

CHAPTER THREE

RESONANCE FROM THE PULPIT

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures... Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

—Luke 24:27, 31-32

Preaching creates an encounter.¹ For the apostles on the road to Emmaus, the encounter consisted of the unpacking of the Jewish scriptures and the breaking of the bread. Their eyes were opened to recognize Jesus. Their hearts burned within them. The event resulted in elation, insight, heartfelt recommitment to Jesus, and a rush to witness to the One whom they had seen and heard. Jesus the preacher knew how to connect.

What does it mean to preach in ways that connect? Homiletical literature has traditionally focused on three elements of preaching—the preacher, the assembly, and the homily. These constituent parts are essential. Yet what about the way these three connect? As a soccer coach, I have seen six year old players run back and forth and up and down the field in a pack, all of them focused on the ball, but none of them connecting with one another. At nine years old, they begin to look up from the ball to see the other players. By eleven years old, some have mentally developed enough to be able to coach them to send the ball to space, to see relationships between players, to anticipate where the ball is going, and to begin to work together to take the ball to the goal—in other words, rather than seeing the objects of sender, receiver, and ball, they can be taught to see their relationships. This shift in vision causes the playing of soccer to become more

¹ Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 20.

of a relational dance. (Basketball point guards and football backs also look to spaces for an opportunity for a steal or a “hole” in a defensive line.) Similarly, preaching has traditionally focused on the homily (the ball) and the sender of the homily (the player with the ball). In recent years, it has begun to look up and see the receiver of the ball (the listener). To “look to space” is to shift the vision toward the relationships between those “objects in the game.”²

In the earliest stages of designing this project, this third chapter had planned to express the state of affairs in preaching as a market researcher would, by describing “what works” with respect to getting the soccer ball (sermon) from the sender to the receiver. The strategy was to define the homily as product, the preacher as producer of the product and listener as consumer. However, in listening to five hundred and sixty-one high school youth in the spring and fall of 2011, they themselves spoke much more deeply about their encounter with preaching and preacher than as the commodified interplay of product, producer, and consumer. The technical question of “What works?” therefore was replaced by the much richer sacramental question of efficacy expressed as: “How does this event impact my life? How does it echo within me? How does it spur us to grow more deeply into our life with God?”

Thus my thinking about this chapter took a Gestalt-type shift.³ Not unlike Augustine articulating the Trinity as Love, Beloved, and Love, homiletic connection is much more than an object, not a “what,” but a “Whom.” The One who is the Tie that binds, the Source of unity, the inner Revealer—the Holy Spirit could also be titled with a capital “c” as the Trinitarian “Connector.” The invisible flow of the Spirit cannot be delineated in a quantifiable way, yet the

² Harris, 116, is of the same mind: “The interaction of these elements... is the basis for good preaching.”

³Marketing research is similarly increasingly looking to interaction as its unit of analysis, rather than the behavior of either the marketer or the consumer. See David W. Stewart and Paul A. Pavlou, “From Consumer Response to Active Consumer: Measuring the Effectiveness of Interactive Media,” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 30, no. 4 (2002): 376, <http://jam.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/30/4/376> [accessed April 13, 2011].

words and pictures of the young people illustrate a rich relational interaction. These responses paint a picture of how the Spirit connects the listener and the preacher in helping the young assembly move toward the goal of growth in discipleship.

While continuing to integrate the principles of consumer research, their expression in the following pages will be framed and illustrated by the qualitative responses of the young people themselves. The chapter will first draw from the transcripts to characterize “connection” as these young people see it. Then it will discuss the homily as a location for encounter, both in the effect of a single homily and in its cumulative effects. Subsequently, the young people themselves will describe their experience of preaching. Finally, they will speak of what it means to connect with a preacher. Each of these sections arises from particular questions in the survey and has been categorized inductively as themes arose from their comments.

“Connection” in the Lives of Young People

The premise for this thesis is that through listening to young listeners and integrating that listening with the principles of consumer behavior research, we can discover what makes for effective connection. What, then, is this elusive “connection?”

In this survey of 561 students, five hundred and thirty-one responded in writing or in picture to the first qualitative question:

The concept of “connection” is important to this study. Think of an adult who connects well with you. How would you describe what happens when that person connects with you—are there specific things that he or she does or says, or a way of acting, that strengthens that bond, makes that connection work? (Some kids are not “word” people. If it would help you to describe it better, draw a picture or a cartoon of what “good connection” looks like.)⁴

⁴The pictures which illustrate this chapter come from the drawings that the young people included in their responses. The pictures add nuances to their comments which may not be captured by the words that they use.

What is Connection?

Because the question was so open-ended, responses to “What is connection?” varied widely. Yet after coding and sorting the data, patterns emerged. Like Jesus in the Emmaus story, there was always a personally admired “who.” Connection was *never* described as something one did with oneself. There was: 1) a “how it happens,” a means, a vehicle for making that connection as in the gift of presence through “walking together”; 2) a “what happens,” the gift of understanding in “unpacking the scriptures”; 3) and a “who,” as a fellow traveler offering the gift of “doing something together,” as in breaking the bread. The concrete symptoms of connection that were articulated by these young people paralleled the disciples’ description of “our hearts were burning.” And finally, from the disciples’ recognition of their bond with Jesus and their dash to go witness to their experience, there were behavioral consequences to those connections. Few student responses mentioned all of those characteristics, but combined together, they repeated them over and over again. We peer over the shoulders of teenagers in a Catholic theology classroom to hear what connection means to them.⁵

Who are the People Connecting with our Youth?

Young people talk most frequently about their bond with adult family members. They connect with mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, older brother or sister, an aunt, and a cousin:

I have a connection with my mom. For some reason, she can always tell what sort of mood I am in regardless of if I say anything.

My father connects with me mostly. He inspires me to do better and become better. He tells me his life experiences and the gift earned from God when we do better.

I have many people I connect with but one special connection with my grandma on my Dad’s side. She is very old and she is very religious. She has had a hard life and so have I

⁵Identifiable features such as names have been replaced with generic descriptors.

but she is closer to God. As I have gotten older, we have formed a deeper relationship with her and I enjoy our conversations.

Teachers and coaches can also connect well:

My German teacher from sophomore year connects with me. She is very understanding and compassionate and does not judge me.

The math teacher here at [my school] really connects with me. I have had to pay bills and pretty much become an adult since my father passed in 2006. He understands my hardships and poverty and is just here for me. I can relate to him on a lot of things.

Yes, my soccer coach used to connect with me very well. What happens is that it gives you this feeling that you have known them and developed a relationship with them over years. It also makes you feel as if you can tell this person anything and that you can trust that they will understand where you are coming from and you are safe with them. (Figure 3.1)

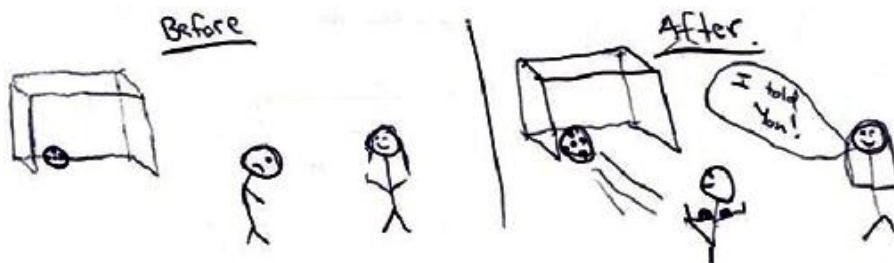


Figure 3.1. To connect means that you can trust that they will understand.

Religious leaders of many varieties were mentioned third most often, with youth ministers and confirmation leaders leading the way, followed by priests and parish employees:

My youth group leader connects very well with me. He is young, funny, and easy to talk to and knows my name. He keeps me coming back to youth group every Sunday because of his energy and youthfulness.

