

turn can shape the lives of the men and women and children of the communities they serve to become theologians as well — men and women with a critical turn of mind, in the grip of mystery, setting forth what they perceive,

calling brothers and sister to align their lives with the great rhythms of God's life for us. The church needs, I believe, men and women who are clear headed and not just sincere.

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Pastor As Translator

Amy Gohdes-Luhman

I am grateful to be invited to speak on the topic of “Theology and the Seminary” at Moravian Theological Seminary, my alma mater. I am also thankful to be paired with President Thomforde, who was my president first! That is, he was President of St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, where I teach in conjunction with the pastoral work I do at Main Street Moravian Church. So, many thanks!

I remember typing papers at Hamilton Hall and thinking of all the men (and they were all men then) who had lived in that hall. I have heard some of the names of my dad's contemporaries: George Lloyd, Bob Rierson, Jim Saldwedel, Bob Smith, Jimmy Newsom (the old Jimmy), Henning Schlim, Will Harstine. I called my dad, Bob Gohdes, to get some dirt, something stupid one or more of these young seminarians may have done, but he gave me nothing. He insists they were all straight-laced

and proper — nothing but the Lord's work all the time. Right.

I remember being in Theology class or Old Testament class and for some reason, at that time of my life, I was shy to speak. I would send telepathic messages to Paul Couch, willing him to raise his hand and say what was on my mind. And it worked almost every time. But sometimes if he wasn't in class or was not receiving telepathy that day, I would be cringing and writhing with something to say in response to some discussion point, knowing I had the right answer. Professor Hargis or Professor Bechtel could see it on my face and would say politely, “Amy do you have something to say?” Blah Blah Blah! It would all come pouring out, usually not so gracefully.

When I was asked to share in this celebration of 200 years of seminary instruction here at

Moravian Theological Seminary, I started remembering. Contemplating what I would say to you all gathered here, one recurrent memory stood in the forefront. It was a memory that happened most often in Old Testament Class, taught then by Dr. Lyn Bechtel. I count her as one of my mentors and she is one reason (along with an off-handed comment by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Arthur Freeman) for my entering graduate school to study Hebrew scriptures. On more than one occasion, as Lyn was teaching about Deuteronomic and Non-Deuteronomic thinking or group and individual orientation, she would be challenged by one or more students: “This is all well and good for here in the classroom, but what does this have to do with my people in the pews, with my congregation?”

And so that is the question that is going to drive my talk with you here today. *What is well and good in the classroom and how does it translate into the congregation?* Thus, the title of my talk: “Pastor as Translator.” And behind that lies the question: what kind of student do I want my alma mater (of which I am genuinely proud) to produce, what sort of theological training do I think is required for our ministry context today? What kind of pastor is needed in our communities today?

The short answer (in my humble opinion) is: A pastor who can read the Bible.

A pastor who can read the Bible. Let’s unpack that. Not to be inflammatory, but right now our faith, Christianity, stands on the brink of a split. You can call the sides whatever you

like: right and left; conservative and liberal; mainstream and fundamentalist; literalists and non-literalists. Whatever you like. We as a denomination may be the last to feel this split because we are a denomination of the “middle way,” but it is a present and growing divide. At the heart of this sad divide stands the question of the Bible, how to read it, and how to derive a theology from it, a way of talking about God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

So Biblical Theology is where it is at for me. I think of the pastor as a translator standing between the ancient biblical world and the contemporary world and all the manifestations of the world in between. Reading a living text is not easy; it is not the same as reading any other text. So when I say I want pastors who can read the Bible, I am not being glib, nor am I asking for a small thing.

We Moravians say, “the Holy Scriptures are and shall remain the only source and rule of our doctrine, faith and practice” (MCCL, #2). “The Triune God as revealed in the Holy Scripture is the only source of our life and salvation” (GU, pg. 4). So reading the Bible which points to our God is vital. It is a habit and practice we ought, as pastors, to do well.

Learning biblical languages is absolutely necessary. Even if you only learn that the Hebrew and Greek are impenetrable, frustrating, ambiguous, and a major pain in the butt for our modern minds, then you have learned something valuable. These languages are ambiguous, frustrating, and, at times impenetrable and a major pain in the butt,

so hanging your faith on one translated word or verse or phrase besides “Jesus Christ is Lord” may be not the best bet for you or your congregation. Now I am not saying you have to be an expert in Hebrew and Greek, but a pastor should know enough to use the tools. Knowing original languages will keep you humble before the text, and it will make you slow down your reading of text. Sometimes that really slows you down, but humility and honesty about the mystery of the text is a good thing.

Your congregation will want to know when you don't know or understand something. You are a much better pastor when you say: “the Hebrew word here has eight different meanings and I am picking this one, but I could be wrong.” Please know this: your congregations are not full of boneheads. They know that the Bible was written a long time ago in another language and culture and they would like some frank and loving conversation about that.

Ellen Davis is a beautiful woman, long grey hair, high cheek bones and big deep warm eyes. She is a professor at Duke University in Old Testament. I saw her speak at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Conference on the topic of Genesis. I could tell by the way that she talked about the text that she loved it, that she was in love with it, like she wanted to marry it (as children today might say).

