

The Sacramentality of the Homily*

We all get things in by e-mail that we haven't asked for.

I have a few friends who forward things to me
that are newsworthy, thought provoking, or just funny.

Last month, I got something from one of these friends
that listed the responses of young children who had been asked,
"What is love?"

Here are some of the kids' answers:
"Love is when a girl puts on perfume
and a boy puts on cologne,
and they go out and smell each other."

We may find this humorous,
but it says something,
at least, something that might seem true from a child's perspective.

Here is another answer:
"Love is when you go out and eat,
and you give somebody some of your French fries
without making them give something back."

This one is a little less humorous,
and it too says something,
something that may be true from both a child's and an adult's perspective.

How about this one:
"Love is what is in the room with you at Christmas
if you stop opening presents and just listen."

Hmm. That's even a bit profound.

And finally one more:
"When my grandmother got arthritis,
she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails any more,
so my grandfather does it for her,
even though his hands get arthritis, too. That's love."

You get the picture.

* Adapted from an interactive presentation made during the Tschoepe Homiletics Seminar at the University of Dallas on January 10, 2006. © 2005 by Joseph Martos

Each of these vignettes paints a picture
that opens up or reveals some aspect
of that spiritual reality called love.

In a way, that's also what a sacrament does.

According to St. Augustine,
a sacrament is a material sign of a spiritual reality.

Spoken words are physical things, sounds in the air,
But words are also signs or symbols:
they point to or refer to things other than themselves.

A good story paints a word picture
that gives listeners some insight into
or helps them to get in touch with
a meaning or value, idea or truth
that is larger and deeper than the story itself.

It does so in the same way as each of these descriptions of love
from the mouths of babes.

If you have given homilies or sermons for any length of time,
you are familiar with how people hear things
that you don't remember saying.

You may have worked very carefully to craft your message,
but in the process of delivering it,
you made some offhand comments or extemporaneous remarks.

And afterwards, someone comes up to you
and thanks you for your very meaningful homily,
only to discover that what they found most meaningful
was something you never intended to say:
rather, it was something you said off the cuff.

So we never know when our words
are going to have a spiritual or sacramental effect on people;
but one thing we *can* do is try to say things
that help our listeners connect with spiritual realities:
values and ideals, beliefs and principles
than can and should affect their lives.

Not long ago, I was talking with a married couple in our parish.
We were talking about children, as married people often do,
and they mentioned that their own kids were grown up

and moved out of the house, as are mine.
 They had considered the possibility of adopting children
 or being foster parents,
 but whenever they thought about it,
 the difficulties always seemed greater than the rewards.
 Then one Sunday, according to the way they tell the story,
 they were listening to the pastor's homily,
 and he said something,
 and the wife looked at the husband
 and the husband looked at the wife,
 and in that moment they both realized
 that God was calling them to open their hearts
 to a child who needed a home.

The interesting thing about this story
 is that neither the husband nor the wife can remember
 what it was that the priest said in his homily.
 The words themselves were symbols, as it were, of a deeper reality.
 The words were like sacraments that pointed to something spiritual,
 and once their hearts connected with that spiritual reality,
 the words that helped them to make that connection
 became irrelevant.

* * * * *

The title of the book for which I am best known is *Doors to the Sacred*.

I gave the book that title because,
 at some point in my study of symbols and rituals,
 I realized that what religious signs and symbols do
 —they way they function, as it were—
 is that they move us out of our ordinary, everyday world
 and into a realm of consciousness
 that scholars have labeled
 sacred space and sacred time.

It is a realm of awareness
 in which we connect or reconnect with spiritual realities
 that we are vaguely aware of most of the time,
 but now suddenly we become more intensely aware of them,
 or we connect with them at a deeper level, as it were.

The word “religion” actually implies
 that this is one of the primary functions of religion,
 of religious teachings and religious practices.
 The word comes from two Latin roots,

re, which means again,
as in retry, rewrite, return, and so on,
and *lig*, which means a bond or connection,
as in ligature or ligament.

One of the basic functions of religion, therefore,
is to reconnect people with spiritual realities
—with God, certainly, and other spiritual realities such as saints and angels,
but also with beliefs and values, ideals and principles—
that are found at the spiritual core of Christianity
or at the spiritual core of another religion.