I connect very well with my parish's assistant, [name]. She is truly a role model for everyone. She's kind, sweet, and loves to talk to me. I feel really connected to her when we talk about God.

Mentors, neighbors, friends' parents, choir director, school alumni, and close older friends were also mentioned as those with whom young people connect.

Thirty students did not answer this question. Some of those who did respond did not have an adult with whom they connect:

There are no adults that really “connect” with me. I am good friends with many adults. However they tend to not understand me as much as my friends. I am afraid to say something personal to them, in case they go tell my parents.

No. I think that adults don’t really understand the people of today’s world. Yea, they were teenagers once, but the world has definitely changed so much in the last 20 years. No matter how hard they try to connect with us, it just won’t work. We connect better with people our own age.

How are These Connectors Connecting?

Young people offer much insight in how to pass the ball to them. The three major categories that arose from their responses centered on: 1) relate; 2) understand; and 3) help.

Rows and rows of data speak of the most common response of the “how” of connection: Relate to me. This is described as: “being chill,” “in sync,” “come down to my level,” and “relate to my life.”

When a teacher, priest or whoever connects with me it means that he/she relates to my life. If they can teach about things, that seem important or have nothing to do with me and then can legitimately connect what they are teaching to my life, they will have my full undivided attention.

Yes, my last theology teacher. He is really nice and chill and taught religion in ways that we could relate to, not something an adult should be doing.

This teacher is really COOL. He is just so in sync with what goes on at school. He just knows how to relate and is a really cool guy. (Figure 3.2. For the uninitiated, “Sup” means “what’s up?” and a bumping of fists is a sign of solidarity.)

Connection to me means being able to relate to a person, to have in depth conversations, and to be on a personal level.



Figure 3.2. To connect means to be in sync.

A subset of “relate to me” is included in this previous answer—have meaningful conversations, be interesting, talk about things that matter. Young people appreciate when adults respect their intelligence and are articulately engaged with them:

They just talk on our level; they act like they are interested in what we say. They are easy to talk to.

The second most common category of response in “how to connect” centered on mutuality in understanding. There were three forms of this affinity. Each used the word “understanding” but used it differently. The most frequent was as a common bond of understanding: “to know me,” to “hear me,” to “get me,” essentially to be in sympathy and show respect and care for the young person:

They understand me. They get where I’m coming from.

Yes, I have a mother of one of my closest friends who knows everything about me. It feels great to have her understand my thoughts, actions, and feelings... She always keeps me grounded and feeling love. She’ll have long talks de-stressing me or give me hugs and kisses when I just need them the most. She constantly betters me and keeps me on a positive track.

Similarity of interests, experiences and/or goals were a second source of “understanding.” This connoted a common ground for building an understanding of each other—“same sense of humor,” “interests in common,” “similar likes and dislikes,” “common enjoyable experiences.” The word “sharing” often arose as an indicator of this sub-category of mutuality:

My dad, we share many things in common. He knows me better than anybody. My father and I have a good connection. He is much like me and often an invaluable teacher in my life.

The person looks at you, listens to what you say, and shares common interests.

When the person connects with me I feel

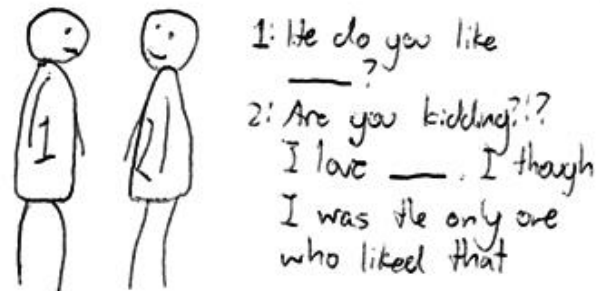


Figure 3.3. To connect means to share common interests.

as though he/she truly understands me and can relate to my situation. We connect from a level of similar likes and dislikes and our personalities fit with each other.

Yes, my uncle. It feels good to talk to a person who feels the same way you do about a lot of things. He likes the same things I do and we act kind of the same.

The third type of mutual understanding keyed from the word “open.” “Share personal life,” “let me relate to your life,” “treated you like family, like a brother” and “make it a one-on-one” thing revealed a desire for a reciprocal interchange that was trusting and true and *jointly* uplifting. Passing the ball back and forth, the connector was willing, not just to listen and take in the concerns of the young person, but also could openly communicate his or her own vulnerability in an effort to connect life experiences:

If someone opens up about themselves and relays a message using personal examples, I can connect with them. To make a good connection work, one must be able to listen to others ideas and thoughts.

A personal story makes for a good connection. One that you can feel what the person went through. It’s like you were on that journey as well.

The final category of “how to connect” was pastoral. The connector “helps.” “Take the time to help me” and “be there for you when you are down” and “knows what to say to lift me up” characterized this bond (figure 3.4). In times of trouble, the connector has come to his or her assistance and thus the youth trusts and has attached to that person.



Figure 3.4. To connect is pastoral: help me up when I am down.

It’s when a person knows about your life and doesn’t judge you but tries to help you when you ask for it. It’s a person you trust.

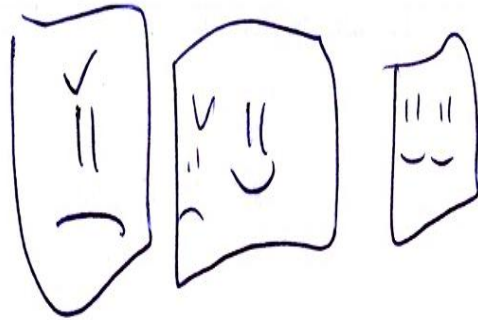
They know how you are feeling and are able to help you with tough decisions.

My dad. He always listens to my problems and helps me get through it.

When my choir directress (or I also call her my big sister) is around I can always talk to her even when I am extremely mad. She has this way of letting me know that she is

always there for me even when I think no one cares. Just by her being around she has this strong connection that says you can come to her (figure 3.5).

One of my teachers from last year because she really understands my pain, and makes me feel better, even when I'm going through terrible things.



I'm Mad + She's there = I feel better

Though some may bemoan the pervasive

influence of the internet and mass media in the formation of our young people, the vast majority of these youth surveyed could identify an adult who has had a personal impact on them. It appears to be a role that almost anyone could do for them if an adult were willing. Rather than stemming from the position that the connector holds, connection arises through taking the time to relate, understand, and help.

What “vibes” does the connector send into the space that the young person detects? What are they looking for in that person? They describe connectors as role models of integrity:

Someone that connects with me is someone that not only I can confide and trust in; they are someone that I look up to or hope to be like in some ways.

If that person is real with you. Not just putting on a show to try to get personal gain. Just wanting to be true to you because they want to.

One who is “real,” “listens to me,” “believable,” “true,” and “knows how kids think” is respected and revered. Character traits of “fun” and “humorous,” “friendly” and “easy-going” and “approachable” combine with “respect” and “compassionate” and “kind” to identify their ideal connector.⁶

⁶Malcolm Gladwell uses the same word “connector” in his second chapter of *The Tipping Point* (see footnote 26 in the introduction). The “connector” that these students describe is not Gladwell’s social gad-about who collects people, but an adult who enriches their lives through deeply listening, one who shares with them and cares about them personally. This “connector” role is accessible to many more personality types than the one-in-a-thousand “connector” that Gladwell describes.

Indicators of Connection

In watching tapes of past plays, a coach can diagnose the relational strengths of a team. There are symptoms of connection. How is an adult to know whether or not he or she is connecting with young people? What goes on in the space between them? There are consistent signs that reveal that connection is happening.

