‘All Together in One Place’

by Scott Hoezee

It was one of the most striking things I ever experienced.

In 2005, after 15 years of pastoral ministry (12 of them spent at Calvin Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.), I went to Calvin Theological Seminary to become the director of its Center for Excellence in Preaching. During the transition from pastor to faculty member, I realized I would go back to being a guest preacher on any number of Sundays. I’d had some experience with this. As a seminary student, I would take various pulpit assignments in a variety of West Michigan congregations. Back then it had been a good experience, so I figured it would be a good experience again. Finding a sermon would be no problem—I had a big backlog to draw from!

In the logbook where I kept track of each sermon I preached, I added a little star to those that seemed to be particularly well received. So when I started looking for sermons to take on the road, I began with those starred sermons.

That’s when it happened. I reread sermon after sermon only to discover something I’d never realized before: Those sermons “worked” because they took place in a congregation I knew well and that knew me as their pastor. That collective chemistry between congregation and pastor influenced how those sermons were written, how they were received, and how they felt to me when the worship services were over. As it turned out, I could not just take those sermons and preach them any old place and expect it to sound or feel the same.

That discovery was just one small window that helped me peer into a larger truth: Sermons are first and foremost live events that take place in a specific time and place and that the Spirit uses to connect with a specific congregation gathered in the presence of God.

These days we can read, listen to, or watch sermons in a variety of places. YouTube is filled with sermons from local churches and from well-known preachers. This can be a blessing. Years ago most churches made cassette tapes of their worship services and brought them to the elderly or others unable to make it to church. Most churches called this a “tape ministry”—and indeed, it was a ministry. Those tapes blessed many people.

So I don’t mean to knock the value of sermons absorbed in places other
be gathered with our sisters and brothers in Christ! The Holy Spirit is very good at making sermon listening into a corporate experience of the one body of Christ. We can talk about the sermon together after the service; some churches even provide a structured time for this to happen. But whether in a group discussion or a casual conversation, someone may point out something about that morning’s message that you missed or make a connection you had not seen that becomes a powerful revelation. And always we remember what it was like to experience the work of the Spirit in the company of others. Our mutual reception of the message becomes indelible. When the sermon is finished, it is the one people of God who get to experience what the sermon leads to or what it contributes to the work of ministry. In the mystery of preaching, the collective experience of sensing the Spirit’s movement among us becomes vital to the whole preaching event. The sermon that made such an impact in one congregation might not work in another place among other people. But it works today, it works here, and it works for us. In this way God’s promise to equip the saints for the work of ministry in Christ’s name is fulfilled. And, as at the church’s inception, this works best when we are all together in one place.

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The Spirit uses preaching—both individual sermons and the overall arc of preaching over months and years—to shape a particular people for the ministry challenges and opportunities that are before them.

Similarly, many of us realize that how we feel about a given movie has a lot to do with the first time we saw it in a theater. There is something almost magical about being with other people, collectively laughing at something funny or shrieking together at a scary moment. This experience sticks with us even if we rewatch the movie at home. The same is true of watching football or basketball or hockey: You might have a better view of the game if you stayed home and watched it on TV, but you’d miss out on the energy of being part of a cheering crowd.

If that can happen with movies and football games among strangers, how much more powerful it is to be gathered with our sisters and brothers in Christ! The Holy Spirit is very good at making sermon listening into a corporate experience of the one body of Christ. We can talk about the sermon together after the service; some churches even provide a structured time for this to happen. But whether in a group discussion or a casual conversation, someone may point out something about that morning’s message that you missed or make a connection you had not seen that becomes a powerful revelation. And always we remember what it was like to experience the work of the Spirit in the company of others. Our mutual reception of the message becomes indelible.