In Elements of Worship series—examining each of the elements of our Sunday worship. Covered, he Sarum Prayer, 2 hymns, and communion. Today, some meta talk about the talking part, aka the sermon. First: a brief history of sermon as an element of worship.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SERMON

This bit where someone talks in context of worship goes back 2500+ years after Solomon’s temple was destroyed, people started meeting in private homes, during Babylonian Exile. Also the period when Hebrew Bible as a written text emerged. Selections from Torah (first five books of Bible) or writings of prophet would be read and an elder in congregation would make remarks. Jesus was invited to do this in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He read from prophet Isaiah (“the Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, and declare the year of the Lord’s favor”).

Luke then records, “And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ ” This reflects fact that rabbis normally taught sitting down (like him megachurch pastors with a lip patch sit on a stool on stage, except no stage) When Luke says, “and he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled...’ ”, this indicates his remarks were beginning of a sermon.

The first churches composed of Jewish members would have been patterned after the synagogue service. Among the Gentiles, the worship was patterned after the Roman semi-public dinner format called the “symposium.” Trade guilds and other civic groups would host symposia as would wealthier households. First churches would have often met in the household of a wealthier member.

At a symposium hosted by Jesus followers, you might 30/40 or so at tables in a U shape. First the food would be served, always with bread. Once people well into eating, wine would come out. A pause in action as the host would offer prayer to the local God (like a toast) and pour out a cup of wine as a libation to the local deity. Servants would pour wine for the guests. As the drinking would commence, a speaker
would rise up (the host someone invite to offer remarks.) Followed by more drinking, entertainment, singing...and as evening wore on, carousing.

That was a typical symposium. Gentile Christians adapted this format—instead of offering prayers to the local deity, the wine would be blessed in name of Jesus—and the story of Jesus might naturally be told, or some teaching of Jesus remarked on. Then singing...minus the carousing part.

But there’s evidence the Gentile followers had to be reminded Gentile Christians to cool it on the carousing. Paul in Ephesians, “Don’t get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another with songs, hymns and spiritual songs.” To party-loving Corinthians, it was more pointed: too much drinking at your love feasts! (1 Co. 11)

As purveyor and consumer of many sermons, I’ve pondered the form. Offer a couple of observation: THING1 and THING2.

THING 1

May be a pet peeve. If you grew up in a conservative have idea that a good Bible-based sermon has to be a line-by-line commentary on text from Scripture. Term: “expository preaching.” Anything other than that is not a “Bible-based” sermon. I’ve given and heard lots of these. A fine form. But idea that this is the highest form of the art is boonkey.

Many sermons recorded in Bible and none of them use this line-by-line expository method. A more common way to use Scripture is to have a theme/topic (usually some life issue that a local community is wrestling with) and to string different texts from different parts of Bible together. Called “stringing pearls.”

Like music, many ways to be beautiful or lame. Same with sermon.

THING 2

Better than THING 1. Conviction about what’s happening in Spirit when a sermon is happening. When it’s working, what happening?

In old Roman Empire, after church was co-opted by Empire, church buildings reflected hierarchy of Empire. Preacher would literally climb a winding staircase into pulpit, high
above the listeners, to speak down at them. A subtle message: “When I give the sermon I’m the boss-of-you”

That mentality in other forms—maybe not pulpit atop a winding staircase, but a preacher entering from stage right, with trappings of celebrity...or adopting the air of the expert...or a charismatic preacher telling stories that feature himself as the spiritual hero.

A good sermon is an event in which the Spirit is working in the mind-heart of the listener as much as the speaker.

I figured this out by trial and error. Someone would say, “Thanks that sermon helped me today. God spoke to me” At first, I was like “Oh, good, God really used me to give his message to someone.” That was trial-with-error part. Then I noticed when I asked people, “what in particular spoke to you in the sermon?”—often, their response was, at best, tangentially related to anything I said.

