

Learning to Preach, and Serve, on the Borders: The 2017 Festival of Homiletics

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A conference called the Festival of Homiletics seemed to be exactly what I was looking for. Earlier this year, I began to look for opportunities for continuing education on homiletics. I had never preached before homiletics class in Deacons' School and since then, I have had limited experience preaching. I want to be a better preacher and realized that I needed to focus some time and attention for that to happen. I looked for classes at the seminaries in the area where I live but didn't find any that would fit my schedule. I also looked for online courses and didn't find any that seemed right.

One of my Deacons' School classmates had attended the festival two years ago and talked about who she heard there. It was intriguing to me at the time, but I quickly forgot about it. While listening to a *Working Preacher* podcast (workingpreacher.org) a few weeks before preaching, I heard an announcement about the Festival of Homiletics and checked out the information on the website (festivalofhomiletics.com).

The festival began 25 years ago as a creation of The Rev. David Howell, a Presbyterian minister, as an offshoot of the preaching journal *Lectionary Homiletics*. The festival is now planned and led by Luther Seminary and is designed to “demonstrate for people the finest preaching and the finest cutting-edge thinking about preaching, homiletics, church and culture.” It has grown from the inaugural year's 400 attendees to 1800.

This year's theme, *Preaching on the Borders*, fit with the topics I wanted to focus on in my preaching. Although I studied the writings of some of the speakers and preachers, I was excited that most were unfamiliar to me. The location, San Antonio, Texas, is less than two hours from Austin where I would be later in that week for a family event. My letter of agreement with the Diocese of Virginia requires that the parish in which I serve pay for continuing education, so I conferred with the rector. Everything lined up for me to attend.

In preparation for my trip, I reached out through the AED Facebook page before I left and connected with some deacons from Texas. We ran into each other on the opening evening and had a chance to chat. A deacon from Georgia encouraged me to meet one of his colleagues, Peter Wallace, the host of Day 1, a preaching resource.

The festival schedule included a blend of learning, liturgy, cultural activities, and social events. About half of the festival's attendees were first-timers and we were warmly welcomed by those sitting around us who made a special effort to introduce themselves and describe their experiences at previous events. Experienced attendees equated the week with drinking from a firehose and advised the first timers to pace ourselves. Sessions started early in the morning and cultural and social events ran into the late evening. Concurrent sessions were held in two venues within walking distance of each other. The walk between sessions provided some other opportunities to talk with attendees or to reflect on what I had just heard.

The theme of *Preaching on the Borders* was woven through all aspects of the festival. From the preaching, lectures, and workshops to the liturgies, music, and entertainment that I attended, the

message was consistent. We are called to cross borders of all kinds (racial, citizenship status, socioeconomic, faith, political, cultural); to invite and accompany across borders those to whom we preach; and to participate in the co-creation of God's kingdom by standing with people living on the borders.

It was encouraging to hear that my own difficulties connecting scripture with the experiences of life were also an issue for well-seasoned preachers. They shared ideas about dealing with that—from taking photos of interesting or unusual things you see as idea starters (Rob Bell) to keeping files of articles, poems, pieces of art. I gained new perspectives on familiar scriptures as lecturers used the lens of life on the border for their teaching. One highlight for me was hearing Walter Brueggemann unfold the exegetical underpinning of his sermon as he preached during the opening communion service.

At the festival, I experienced a great sense of the Spirit moving among us as we discussed the role of the church in our time. We were challenged to consider what church should be organized for (Brian McLaren). The visions of new ways of “being church” aligned with diaconal ministry and our diaconal call to be with people at the borders and to who walk with them to demonstrate the Good News of God's healing hope and love. We were reminded to open ourselves and our parishioners to the needs of the world and to be Christ in the world.

I left the Festival of Homiletics filled with new ideas, encouragement, and lots of notes. Since my return, I've preached once. As I prepared, some of what I heard guided me. Preparation encouragement, *The Spirit might be where you are knocked off track.* (Nadia Boltz-Weber); considerations for dealing with controversial subjects, *Is your job to influence or irritate?* (Adam Hamilton); reminders about the importance of why we preach, *One way God says no to evil is the world is preaching.* (Will Wilemon); and the role of prophetic engagement, *When [the lived experience of Pentecost] connects with the prophetic movement, it overturns the empire.* (Otis Moss III). This time I stepped into the pulpit with a new sense of confidence. I know I can let the Spirit do her work in and through me as I prepare my sermons.

I drank from the firehose and was energized and renewed by the Festival of Homiletics. I plan to attend next year when it will be in Washington, DC. If you want to connect about the festival, feel free to get in touch with me through AED's Facebook page.

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