

William Willimon. *Leading with the Sermon: Preaching as Leadership*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020. 194 pages. \$18.99.

No one likes to see an opportunity squandered, whether it might be the chance to dine with a long-admired celebrity or to use free tickets to see Hamilton. “Alas,” we say, “what a wasted chance for fun.” But when we watch a wasted opportunity cost other people, stunting growth and even causing harm, we become not merely wistful, but downright agitated and alarmed. William Willimon is in the latter camp. He writes as one who has walked the trenches and observed up close the costs to congregations when pastors fail to use the preaching moment to lead with visionary courage. He writes as an impassioned overseer of the flock, as his role of bishop (of the North Alabama Conference, United Methodist Church (UMC)) called him to be for several years. So, not surprisingly, his tone is urgent here—at times bordering on curmudgeonly. But it is not fundamentally negative, for not only has he watched agonizing, slow failures of leadership in the pulpit, he has also coached and taught numerous pastors the art of leading well while preaching. He has celebrated as that focused and courageous practice has borne fruit in numerical growth, missional engagement with communities, and deepened discipleship.

At its core, this book has one task: to strengthen the synergistic connection between preaching and leadership in the minds, hearts, and habits of pastors. These concurrent practices strengthen, correct, and inform each other. The book’s primary audience is current pastors, and secondarily those preparing to preach. It argues that too many preachers understand their leadership as something which manifests itself in other settings than the pulpit, primarily in meetings with elders and other leaders of congregations. For them, preaching as an entirely separate task having vaguely to do with comforting. Thus they fail to take advantage of the rich platform they have been given right within the worship service to shape culture, catalyze ministry, invite repentance from sin in all its forms, and even face painful truths about their congregation. As we would expect from Willimon, the book is rooted in a robust theology of the preaching, rooted in God’s self-proclamation through human speech as it summons, confronts, and inspires.

Not only does Willimon make the claim that good pastoral leaders will make use of their preaching to lead well; he further claims that preaching well actually grows pastors into better leaders. It forces them to sharpen and articulate their vision in memorable ways, to articulate losses and failures within the congregation with honest, gentle courage, and to name their growth with grateful joy. Willimon departs from preaching *per se* to offer useful insight into leadership, drawing from the wisdom of Gil Rendle, Ron Heifetz, Peter Steinke, and others to call pastors to do the hard work of excellent administration, empathetic listening, and thoughtful presence with their congregants. The conviction that a pastoral leader must be willing to introduce tension and to surface underlying pain is central to Willimon’s leadership (and preaching) philosophy.

One area where this book could have been stronger is in its breadth of consideration of how leadership looks different in various ethnic groups, subcultures, and denominational or even parachurch structures (such as prison, hospital, campus, or recovery ministries, where preaching takes place but in significantly different forms). Most examples seemed to be drawn from either Willimon’s own preaching or his supervision of UMC pastors in the South. Relatively little consideration was given to how gender, ethnicity, socio-economic factors, or other markers of culture would cause leadership in the pulpit to be expressed, received, and conceived differently. For example, a few of his examples which seemed to be framed as positive models of straight

talk would be received as shaming by some congregational subcultures (29, 168), and could alienate or immobilize some listeners. Despite this, Willimon's book achieved its worthy goal of connecting preaching and leadership, bringing in numerous insights into both along the way. Willimon writes out of deep love for the church. He longs for its flourishing, and his book will challenge and equip pastors to lead as they preach, with courage, hope, and bold vision.

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