First is the element of spending time with ease, “being yourself” in the presence of the other, the sense of safety to just “be.” Whether in a time of difficulty or a moment of joy, over and over again, students speak of “good” or “natural” conversation as a symptom of connection:

When I connect with an adult, everything just flows. We can continue on the conversation and it’s not uncomfortable at all.

I can feel a person truly cares when they connect with me. Signs of feeling safe.

No talk, just hang out.

Good connection comes from a bond you two share. They are easy to talk to, funny, and they are there for you when needed. That person tends to always know what to say when things are hard.

Accompanying that comfortable and easy flow of conversations are the symptoms of smiling, humor, feeling good, fun, and laughter.

In a connection I have with an adult, there is a conversation that relates to both of us and is a good nature. Laughing would normally occur.

It feels very good when an older person connects with you because at this young age we often feel very confused.

There are adults that connect with me. What happens is we laugh; there isn’t a serious nature in the conversation. There are jokes and the conversation is about interesting topics. A sign of the “connection” would be smiling and laughter.

Secondly, in American mainstream culture, eye contact shows connection:⁷

The person I can think of that connects with me is a teacher. She makes eye contact,

⁷In other cultures, avoiding eye contact may be a sign of respect.

listens well and gives great advice I can relate to.

A small number wrote of physical contact as expressive of connection:

One of my teachers is a good friend and person to talk to. If anything is wrong, she asks me are you ok and touches my shoulder to show that she is there as support.

FRIEND/High five! Joking around.

Whenever my mom is around, I always get a positive feeling. When I'm sad, she hugs me and tells me everything will be alright. I know if anything happens, I can go to her. I can share my feelings with her (Figure 3.6).

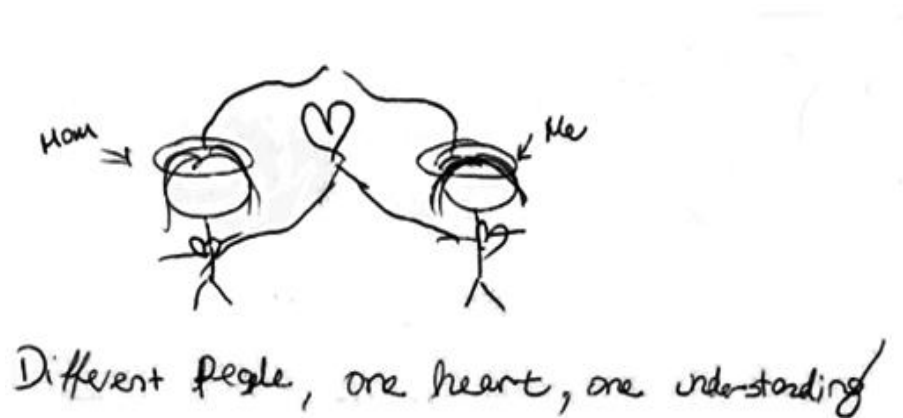


Figure 3.6. To connect is to share feelings.

A fifteen year old boy simply drew a picture of connection with the word “La-di-da-di-da” and left the interpretation open to the imagination.

In summary, to the respondents in this study, the symptoms of connection are comfort, safety in being oneself, naturally flowing conversation, laughter, eye contact, and physical interaction. The “how” centers on relating,



Figure 3.7. To connect is “La-di-da-di-da.”

understanding, and helping. The “who” of connection can be anybody willing to invest the time to listen and be there for the young person. What happens when the event of preaching, as the interaction of preacher, listeners, and homily, connects?

Homiletic Encounter

Like the fire burning in the hearts of the disciples on their way to Emmaus, the encounter of preaching can impact a young person. A high school junior from Ohio writes about how preaching has influenced his life:

A lot of it had to do with accepting difficulties in life. Often, people will either turn to or turn away from God during the extremes in their life, the homilies I've heard usually kept me closer to God in these times.

Jesus unpacked the Scriptures for the disciples on the road to Emmaus in just such a moment of difficulty. Through liturgical preaching, young people's eyes can be opened. They have much to say about what a preacher can do to help this to happen.

The Impact of the Individual Homily

A single homily can stick in the memory. A single homily can connect so as to help. A single homily can also hurt at this vulnerable age. Almost as a mother hen protecting her chicks, a twelfth grader from Indiana urges caution as she describes the power of preaching: "I would tell them to consider my age group. Our faiths are fragile right now and homilies could either make or break them."

When faith is fragile, the world is confusing. There is so much conflicting information. In an individual homily, one way to differentiate from all of the noise is to meet the personal need of the listener. What would this twelfth grader hunger to hear? In meeting the need, the homily should be as simple and clear as possible. The messenger selects that which has the best chance of getting through. Less is more.⁸ As teens grow, their view of the world broadens. They have many questions. The adult world does not always make sense to a child-becoming-adult. When

⁸Ries and Trout, 7.

preached simply, an image, story, or statement can “hook” into their mental framework.⁹ A profound analogy can further understanding. A fifteen year old girl may not grasp the complexity of suffering, but this visual image from a homily resonated with her life experience:

It was odd to think that Jesus, who is supposed to love us, could let us suffer so much sometimes. But after hearing a preacher’s homily about how to make gold, you must put it in the fire until it is ready and beautiful, I realized that I shouldn’t give up on my faith just because life doesn’t go my way.

When the message is distilled to a core concept, that idea reminds the hearer of what is important.¹⁰ Beliefs then change, which adjusts attitude and thus behavior.¹¹ A seventeen year old Ukrainian Catholic boy describes just such a change as the result of a homily:

The homily helped me see a bird’s eye view of life or the “big picture.” I started to stop worrying about the petty arguments about things that didn’t really matter that were harming my relationship with my family (parents and siblings).

How do we know what the Holy Spirit is doing in a homily; are there identifiable attributes of the Connector in the encounter with a homily? Some young people described moments when they saw their faith more clearly. The invisible became more visible:

The homily motivated me to worship God more and opened my eyes to how I should worship God and respect other people.

A preacher who is theologically educated may not remember what it is like to not know theology. “The Curse of Knowledge,” was described in the previous chapter as the tune that is playing in my head may not be playing in your head. Once we learn something, it is difficult to perceive what it is like not to know, causing a tremendous information imbalance.¹² Similarly, a robotics engineer can explain the intricacies of motion controllers to his mother but get nowhere.

⁹Heath and Heath, 57.

¹⁰Heath and Heath, 37.

¹¹Hoyer and MacInnis, 135.

¹²Heath and Heath, 20.

A nuclear physicist can describe the implication of neutrinos traveling faster than the speed of light to his sister and it still may make no sense to her. A poet can wax eloquent on the beauty of iambic pentameter to his son, but if there is no schema, no hook, no source of connection for that information, there is no understanding. Young people are listening. But as the creators of Sesame Street found, it is not entertainment or stimulation but comprehension that maintains attention. A Hispanic Greek Orthodox girl suggests to preachers, “Remember what it is like to be young again.” A Korean seventeen year old boy says, “Understand the common teenager and talk about things they can relate to.” Another says “Speak more in young kid terms, i.e. examples that could relate to us.” One young man found courage from an older priest through just that type of homily:

Well, it was when the preacher’s homily was talking about an event in my life that I was currently going through. That homily kind of uplifted me to push on in my life.

In creating a single homily, the preacher imports the mindset of the listener insofar as possible. As was illustrated in the chapter 2, the listener walks into a church service with a mind that is awash with secular messages. How does a homily address this competition? In *Positioning*, Ries and Trout suggest finding a hole and filling it.¹³ What is the culture leaving out of their lives? What is missing? What is not being fulfilled by other messages? What does Christian preaching have that is unique? If the message is just that we are one among many others who are similar, then that communication has little influence. Auxiliary to “relate to me” is “stretch me” and “give me something to stand/live for.” The core message does not change. Its packaging sometimes must inculturate.