Without remembering her, I picked a book off my shelf, in preparation for this talk, called *The Art of Reading Scripture* published in 2003. Coincidentally it was co-authored by Ellen Davis.¹ Her opening chapter is titled, “Teaching

the Bible Confessionally in the Church.” She is a seminary teacher, and she states the need for Christian seminarians to know that biblical interpretation can be genuinely dangerous (p. 24). I know that we want to know exactly what the Bible says — what the one right interpretation is — and we want our professors to give that to us. And my response would be (I don't think this would be Ellen's because she seems so gentle and nice), “I can certainly give you that one right interpretation, but then I would have to kill you.”

There is in the air now an anti-intellectualism that is quite disturbing, and I pray our seminary does not fall prey to it. Honest, transparent, interpretation of the Bible done with rigor and integrity is desperately needed and desired by your congregation and by Christendom in general. That does not mean you will end up as pastors and teachers producing the one valid and conclusive interpretation of one or more biblical passages, but you are beholden to shift out the best interpretation for your congregation with the guiding of the Holy Spirit and the responsible voices of scholarship and the accountability of your larger church community and tradition. You will need skills.

Ellen Davis reminded me that the word for heart (in Hebrew *leb* and Greek *kardia*) has been argued to refer to not the organ that pumps blood (though it is that), but for the biblical thinker it may refer to the seat of imagination, just like the term translated in the King James as “bowels” or “kidneys” may refer to the seat of emotions. “And Joseph

made haste; for his bowels did yearn upon his brother: and he sought [where] to weep; and he entered into [his] chamber, and wept there.” I love that. Yearning: bowels. From the Psalms: Lift up your hearts = Lift up your imaginations. The Bible often speaks in symbolic imaginative ways, which makes sense because its writers are struggling to express the ineffable. To speak of the sublime, to illustrate that thing that which can not be seen: God. And so our interpretations remain partial, as Paul says: we see in a mirror dimly.

But I am telling you things now you already know.

Another thing I remember hearing in Old Testament class is this: That is all well and good, but where is Jesus in all of this? My glib response (always in my head) was he wasn't born yet, idiot. But that just shows how poorly I had read the Gospel of John or Proverbs 8. In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified as the woman Hokmah in the OT and this same figure is called Logos (the Word) and is identified with the figure of Christ in John. This figure of Wisdom is said to be with God in the act of creation. Christian pastors cannot read too quickly through the Old Testament to get to the New Testament.

Those thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are not just introductory pages to the Gospels, they are the Holy Scriptures according to Jesus. Remember, he did not have a clue about the Gospels or the Pauline letters when he went to the synagogue and read from Isaiah. What Christ held as God's sacred Word was little more than 2/3 of the OT and none of

the NT. He didn't imagine Revelation when he stopped on the road to Emmaus and explained, beginning with Moses and working through the prophets, what all of the scriptures had to do with the Messiah. And, likewise, the writers of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings of the OT didn't have a clue that the messiah that some of them (certainly not all of them) were waiting for would be some carpenter's son from Galilee.

Some people do not like the Old Testament. I was doing a Saturday (all-day) workshop for a Methodist Women's group a few years back and they let me pick the topic. So I picked "The Bible: A New Look at an Ancient Book." And I began by admitting that since most people don't have a good grasp of the Old Testament outside of the Psalms, I was going to spend most of the day in the Hebrew Scriptures. A hand shot up, right at that moment in my introduction. It was a woman in her late 60s, early 70s. "Yes?" I said. "I don't like the Old Testament. I stopped reading it a long time ago. I don't like that God, and I don't think I am going to enjoy your talk much today." Brilliant.

The Bible as a *whole* is the incarnate Word of God: a word that bears flesh. It is a conversation bound by time and place, a sacred conversation into which each one of us is invited to participate and overhear. The Old Testament stands on its own as a revelation about God. It is the Holy Scriptures of our Jewish brothers and sisters. But the New Testament (NT) in no way stands on its own.

Matthew would freak out if he knew pastors

were not looking up his numerous scriptural references. He is depending upon the audiences understanding of all his “it is written”s. And the book of Revelation, please do not read that without reading Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah. Ellen Davis points out that the OT can challenge some common misreadings of the Bible as being only about salvation. The OT is much more about revelation and can point us to the fact that much of the NT is about that as well: revelation of God and not simply our individual salvation.

Certainly the theme of salvation figures into the OT, specifically in the theme of the Exodus story of liberation/salvation from slavery. The prophets speak to the exiled nation of Israel about a time when God will gather them up and bring them home, when God will save them. But the OT is much more about revelation of God. It is in Davis’s words, “relentlessly theocentric.” Of the 187 chapters in the Torah, 20 of them are about salvation (God saving his people); about 120 of the chapters are about revelation (God revealing himself as a maker of covenants, as one who is holy, as one who evokes obedience) (p. 21-22).

The Bible is the record of that sacred conversation by people in love with their God, with their messiah, their advocate, and in many and varied voices they seek to explain the Divine. And this conversation happens to be in words, in words that none of us readily understand. So we treat the written word with respect and we seek out historical and rhetorical scholarship as well as our Hebrew and Greek dictionaries.

