

The Homiletical Plot

The Sermon as Narrative Art From

Eugene L. Lowry



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Foreword by Fred B. Craddock

THE
**Homiletical
Plot** The Sermon as
Narrative Art Form

EXPANDED EDITION

From the afterword.

“In the case of sermon plots, which always move from itch to scratch, the various stages along the way appear sequentially set (1,2,3,4,5). Often, indeed, they are. Truth is, however, there are some possible variations of movement—particularly as related to stage 3 (Aha—disclosing the clue to resolution) and 4 (whee—experiencing the good news.)”

accessibility, namely that advice considered to be simple clarity may turn out to be advice that is simplistic. Nothing is ever quite as simple as at first it may appear. Indeed, no one would want the sermon slavishly to become a painting by numbers.

In the case of sermon plots, which *always* move from *itch* to *scratch*, the various stages along the way appear sequentially set (1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Often, indeed, they are. Truth is, however, there are some possible variations of movement—particularly as related to stages 3 (aha—disclosing the clue to resolution) and 4 (whce—experiencing the good news).

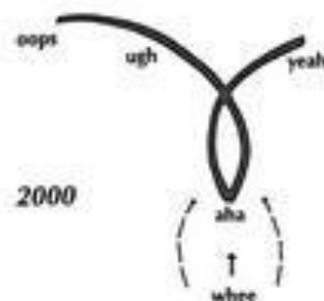
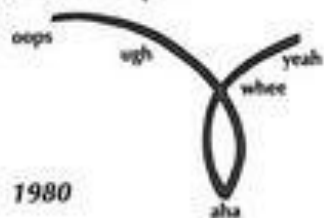
Please understand, the principle is firm that the sermon is a bridging event in time, moving from *itch* to *scratch*, from issue to answer, from conflict to resolution, from ambiguity to closure born of the gospel. Sometimes, however, the clue to resolution (stage 3) and the experiencing of the good news (stage 4) turn out to be the same sermon moment. That is, the good news *is* precisely the evocation of reversal. In such a case, stages 3 and 4 are simultaneous.

For example, this certainly appears to be the case with the John 8 account often called the “woman taken in adultery.” After being challenged by Jesus to let the one without sin cast the first stone, the eldest male in the circle of scribes and Pharisees responds by dropping his stone at his feet. This moment in the story is both the “aha,” the clue to resolution, *and* the “whce,” the experiencing of the good news. The decisional reversal and the shock of grace are simultaneous.

Sometimes stage 4 (good news) happens immediately prior to stage 3 (clue to resolution). For example, in the Good Samaritan story, the man in the ditch has already been taken to an inn for further

recuperation before Jesus turns to the lawyer who first asked “Who is my neighbor?” (that is, who do I have to help?). Jesus now asks him “Who proved neighbor to the one in the ditch?” (that is, who provided the help, *not* who received the help?). John Dominic Crossan long ago helped us to see the fundamental reversal of the meaning of the term “neighbor” as the decisive axis of the story.¹ In this plot, stage 4 occurred in the story just prior to stage 3.

What is crucial to note here is that although it is generally the case that disclosing the clue to resolution (stage 3) happens immediately prior to experiencing the good news (stage 4), there are times when the good news prompts the reversal or is simultaneous with it. In a sermonic plot, both the biblical text and/or the sermonic aim help determine the relation of stages 3 and 4. Perhaps an updated drawing of the plot line will be helpful.



Plot Forms

1. Felt Discrepancy Unknown Resolution.
2. Felt Discrepancy Known Conclusion.

“The homiletical plot must catch people in the depths of the awful discrepancies of their world—social and personal.

OOPS. Upsetting the Equilibrium

“...the purpose of the opening stage of the presented sermon is to trigger ambiguity in the listeners’ mind. Such an ambiguity is not known simply as an intellectual matter; it is a mental ambiguity which is existentially felt.”

“Unfortunately we have been taught to begin our sermons by giving away the plot—even to include in the introduction a one-sentence abstract of sorts.”

UGH! Analyzing the Discrepancy

“In most sermons this process is the most lengthy...”

“In this stage we must dive directly into the fundamental or central discrepancy, asking: “Why?”

“Unfortunately, the greatest single weakness of the average sermon is the weakness of diagnosis.”

“Hence, the preacher should go through the process of analysis *with* the congregation...”

Aha! Disclosing the Clue to Resolution

“The overarching purpose of the process of analysis (step two) is finally to arrive at an explanatory *why*, first for the preacher...then for the congregation in the sermonic event...”

“Such a revelatory clue is *experienced* by the congregation rather than simply *known*.”

A reversal: comes as a surprise. “*It turns things upside down.*”

Whee! Experiencing the Gospel

“But note also how important sermonic timing is to the matter. ...it would be fatal homiletically to announce this good news at the beginning of the sermon.”

“Stages one, two, and three are intended to prepare the way so that when the gospel is then proclaimed it is *effective*...it *does* what it says, and *is* that to which it refers.

Yeah! Anticipating the Consequences

“The critical matter left for explication has to do with the future—now made new by the gospel.”

“...it is predicated on a new situation being created by the gospel—a new freedom to make choices we could never before make. This last phase of the sermon articulates the possible consequences which now—thanks be to God—can be anticipated.”