¹³Ries and Trout, 54.

If the Holy Spirit as Connector is to be given a chance to stick like the thousands of tiny hoops in Velcro material, then the preacher has to search for hooks to latch onto. This is a commonly recurring theme:

I would tell them to continue relating their homilies to real life situations in order to help the people in their journey to become more Christ-like.

I like real life examples.

He has to know what its like for a teenager in 2011 and not in 1960.

He talks about things that I can relate to in my own life as a teenager in an engaging original fashion while simultaneously teaching the messages set forth in the gospels.

How is a preacher who does not live with teenagers supposed to preach to what is going on in their world? Those who work with teens know that their day to day struggles and concerns are very real. They like to be asked.¹⁴ They do not like adults to superficially assume that they know what is going on in a high-school student's mind. They are attentive to gaps in authenticity with antennae finely tuned to what they consider "fakeness." Shallow presumptions leak through a homily and can be both disrespectful and alienate:

Be truthful in all things; never try to be something you are not just for the sake of relating. Ask us what we want to know and we will tell you.

Sometimes his message is too blunt and just makes you feel bad for being on Facebook too much or something that isn't actually bad.

To relate to topics teenagers deal with daily, such as peer pressure, bullying etc.

You should truly know what people/teenagers are going through on the day to day life. Don't tell what we can and can't do (we hate that) but try to instruct us to make the right decision and expand our spiritual life.

As a model preacher, Jesus valued his hearers. He took the ordinary "stuff" of his world and taught lessons that resounded within ordinary human life. Something happened. As a result,

¹⁴Chapter 5 will lay out a reverse mentoring process through which young listeners can be heard.

they asked, “Were not our hearts burning within us?” From this single instance, the Word reached a deep place within the hearers which opened and readied and echoed in their hearts and minds. In listening with young listeners, this is what spurs passion. This is what engenders commitment. This is what made the disciples in the Emmaus story sprint off to tell the world about their encounter.

In the marketing world, that burning of the heart about one’s brand of Apple Computer or Harley-Davidson motorcycle is called “resonance”:

A brand with the right identity and meaning can result in a customer believing the brand is relevant to them. The strongest brands will be the ones to which those customers become so attached that they, in effect, become evangelists and actively seek means to interact with the brand and share their experiences with others.¹⁵

Yet resonance in preaching and resonance in branding are seldom based on one experience. Like the continual watering of a field yields crop growth, a seventeen year old girl from New York resonated with not just one preaching event, but with the composite of all of the homilies that she heard:

I WOULD TELL THEM HOW MOTIVATED THEY MAKE ME TO FOLLOW Jesus and how much I want to tell others about it. I hope to help others in experience from the homilies every week. I really connect to my parish homilies.

The attributes of the Connector in the encounter with a homily are more apparent as long-term effects:

It [connection] is not one particular experience. I feel uplifted by homilies when a preacher engages in the aspects of my life that I struggle with. When a preacher touches on a problem I have/have had/will have and helps me with these problems I feel enlightened.

¹⁵Kevin Lane Keller, “Building Customer-Based Brand Equity,” *Marketing Management* 10, no. 2 (- July/August 2001): 19. http://web.ebscohost.com.ezp.slu.edu/ehost/detail?vid=3&hid=104&sid=19e08a31_df26-49cd-86fa-79568792b59e%40sessionmgr114&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWlhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=buh&AN=4966486 [accessed July 10, 2010].

To recap from the Introduction, foundational to this study is the premise that “the true test of good preaching is the effect it produces in the lives of believers.”¹⁶ The connection that lodges in the memory offers a long-term assessment of how a homily impacts peoples’ lives.¹⁷ Recall that the Heath brothers found little correlation between the perceived “speaking talent” and the stickiness of the message.¹⁸ In marketing, an advertisement is not evaluated on its depth of color or the artistry of its layout, though each is important—the ad is judged on how well it sells its product. In like manner, the individual homily does not stand-alone. Therefore the survey questions sought to ascertain not “how did the respondent like *this* homily?” nor the perennial (and liturgists’ least favorite) question, “what did *I* get out of it?” but “what changed and moved within the listener *as a result* of the homily?” and “how did preaching shape the experience of and encounter with God?” The bulk of the results, then, express the experience of the homily not as a single event but as an ongoing engagement with God.

Long-term Homiletical Takeaway Reveals the Face of God

One question in particular described how the homily provided the bread and butter for growing disciples. In the fourth section of the survey, two hundred and ninety-four students (Group I) responded to the Sunday preaching that they had heard in the past year.¹⁹ They checked the words that described their overall impression of that preaching, marking as many of the sixteen characteristics as fit their experience.²⁰ The follow-up question then asked: “If you marked the box above ‘helped me grow in my faith’ or ‘uplifting, made me a better person,’

¹⁶Harris, 116.

¹⁷Untener, 99-100.

¹⁸Heath and Heath, 242-244.

¹⁹Group I was composed of baptized Catholics who attended Mass at least once per month, the baseline for inclusion in the section of the survey that evaluated Sunday homilies.

²⁰Characteristics were: comforting; flat, boring delivery; helpful to my life; talked down to me; helped me grow in faith; uplifting, made me a better person; harsh, judgmental; frustrating; rambling, pointless; interesting, mentally stimulating; confusing; didn’t seem to matter I was there; easy to follow; inspired me to commit myself to following Jesus; helped me forgive someone; made me feel good (see figure 4.10 for a graph of the responses to this question).

what was that experience like? Please describe that as clearly as you can.” Fifty-five percent of the respondents were able to articulate an experience of preaching within the past year that connected so as to help them grow in their faith or uplift them.²¹ It was as though the ball was passed to them and they took off running toward the goal with it. A tone of energy, lightness, and joy characterized these comments. Chapter 1 pointed out that the documents of the church do not mention the significance of the homily as source of faith growth for young disciples. These young people did. Of these, some said that the ongoing experience produced a positive emotional response within worship:

I usually look around at other parishioners and feel a strong sense of faith and community after a good homily.

Listening to the homily just uplifts my heart and I just feel really good about myself when I hear about Jesus. It’s like my own little world.

Well, when you hear a good homily you fall into a state of calmness. It’s hard to explain but it’s peaceful and you feel like a different person in a way.

The largest category of response centered on a deepening of understanding, whether to better understand God or life, Church teaching or Scripture, or one’s vocation. This richer awareness led to an epiphany marked by courage, comfort or inner leading:

The experience was like I actually know that God listens to me. He may not answer me right away or when I want but he does hear me. He also forgives me when I do wrong and will help me through life as long as I follow and worship him to the best of my ability.

The Sunday homily taught me about Jesus and his teachings. Hearing and learning about the goodness in the world made me want to do as HE did.

They helped explain the gospel and help me find a calling.

²¹Though the questions are only somewhat similar, this is a higher percentage than Christian Smith’s findings in the *National Study of Youth and Religion* in which only 37 % of surveyed Catholic teens (ages 13–17) said that they had ever had an experience of spiritual worship that was very moving and powerful. The source of the difference may be that question 60 was only asked of those who regularly attend Mass. The average would drop if the baptized Catholics who do not attend were included. See Smith, 53.

A lesser number described a change of heart or attitude as a result of the connection of the preaching:

This experience was a huge impact on my life. I was so done with my terrifying experiences and going to Sunday homilies made me finally let it all go.

Whatever worries I had, they would preach something relating to that that would calm me down.

Well, it made me feel like I should be thankful for everything I have.

A large number also spoke of an intensified spirituality or deeper relationship with God. Most of these responses used the word “closer” or “strengthened.” This hunger expressed itself in both general and specific ways:

It helped me to understand God more and grow closer to him.

