

Squib: Preaching with Élan

Charles L. Campbell

“God is not afraid of new things.” Pope Francis proclaimed this word at the beatification of Pope Paul VI, who implemented the vast changes of Vatican II. “God is not afraid of new things.” That is a critical word in times of transition: God is a living, moving, fearless God. Israel has repeatedly witnessed to this God of new things. This God told Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). This God reminded Moses at the burning bush, “I will be who I will be.” This God spoke new and unsettling words through the prophets: “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing” (Isa 43:18–19). Similarly, Christians live and move in perpetual, unsettled transition – the transition from the old age to the new creation. Christians live in the fluid, liminal space in which the old age has been interrupted, but not yet fully overcome, by the new. In that space the Spirit blows where she will (John 3:8), repeatedly forming and re-forming the church.

The living God is not afraid of new things. Rather, this God repeatedly *instigates* newness, interrupting those places where human beings are held captive by the static and oppressive systems and structures of the world. As preachers, we do not need to fear transitions. Dynamic, unsettled change is at the heart of our lives as a covenant people who seek to serve the living God.

This homiletical orientation is particularly important today, not simply because we serve the living God, but because of the context in which we minister. Synagogues, churches, societies, and the earth itself are in transition. The old ways seem to be dying, but there is no clarity about the new that is being born. Preaching takes place in a liminal space, an in-between, threshold space in which old identities are being left behind, but new identities remain uncertain and fluid. And the death of the old can be frightening; it can lead to a kind of narrow, dogmatic seriousness. Circle the wagons! Fix the boundaries! Maintain orthodoxy! Uphold the tradition! The seriousness is warranted, for these are challenging times. But the fear and narrowness are misplaced.

In the service of the living God, there is no reason for “closed seriousness.” Rather, preaching in these times calls for Mikhael Bakhtin’s *open* seriousness, which is characterized by fearless laughter in the face of change.



“Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivete and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness.”¹

Open seriousness is “always ready to submit to death and renewal. True open seriousness fears neither parody nor irony, nor any other form of reduced laughter, for it is aware of being part of an uncompleted whole.”² Open seriousness characterizes preaching that trusts the living God.

At the top of each of my course syllabi I have begun placing a quotation from the daring classical pianist, Hélène Grimaud: “A wrong note that is played out of *élan*, you hear it differently than one that is played out of fear.” In the midst of ecclesial, demographic, economic, political, and environmental transitions, the greatest danger for preachers is fear. The alternative is *élan*, even if we hit some wrong notes and need to laugh at ourselves along the way. And we dare to preach with *élan* because we serve the God who liberates the captives and raises the dead. We serve the God who is not afraid of new things.

Charles L. Campbell, born 1954, is Professor of Homiletics at Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC.

ccampbell@div.duke.edu

¹ *Mikhail Bakhtin*, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington, Indiana 1984, 123.

² *Ibid.*, 122.