It dawned on me: “When I listen to a sermon, there’s a multi-level dialog going in my head. I’m hearing words of the speaker, but his or her words are stimulating my own thoughts, questions, agreement, disagreement, musings. In that fluid, semi-chaotic chaotic process, a light bulb goes and a thought-feeling-image-impression lands, and I’m moved. I undergo perception shift”

It’s not like there’s a direct line from the speaker into my head and the speaker is delivering inspired messages like UPS guy leaving something from Amazon on my porch. No. In act of listening to another human (who bears image of God as we all do) my heart opens to thoughts-perspectives other than my own. Listening is a spiritual act. That act of openness is like a crack in the door that the Spirit needs to get in a word edgewise.

That means we can easily experience divine inspiration through a sermon or a portion of a sermon we disagree with. The speaker makes some remarks about a text and you think, “I don’t think that’s what the text is saying” and it makes you wonder what the text is saying...and something dawns on you that moves you.

The inspiration of a sermon is not limited to the words of the speaker—inspiration is in the process going on between speaker, the listener, and the Spirit dancing around the room in everyone’s head, ready to slip thru any cracks-in-the-door of any open minds.
A quirky line in first letter of John refers to this phenomenon: 

_The anointing which you received from him abides in you [the Spirit lives in you] and you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him (1 Jn. 2: 27)._

There’s a weird tradition in Jesus movement that no human being is to be regarded as a teacher of any other human being. Jesus said, _“Call no man rabbi.”_ Which either means only women should be rabbis or it means “don’t regard another human being as your teacher”—because you have one teacher, God.

Obviously, wasn’t taken literally. The author who wrote “you have no need that any one should teach you” is, technically, teaching them that. But there’s a real thing that is being recognized: Something new is afoot with the coming of the Spirit—direct access to God is spreading like a virus in a day care center.

The energy related to a sermon happening in a room of people is running through a triangle: person speaking—people listening to the speaker-Spirit with equal access to speaker and the listeners.

Understanding this introduces of new level of freedom to the experience of a sermon in worship. Paul in Galatians says, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”—not constraint, pressure, power-moves, but freedom.

Application: Insider clergy-secret. When pastors talk to each other about their trade these days, here’s how it goes: “What are you doing about Trump? What are you saying? Anything? How’s it working at your church?” These are always anxiety-riddled conversations especially in predominantly white churches.

The anxiety comes from this faulty idea that ignores the speaker-listener-Spirit-with-equal-access to both triangle. If speaker thinks it’s his or her job to be the FedEx delivering person dropping off truth packages on every porch, well that’s a lot of pressure.

If listeners think, my job is to take in whatever package the speaker drops off whether or not I want it in my apartment—that’s pressure too, not freedom.

I think we intuitively get the triangle thing—that we all have equal access to the Spirit. We listen to person giving sermon, and that act of listening is a spiritual act. Spiritual benefit of listening isn’t to receive whatever the speaker says, but to open our minds-hearts to the Spirit at work in room.
The listener may hear the Spirit through something you agree with the speaker saying or through something you don’t and Spirit in you sheds a different light on you in the process.

Speaking and listening takes faith: As a speaker I need to trust the Spirit in me, but even more I need to trust the Spirit at work in you. As listener, I need to trust the Spirit at work in speaker, but just-as-much, I need to trust the Spirit at work in me.

When Spirit moves me to speak, it doesn’t remove the “me” speaking. The “me” speaking, even by the Spirit, will be shaped by my own story, background, experience. But you, as mature adults know that. It’s your job not to receive whatever I say as truth, but listen to the Spirit in you, as I speak.

So the point is not whether I, when speaking, get my comments on a topic right or not. The point is, we’re in this Spirit-infused space together, and the Spirit working in me can trigger-elicit the Spirit working in you—the Spirit in each of us is the authority.

This approach brings the freedom of the Spirit: it’s a freedom of speech and a freedom of engaging speech.

We honor this reality by practice of Quiet Reflection at end of sermon.

QUIET REFLECTION