When I heard Fr. J. preach, he touched me.

I felt a stronger longing for God. I wanted a better relationship with Him.

I’ve had a few enlightening moments at a parish I went to. I was at a point where my faith was being challenged and what the priest said made me turn more towards my faith.

Finally, a common result of the homily was a modification in the teen’s behavior: to help others, to be better, to go to church more, to imitate Jesus, and to forgive. Scripture calls it “go and do likewise.” Here is how they express this conversion:

The experience was not really divine or euphoric but rather contemplative, forcing me to think about certain parts of my life that I could or should have changed.

That experience uplifted me because I felt as if I could change myself and strive with motivation to become a good, God loving person.

Fr. A. gave a homily about LOVING HUMILITY. It helped me want to grow more deeply into my relationship with God. It made me want to be a better person.

It made me realize who God really wants me to be. A good and caring person. And to use the gifts that I have and share them with others.

Made me want to be more like Jesus.

These comments are reminiscent of the “aha” moments in coaching soccer when a player looks up from playing “his” ball and sees the new world of space and relationship for the first time. Some young listeners put a lot of energy into processing a homiletic message. They will work to sort out ideas, they may be emotionally connected to the person of the preacher, have a strong commitment to God, and may have had positive experiences with homilies that have helped them. These high-energy listeners expect homilies to connect:

I was really confused about what God wanted me to do when I walked into Mass. That week, the homily was all about giving your life up to God and trusting in Him. I have had other experiences like this where the homily is exactly what I needed to hear that week. It just helped me believe that God was real and was trying to talk to me.

If they help me to understand and make me aware how Jesus is always present and loving, I feel they have done their job!

These comments are expressive of the ongoing transformative power of preaching in the context of the liturgy. The community’s experience of preaching, its homiletic take-away as “first theology,” has co-created meaning with the preacher to actualize encounter with the Trinity in its midst. The Holy Connector has aroused that give and take of faith through the event of preaching. If the task for the Church is to transmit its message to the next generation, these responses indicate that it can do so. God’s Word goes forth into the world. This is cause for celebration. The kingdom of God is here.

Long-Term Homiletical Take-Away can also Obscure the Face of God

The kingdom of God is also not yet here. Some young people verbalized spiritual growth as a result of homiletic take-away. Others articulated how homilies had not helped to strengthen their faith, describing “what is not working” toward growth in discipleship. Forty-five percent of those surveyed who regularly attend Mass could not recall an experience of preaching that had helped them to grow in their faith in the past year. These responses also coalesced into consistent

themes. When asked to describe what that experience was like, it is as though they ran up and down the soccer field and never got a change to touch the ball. They described a sense of dullness, sleepiness, or heaviness characterized these comments. For some, the experience was emotionally painful:²²

It makes me frustrated and confused that the preaching doesn't help me grow in my faith. I hate not being able to focus my attention on the homily.

It just seems like not only me and the rest of the people at the church are going through the motions but also our priest was.

SAD.

It feels pointless.

If I am not helped in my faith when I come to Mass, at the moment I feel lost because I have nobody to help me understand God.

When the desire to grow is not met in this encounter, it also has a cumulative dulling or demotivating effect among these young people who have been consistently going to church:

It feels like no one is really reaching out to me. I feel obligated to go to Mass.

When I come to mass with the intention of learning and becoming closer to God and leave with having neither of those fulfilled, I do not have as strong of a desire to go the following weekend.

A second theme that reverberated throughout the comments of young people who were not growing in faith was “boring.” If the message were coming through their cell phone, it was getting no signal. There was no connection. They described this weightiness as “watching it happen,” the “same everything every time,” and “not worth it.” High school students described sources for “boring” as repetitiveness, lack of a central message, rambling, and poor delivery:

I usually end up spacing out during the homily and getting sleepy because of the

²²Hoyer and MacInnis assert that dissatisfaction is costly. Negative word-of-mouth spreads quickly and sticks firmly in the memory. One European study showed that it took twelve positive experiences to overcome one negative one, 281.

rambling (which may have much meaning behind it, but puts me to sleep). I end up losing concentration, thinking of other things or yawning.

The same point is made over and over and it gets boring. Sing a new song for once.

It feels like there is no point to go. If I open my Bible at night and read, I feel closer to God than when I listen to a priest with awful speaking skills.

A small number of young listeners dismissed the homily as unnecessary to their growth in faith.

The expectation was that the homily was of no help. Not only was there no signal, the cell phone had been turned off as though there was no service:

Honesty, I feel that I'm a pretty good person, so they don't do much.

Not having a preacher to connect with isn't life altering. I still have a family and friends I connect with. Most sermons come off as lectures and information shoved down your throat to me.

I try to learn outside of church with my family about my faith. The church only provides the sacraments to help me.

It depends when I go, some Sundays are brutally boring and others can hold my attention, it depends on the priest. I grow in faith through myself and my experiences, not a homily.

These listeners have shrunk inward and turned "self" off. The ongoing fruit of preaching that does not connect is that the encounter does not occur. The preaching event as icon becomes like a window that is dirty, smudged, or darkened. The face of God is obscured or hidden. Even though they sit in a pew with others, it is though these young disciples sit alone, isolated from the Connector that would rouse them.

If the homily is to create an experience of God in the midst of a world that constantly bombards adolescents with words, then preaching has to work to connect. Listeners are co-narrators in creating an effective message.²³ To pass the ball back and forth between preacher and assembly results in a stronger team effort toward the goal. Therefore we seek to understand

²³Janet B. Bavelas, Linda Coates, and Trudy Johnson, "Listeners as Co-narrators," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 6 (Dec 2000): 941.

how and why and to what they are motivated.

The Motivation of the Young Assembly to Connect

Situational moments of high sensitivity impact how the homily is received. Peak experiences come from retreats, mission trips, youth conferences, work camps, and conversion experiences. A previously taciturn student may pump the preacher's hand and exude, "Great homily!" Preaching plays a role in continuing to strengthen that (perhaps temporarily) receptive disciple, before the inner excitement wears off. A sixteen year old boy describes his experience:

I go to [youth conference] every year, and we go to mass during our time there. It is an amazing experience overall, but the homily was really good this year. It told about how he (the priest) was struggling in his faith and how he partially got out of it, but never fully can. It changed my outlook on my faith. I often feel lost and confused, but this homily in particular helped me to realize that God hasn't chosen to reveal more to me yet, and, for now, I need to do the best with what I have.

Adults are sometimes put off by what looks like cockiness in teenagers. Many young people project the confidence that they are solid in their take on life, yet the marketing world knows that those most easily influenced are ones with an innocent mind:

The first thing you need to "fix your message indelibly in the mind" is not a message at all. It's a mind. An innocent mind. A mind that has not been burnished by anyone else's brand.²⁴

In times of emotional fragility, their question may be "How do I make sense out of this?" When their view of the world broadens and new information prompts mental adjustment, kids ask, "How do I integrate this into my current belief system?" When they have taken a new behavioral path and as a result are shifting their identity and beliefs to be in accord with what they have begun doing, questions arise: "What should I do?" and "What is right?" and "How does faith speak to *this* in my life?" In suffering, they can ask the profound question of "What

²⁴Ries and Trout, 20.

kind of a God would make this happen?” In addition to the confusion that many youth express, valley experiences are also moments when preaching can help:

When a preacher gives a sermon, I try to listen for advice he can give. Sometimes he will talk about things that I am going through at the time and what he says can be helpful or at least get me thinking.