The primary way that religion performs this function
is through myth and ritual,
that is, through symbolic stories and symbolic activities
that help people to become more intensely aware of spiritual realities
of which they are vaguely or dimly aware
in their everyday lives.

What I am proposing to you today
is that homilies—and sermons too, for that matter—
function in the same way
when they are doing more than simply conveying information.

Any by becoming aware of how symbolic narrative works,
you can become better at offering stories and other word pictures
through which your listeners can connect with
spiritual realities and spiritual truths
that can have a significant impact on their lives.

* * * * *

How does this work?

I could describe it in words,
as I have already been doing, to some extent.
But words can be vague and misleading,
so let me illustrate it with an example,
and let me invite each of you to come up with your own example,
one that works for you individually and personally.

To begin, let me ask you to think of a souvenir
(from the French word meaning to remember),
something that you have at home or in your place of work,
or maybe even in your wallet or purse,
something like a photograph, or a ticket stub, for example.
It may be something that you bought,

or something that was given to you,
and whenever you see it,
or at least whenever you look at it intently,
it reminds you of a person or a group of people,
a place or time in your life,
something that you did,
or something that happened to you.

Now, notice that what your souvenir reminds you of
is not a physical, material reality.
Rather, it is a spiritual reality of one sort or another.

At the very least, it is a memory,
and a memory is something real but it is not physical
so it is a spiritual reality.
Very likely, that memory is symbolic of a deeper spiritual reality,
something like love, friendship, family,
discovery, beauty, challenge,
and so on.

Now let us approach this same phenomenon from the opposite direction.
Let's begin with a person or place,
or an event in your life,
that is especially significant for you.
Maybe it is your best friend in grade school or high school;
maybe it is a teacher or coach;
maybe it is a grandparent or some other relative.
Maybe it is the house you grew up in;
maybe it is the school you went to;
maybe it is a place where you went on vacation.
Maybe it was a sudden event,
like winning a race.
Maybe it was something that spanned weeks or years,
like going to summer camp year after year
or being on a team or in a band.
Whatever it was, it is still memorable and significant for you.

Now, think of something that reminds you of that.
It may be a physical object
such as a photograph or souvenir.
but it may also be something less tangible
—a song or a piece of music,
a taste or a smell.
or even a picture in your mind.

Next, let me ask you to dig a little deeper, and ask

what is the significance of that significant reality?
what does it mean to you?
what is its importance?
why do you remember it?

What we are looking for is the personal significance of the memory,
or the spiritual significance, if you will.

If we have our eyes open all day (except for when we blink)
theoretically we could remember every image
from every day that we are alive,
but in fact we don't.

What we remember are those images that have personal significance.
What we remember are the images or physical memories
(for example, sounds and smells)
that are associated with or connected with spiritual realities
such as love, affection, togetherness, belonging, relationships,
growth, self-concept, pride, courage, responsibility, and so on.

So again, let me ask:

What is the predominant spiritual reality (value, ideal, belief, etc.)
that is connected with the person, place or event
about which you have been thinking?

* * * * *

We have been talking about the power of objects, images and words
to be associated with and evocative of
spiritual realities such as beliefs, values and ideals.
Many of these spiritual realities are sacred and precious
to each and every one of us.

And since a sacrament is a sign of something sacred
(to invoke Augustine's definition again)
we can say that images and stories
that have the power to connect or reconnect us
with spiritual realities
have a certain sacramental function or ability.
They are sacraments in the broad sense,
to use the terminology of *Doors to the Sacred*.

Now, if you understand this evocative nature of language,
especially of symbolic images and stories,
and if you are in a position to speak in front of others
in a setting of religious worship,
then you have a reason to use the time devoted to the homily

as an opportunity to speak concretely and vividly
using images and stories from the Scriptures,
from your own life and from other people's lives.

Because of its symbolic and sacramental nature,
image-filled language is much more effective
as a means of quick communication
than speaking abstractly and generally
about beliefs and values,
ideals and principles,
doctrines and morals.

This is not to say that one should never preach
in abstract or general terms.

But it is to say that,
while abstractions and generalities may be true,
it is images and stories that have the power
to evoke and to connect with
spiritual realities that shape people's minds
and guide their lives in an intimate and personal way.