We set the conversation in its context and see what was at stake and how the truth in that ancient conversation still speaks to us today, because if that conversation is about God or our response to God, which it is, then it will speak a truth to us today.

That brings us to today, and to the other duties of the pastor as translator. Yes, they have to know the original context of the ancient word, but they also have to know the context of their congregation and community. I would argue there are some Christian heresies out there today: My list would include the following: (1) the prosperity gospel — the name it/claim it, Jesus can make you rich gospel; (2) the Bible as rule book — some are in and some are out, follow the rules and you are in and the rest of the players are going to hell gospel; (3) the Bible as affirmation of the individual over the community — it is only about you and your personal relationship with Jesus and the church is your self-help center gospel; and lastly (4) any gospel that induces or calls forth a righteous hatred instead of a radical forgiveness. But that is my list and I could certainly be wrong.

Now lots of people don’t go to church, don’t read the Bible, and think Christians are downright morally dangerous. Those folks are certainly a part of your community; they are probably not in your church. But they are a part of any town, city, village or cow pasture you are serving. And all the heresies I mentioned, these folks think that is what Christianity is all about. So a Masters in Apologetics might be a nice thing to have in your back pocket as a pastor.

As a church, we have some PR problems, certainly problems of our own making, but problems nonetheless. I am not sure if we are moving out the generation of folks who have been hurt by the church (probably we'll never move out of that); but we are certainly into the generation of those who don't have a clue about Christianity and some of the heresies I mentioned may creep into what they determine Christianity to be.

Your church has to know how Christianity is being perceived and be able to speak to that. And it is your congregants, not you, who the community will listen to. Collectively they know more people than you do. So teaching the Bible from the pulpit and in Bible study in ways that address and combat some of these heresies is vitally important for your community. See, I think of the pastor as serving much more than just their congregation. You have a larger community who is called into your care. Always introduce yourself as Pastor so and so. At the drycleaners, the grocery store, the candy store, wherever.

Now, when you do this you commit to something; you commit to knowing things. You commit to being able to answer what the heck atonement means, why God had to kill his own son, and why God in the OT says "Thou shalt not murder," and then turns around and smites everyone he can get his hands on. People will ask you such things or make statements that make it clear that they have a toxic rendering of some Christian tenet and, as a pastor, you can tend to that.

You tend to it in a variety of ways. At Main Street Moravian we have a group called Talk Back. It is for those in the community to come and have a safe place to talk about Christian ideas, doctrine, and theology. It is for people who may have had a less than pleasant church upbringing. It is a place to Talk Back.

You, as a pastor, may think about starting a blog or engaging a community blog when issues of religion come up. Recently an acquaintance of mine told me about an article by our town blogger called "False Prayer." His argument was that all intercessory prayer is false prayer: "Bring my son home safely from Iraq" was a false prayer. Any prayer asking for something was setting God up. The town blogger was reacting to the prosperity gospel that says you can ask God for wealth and power and prestige and you will get it. The acquaintance told me I had to get on the blog and respond. I hate computers. I am not a fan of the Internet...

But there I was at 5:30 in the morning because I couldn't sleep, typing out my response. Trying to explain that prayer was conversation with God. We could and should bring all things before God, that there was great value in intercession, and that the perversion of prayer promoted by the prosperity gospel doesn't make all prayer bad, and so on.

Now as we answer all these questions, we are honest and forthright about what we know and what we do not know. The latter being the bigger category.

In all of this, what I am saying you must do as pastors: learn original languages, know all

the current historical and rhetorical scholarship, know all the varied interpretations that are already out there and grasp all the possible heresies that a text might engender — I know I am asking a lot. I am not saying you have to be a brainiac to open the Bible and meet God there — that someone uneducated has no way to engage the written word. What I am saying is that it behooves you as pastors, who have the luxury of three years of intense study, to know your stuff. To continue your critical Bible study, to reflect on what you hear in contemporary culture and how God is at work in it and how you can aid the Creator in that work.

So in answer to the question posed more than once in my seminary education:

“This is all well and good for here in the classroom, but what does this have to do with my people in the pews, with my congregation?”

The answer would be: Everything. Pastors and educators, your task is not easy, it is only necessary. Study up.

Endnotes

¹ Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, ed. *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

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Rachel’s Story

Sam Gray

Rachel was raised in a good Moravian family. In fact, she had two good Moravian families: her biological family and her church family. Her parents were loving and affirming, and they brought her up in the fear and admonition of the Lord as they had promised to do. She loved her Sunday School teacher, dear old Mrs. Taylor, and she enjoyed listening to her tell all those wonderful stories from the Bible. The pastor’s sermons weren’t always that

easy to understand, and some of the hymns put her to sleep, but it didn’t matter because she felt at home. And besides, the fun that she had at Youth Group kind of made up for it.

She went to camp in the summer and had the mandatory mountain-top experience. She had actually had a part in leading worship, and she thought that was cool. Some of the other kids had told her, “Rachel, you’re like a natural.