In times of uncertainty, people of all ages are most likely to look to the actions of others to see what they should do.²⁵ At this receptive time, unfortunately, adults can also “majorly blow it” by not providing guidance, support, answers, and/or direction. This is the flip side of the high energy listener—when the listener is receptive, ineffective preaching can also deeply dishearten. These vibrant disciples can be candid about losing their drive to hear the message of the homily:

The Eucharist (Jesus!) and my faith community is the reason I love the Mass. I generally hate homilies... this summer they even became my “nap time” on my mom’s shoulder right before I had to go to work (after Mass). I would consider myself deep in my faith, but I want to make the preacher sit down so many times and have someone else talk.

One eighteen year old high-energy listener plans to enter a cloister of contemplative nuns. Leah is the most high-energy young listener that I interviewed. Though passionate about God and her faith, when asked to describe the preaching at her parish, she laughs:

Confusing! [The preacher] seems like he is wandering through the jungle, hacking away with a machete with *no* idea of where he is going. He has no idea of what he is going say when he gets up there and makes it up, wanders around as though, “well... there’s something we haven’t heard yet... so... let’s throw that in...” He knows the jungle, probably better than all of us, but he doesn’t know where he is going in it. If he would make a path, I could follow him.

(How are you doing with following him?)

It depends on how much I’m trying to follow... I usually... try to hang in there for about two minutes; I’m *always* hopeful... and if it’s not going anywhere, it feels like it just goes into my head and trickles down to my feet.

²⁵ Cialdini, 129.

In the same focus group, seventeen-year-old Leo is sprawled on the couch with his long legs stretched onto the ottoman. He laughs about the same preacher:

I zone out within, like... once he stands up to walk to the pulpit. In one ear and out the other...

(Is that based on your previous experience?)

Yup. In one ear and out the other.

(Why do you come?)

You come because your parents say, “Get in the car.”

Leo is not unusual. When queried, “Why did you go to Mass this Sunday?” about a third of those regularly attending Mass checked, “Because I was required to.” To get feedback from low-energy listeners, the preacher who wants to connect has to do the seeking. They will not come to you. This is a crucial population. When beliefs are not deeply held, these young people are vulnerable. In the sample surveyed, they are not hostile. Those who are regularly attending Mass rate the “person of the preacher” rather well.²⁶ Their response to the quality of the homilies could be articulated in their language as “meh...” In spite of what looks like disinterest, though, these young people *are* listening. They value being treated with respect. They want to be challenged. From chapter 2, the four factors of motivation are: 1) personal relevance; 2) moderately risky; 2) somewhat inconsistent with prior attitudes (stretches); and 4) consistent with values, goals, and needs.²⁷

From across regions and ethnicities, many youth feel that the preaching is directed toward the adults and not to them. They repeatedly express that it feels as though they are not really

²⁶ Quantitative analysis will comprise the next chapter.

²⁷ Hoyer and MacInnis, 55.

there.²⁸ In looking for connection, a sixteen year old Asian-American girl finds

None. I find it frustrating. Shouldn't a man of God be able to connect with us laypeople? Especially us young members. We are the next generation of Catholic/Christians/etc. If we get disconnected, we won't want to come or listen and eventually separate for good. It saddens me that most people I know turned atheist b/c they were not able to connect.

If the response to the homily within liturgy is like a mine from which to quarry data,²⁹ then what can we learn from this description of the ongoing experience of the homily?

Identifying these no-service areas can pinpoint areas for needed growth in the encounter of preaching. Dissatisfied listeners, when needs are met, can become deeply committed ones. For both the sender and the receiver, locating the source of disconnection is a springboard toward strengthening their bond. Where there seems to be no connection, the Connector can build new cell towers if we are listening. All through Christian history, from Francis of Assisi to Martin Luther to Teresa of Avila to Juan Diego, the Holy Spirit has connected the age-old gospel afresh in new ways in new places.

Rather than attending to homiletic words, low-energy listeners are more observant of and impacted by non-verbal cues—the body language and tone of the speaker, the music, the physical environment, and the welcoming of the community.³⁰ If a preacher wants to know what is going on in the world of these low-energy listeners, his strongest recourse is to sit with them and observe. These listeners seek for holiness from the preacher.

The Witness of the Preacher

²⁸ For a detailed literature review of the marginalization of youth in preaching (not just in Catholic preaching), see the 2007 Academy of Homiletics paper by Richard W. Voelz.

²⁹ Fagerberg, 55.

³⁰ Hoyer and MacInnis, 155. The “peripheral route to persuasion” influences in ways other than main message arguments. When effort is low, listeners let their guard down. They are then swayed by forming simple inferences and do not put forth the mental energy to develop counterarguments. (See the “subjective comprehension” section in chapter 2.) Many adolescents are lost to the faith as a result of this style of persuasion from non-gospel sources.

The spiritual formation of the priest is a priority in Catholic clerical life. He is to be a man of Scripture. If he has encountered God in the Scriptures, then his people will too. He is to be a man of tradition. If his life is imbued with the richness of history, liturgy and prayer, and the witness of the saints, he will embody the holiness of the Church. He is to be a man of communion.³¹ If he is connected to his people and in solidarity with them, then the Holy Spirit, the Great Connector, who wants to be here, wants to be at work, and wants to unite us, will speak through him. Ideally, in the preaching event, a priest paints an icon by how he invests his life, composes his words, and bodily expresses them. The receivers communally enter into that preaching event with the preacher on a journey to the Father. The Invisible is then seen by its visible fruits. Young people hunger for that authentic communality:

When a preacher connects with me it means that God himself is connecting with me.

To be able to show you in the face of God.

(Connecting with a preacher) is special because he is a role model and has a relationship with God that I want to model mine after.

Personal Positioning of the Preacher

In priestly formation, a man is taught to be humble, not to stand out or exalt himself.³² At the same time, the ethos of the preacher matters. This is a delicate balance. Augustine believed that the “life of the speaker has greater weight in determining whether he is obediently heard than any grandness of eloquence.”³³ When young people look at their preacher, what do they see? The source of the message plays a major role in facilitating the encounter of the receiver.

³¹Shawn McKnight offered these sources of priestly identity in a presentation and dialogue at the annual meeting of the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics (CATH), Austin, TX, December 1, 2011.

³²Timothy Dolan, *Priests for the Third Millennium* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2000), 53-65. This tug and pull was also expressed in clergy interviews with the author in the spring and summer of 2011.

³³Andre Resner, “Ethos” *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 350.

What counts is not what the preacher thinks that he projects, but the image of him that the listener remembers. This impression of presence that is formed in a listener’s mind is called positioning.³⁴ To be attentive to the positioning question of “How do *they* see you?” is more humbling than just seeing one’s own image of self. Questions to test personal positioning are:

- What is in the mind of the hearer? What will they already give you?
- When a young woman thinks of people of faith, is her parish priest among the top ten that come into her mind?
- When a young man considers his vocation in life, does his local preacher stand as a vibrant representative for a future priestly role?
- What image springs up when they hear your name? What obstacles pop up when they hear your name?
- What memories are you giving them? Have you made a connection with teens through non-preaching venues?
- Do you have a reputation for treating them with caring, kindness and love?
- What is your personal “buzz?”

In short, what is your position in your people’s minds?

And how is that impacting your effectiveness as a preacher? Listeners who are not highly invested in processing words are especially swayed by the friendliness, credibility, and authenticity of the

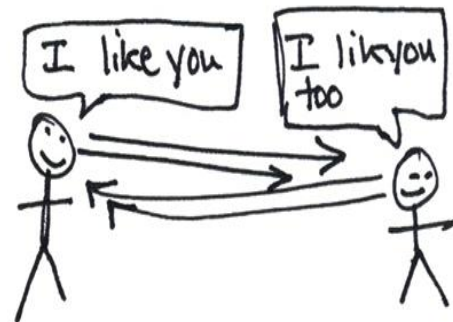


Figure 3.8. The mutuality of “liking.”

preacher.³⁵ In the shifting world in which we live, “who

can you trust?” becomes critical. The findings from marketing studies parallel those expressed by the young people earlier in this chapter—a strong local connection can carry an influence over the barrage of the outside world.³⁶ This opens up a tremendous personal opportunity for the caring and credible parish preacher.

In the theology of the seven sacraments, their efficacy is not based on the holiness or

³⁴Trout and Ries, 4.

³⁵Hoyer and MacInnis, 164.

³⁶Ibid., 396-408. The strength of the bond within a person’s reference group impacts its influence.

personality of the minister but on Christ himself as the author of those sacraments (*ex opere operato*). Does that concept consciously or unconsciously trickle into perspectives on preaching? In conversations with clergy, some imply that preaching is just not a priority. That is not why they entered the priesthood.³⁷ Perceptions vary: “I do it well enough to get by”; “it does not really depend on me”; “I have so many other things to do”; and “I am not an entertainer.” Yet that outlook can leak into the homiletic message. Young listeners’ antennae are keenly attuned to this; they are not fooled: “(I would tell them) To do their homework and be prepared.” “For a priest to connect with younger people, he has to have energy in his voice and *sound happy* to be there.” If the preaching event is iconic, then the preacher cannot get out of the way. He *is* the way. Rather, the icon should be painted as beautifully as possible. The person of the preacher matters. He should strive to be wide open to the indwelling of the Connector so that the congregation can encounter God.

As young people articulate about connection, they have quite a bit to say about how their preacher connects. The earlier responses described how young people saw “connection” in general. A subsequent question asked: “The concept of “connection” between the preacher and a young person is important to this study. Please describe what it means for a preacher to “connect” with you.” Each of the responses about connecting to a preacher arose from memory since the survey was filled out in a focus group or a theology classroom. Which memories stuck?

The Hard Skills of Preaching to Connect

The broadest category of response to the question of connecting with a preacher gave a

³⁷Rick Sterns, personal communication, December 1, 2011, says that consistently, in informal surveys of beginning homiletic students, about 15% of those coming into the priesthood say that they do so because they want to preach. Ironically, this is the same percentage of homilies that young people would recommend to a friend (figure 4.18).

clear “how” to connect. From their perspective, the “hard skills” of speaking to youth divided into two sub-groups, homily content and delivery (table 3.1.):

Table 3.1. How to Connect

Homily Content	Work on Your Delivery Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Come to our level, relate to my life • Bring meaning, be interesting • Have emotional appeal • Be personal and open with your life • Help us – know our problems and speak to them • Help us to understand/teach me • Apply the gospel to my life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use good eye contact • Keep it relaxed • Make it to the point • Speak clearly • Use words that people understand • Be organized • Be enthusiastic • Do not repeat yourself

Source: *Are You Talking to Me*, questions 24 and 63.

The majority of these young people wrote that connection with a preacher came from relating at their level: “real-life examples,” “to talk about things you can relate to,” and “be relatable and down to earth.” To get across, the message has to fit into the cloud of associations that the young person already knows and then re-tie the connections that are already there. Pages and pages and pages of comments described how the homily has to hook to connect:

For a preacher to connect with me, he must be able to see in the eyes of a kid/teenager. My deacon is very good at communicating with kids as much as he does with adults.

For a preacher to “connect” with you, he needs to understand how I am as a person. He needs to be accustomed to what kids my age are going through.

The preacher needs to speak to me, not talk down to. He or she also needs to put things in “teenage terms” so I understand more fully.



Figure 3.9. Connect via a story that relates.

Consumer behavior research tells us that motivation to listen is influenced by personal relevance, “the extent to which it has a direct bearing on and significant consequences or implication for your life.”³⁸ Some might caution about being so accommodating toward getting their attention and relating to youth that the core of the message to them would be lost. Watering down the gospel was not desired by these Catholic young people. They wanted more, not less. They sought for the homily to be about a topic that touched their lives. When that happened, the connection felt tailored to that individual:

When a preacher connects with me, it means that he understands me and what I believe in. Also it means I understand him and feel as if his words mean something special to me.

They can apply gospel stories with real situations that I deal with in high school.

For a preacher to connect with me personally is when he describes an event that I can relate to, or if he is preaching about a topic that I find interesting.

Part of this relatability factor comes from perceiving that the preacher knows what the world is like for a teenager. Ries and Trout suggest, “You have to get off of your pedestal and put your ear to the ground. You have to get on the same wavelength...”³⁹ When teenagers do not hear something that they relate to, it not only makes them tune out to a particular message, but colors how they position the preacher. Since memories vary in salience, unfortunately negative perceptions most easily come to mind:

For a preacher to connect with a young audience, he needs to be aware of current events in the news/media that pertain to their age group. When my priest rambles on and on about things I don’t know/care about, I lose interest.

To be in touch with the world. Sometimes older preachers are disconnected from the changing world and don’t seem to care.

A variation of “relate to my life” was “let me relate to yours.” Both positively and negatively, they called for an authenticity or truthfulness that they gained through hearing the preacher’s life

³⁸Hoyer and MacInnis, 59.

³⁹Ries and Trout, 18.

experiences. This can be either implicit or explicit:

It made things clearer to me and I felt like that my priest really understood what I was dealing with. It was almost like he was talking directly to me.

They've been in my footsteps before. Been there before. Admits it's not always easy.

For a preacher to connect with me he must bring in real life situations and talk of his personal triumphs/failures.

The preachers are terrible at connecting with the young. They need to include something that kids can relate to. Only talking about the bible and not expressing their life experiences in a believable manner is failing.

If I feel the priest is being genuine about his experiences/emotions/thoughts and not making too many assumptions/talking down, I can relate as a fellow human with experiences/emotions/thoughts.

Students sought for content that was meaningful or interesting. They were not looking for fluff.

Those who were attending Mass wanted substance. This came through both positively and negatively:

Preachers rarely connect with me because half the time they aren't saying anything interesting. Most homilies don't have any practical use to me because there's no real world application. Instead of telling me what the readings were, how about trying to describe why the readings actually matter in today's world? The only time preachers actually keep me interested is if they tell a relevant story, or describe an overlying theme of the readings instead of reiterating them.

Make it more interesting because it's the same boring thing over and over again.

To "connect" with a preacher for me means that the preacher interests me, holds my attention, and makes me understand God more. I want to feel inspired by God's love and the stories I hear. Nowadays, it is hard to connect with all the hate in the world. Unfortunately, sometimes that gets brought into the church. That is why I don't go as often as I used to.

Some looked for "insight into the Christian belief system" and wrote, "He helps me to know the meaning of the word of God." Two boys raved about the intellectual quality of their preachers' homilies at school:

They were smart & shared relatable and intellectual ideas in their homilies. They were

enthusiastic about what they were talking about, not bored. They had a way with words, well spoken and gave educated insight into their homilies.

I also like the Jesuit homilies I hear at school masses. They seem to challenge me more intellectually as opposed to just hearing the same about trying to be better and don't sin!

Many more sought for intellectual understanding:

Use analogies that I can understand, that provide a comic relief, and that I can apply to my everyday life.

When a preacher connects with me, it means that he or she has spoken truthful words of God with me. It means that I understand God and understand most of His aspects. I feel as if God is sitting in front of me and I can understand Him. Also the role God plays in my life as well as what my responsibilities as a daughter of God are, should be highlighted in the preaching.

For a preacher to “connect” with me would mean for him to understand the times we are in but still use his experiences and the word of God to teach the truth.

When a preacher is convinced about the message, he is also convincing:

When a preacher “connects,” they are interested in who you are, and they want to convey an important message.

To be open and truthful. Show excitement, respect.

A large number of kids want to be understood and helped in the preaching that they hear. When a message applies to a young person's life, they are grateful. When it seems that the preacher understands their problems and can speak to them, they are uplifted. When they learn to apply the gospel to their lives, they feel connected.

It was good to hear a great homily by my favorite priest, he makes the gospel into life lessons that we can incorporate into our lives.

For a preacher to connect with you, they must be able to see out of your eyes and to feel what you are feeling and truly understand where you come from.

The preacher needs to connect with one in a personal level—he can't just be talking to [me] as if I'm a 50 year old man.

He is able to just talk to me and help me to understand the gospel.

For a preacher to “connect” with you, he needs to understand how I am as a person. He needs to be accustomed to what kids my age are going through.

When a preacher is speaking, his message should relate to my life and his life. I want to hear a personal story about him, and I want him to apply it to my life, as though he was only talking to me. That is a connection, for me at least.

Preaching delivery is also indicates a preacher’s connection: use good eye contact, keep it relaxed, make it to the point, speak clearly, use words that people understand, be organized, be enthusiastic, do not repeat yourself. High school students who are involved in drama, speech, and debate are especially attentive to content and delivery of public speaking. In giving his advice to preachers, one seventeen year old boy summarized the comments of his peers:

Personal Stories. How message of readings apply to “real world.” Be a good Story-teller. Talk loudly and slowly. Include pitch and tone into your talk (when applicable, no monotone). Call to action. Open with a semi-relevant joke. Be honest and sincere. Keep it fairly short: 1-3 examples will suffice (as opposed to 6-10).

The Soft Skills of a Preacher’s Connection

Many young people did not describe connection with their preacher as linked to the words from the pulpit. They described these signs of relation as the social qualities of: being friendly; easy-going, approachable, and comfortable; and says hello and greets you outside of Mass. These “soft skills” go a long way in connecting a young person with their parish priest:

I have had a deacon that has really connected with me. He always greets me with a hug or a smile. He calls me by name and always asks what’s going on in my life. Even though he is friends with my parents, I feel that he genuinely cares about me. When he preaches, he’ll make eye contact with me and that makes me feel like he is genuinely talking to me.

To be friendly and have a good understanding relationship with you.

Yes, (he) always greets me and regularly checks up on me in a caring fashion. He is fun when hanging out with but also is a great example and teacher of God’s word.

To be friendly and not treat as just another member of the parish.

A preacher that connects with me makes one feel welcome. At the beginning of mass my priest greets my family and welcomes us to the parish (figure 3.10).



Figure 3.10. Connecting means to make me feel welcome.

Many respondents wanted to be known personally. Not just a face in the crowd, their plea was

“know my name,” “learn something about me,” and “treat me as a friend”:

I go to a very big parish so just knowing my name and some stuff about me makes me feel very connected to him.

To know your name and be nice, and to not treat you like you are stupid.

They call me by name and we just have a natural connection and they are very easy going and easy to talk to.

The preacher should know who you are, by name. He should also know a little bit of your personality so that he can relate to your life and make the homilies relevant.



Figure 3.11. Connecting means knowing my name.

A third category of soft skills revolved

around counseling, helping with problems, and “being there for you.” There are times in teenagers’ lives when they are highly vulnerable. The Sunday homily does not preach into a vacuum. Parents, friends, relatives, and clergy as authority figures, role models and heroes can have a lasting impact and create turning points in life. In their vision of connectedness, they saw their parish priest as a valued companion as they travel the confusing journey of life. The sacrament of reconciliation can create just such an opportunity for those youth who still go. In

the harried world of Catholic parish busyness, this pastoral counseling aspect of clerical life may not be as accessible as in the past, yet a large number of young people wish that it could be so:

For a preacher to connect with me, it means that we can have normal conversations and that I feel comfortable going to him for help or to talk.

They understand you and can relate/help you w/ problems and advice (figure 3.12).

He tries actively to talk and help you, bring you closer to God.

You can feel like you can tell the preacher any of your problems and trust him.

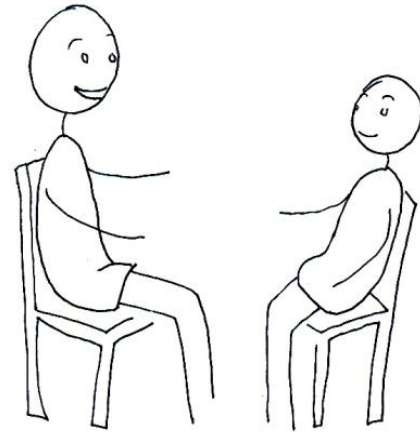


Figure 3.12. Connect by helping me with my problems.

Contrary to what has been historically intuitive, it is with a touch of vulnerability that an authority figure most connects. In a series of studies on influence, especially in situations where there was no single clear or obvious answer, when an expert expressed minor doubts about his advice or opinions, he was more readily believed.⁴⁰ Greater influence is granted to the preacher by coming “down to the level” of a young person, asking their opinion, being “real,” and (occasionally) admitting weakness. Rather than being a form of “selling-out,” it is a sign of strength.

In conclusion, young people who continue to attend Mass through high school seem cautiously hopeful about preaching. If the event of preaching were a soccer game, most of them want to be out on the field and to be valued as a member of the team. They want to play. They

⁴⁰Uma R. Karmarkar and Zakary L. Tormala. “Believe Me, I Have No Idea What I’m Talking About: The Effects of Source Certainty on Consumer Involvement and Persuasion,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 36, no. 6 (2010): 1033-1042.

are listening. They are watching.⁴¹ They hunger for both a human person and a personal message that will inspire them, give them direction, and be a vibrant living expression of what their faith life is to be.

Preaching with Resonance

In market research, a survey like this one is used to create a picture of the customer's perception. Researchers extrapolate from those results to understand what the customer needs and then design their product to meet that need. Why do they do that? People speak out of their current experience. They do not necessarily envision their needs more than as an extension of what they have. For example, customers in Henry Ford's day may well have said they would fancy a faster horse. They did not foresee the creation of the horseless carriage. In painting the portrait of the world of the young listener, they have described what their world is like. How, then, do we move from that depiction to a vision of what they need in preaching?

Two overarching symptoms from the qualitative responses to connection and faith growth give major clues toward evaluating the dance of homiletical interaction: 1) Does the ongoing experience of the homily bring energy, light, and vibrancy, imitating the delighted connection of the dance of the Trinity? 2) Does the preaching induce heaviness, plodding, dullness and self-protective disconnections that block the image of God and the movement of the Spirit? As an eschatological event, preaching is likely to contain elements of both. If weighed on the balance of the Paschal Mystery, which one is the more pronounced—death or life? Sorrow or joy? Despair or hope? Darkness or light? Flourishing or fading away?

If asked the theological question of revelation, “God, are you still speaking?” many of

⁴¹High school students' sensors are finely tuned to interpreting body language. Most of the “under-the-radar” communications of “like” and “dislike,” “in-group” and “out-group” in classrooms and hallways are passed through subtle physical signals. They can at times also be over-sensitive in their responses to body language in authority figures (as parents and principals know).

these young folks would give a resounding “yes!” If asked of their preacher, “Are you talking to me?” some would give a high five and state “For sure.” Some would say, “Um, no, not really.” They are not seeking for a faith that is blind and dark, but a faith that is revealed and shining, challenging and motivating through the preaching that they hear. McCarty, who has worked extensively with young people, describes his vision of their need in this way:

There is no need to “water down” our theology or our teachings. Ministry with young people is not served by appeasing their youthfulness. Rather, the church must preach the authentic Jesus Christ, who challenged the world of his day and now the world of ours. They deserve the whole Gospel, the Gospel that calls young people to authentic discipleship. Young people are looking for a noble adventure, and the reign of God is that adventure.⁴²

The final question in this survey offered a young person an opportunity to say anything at all to their preacher. Some simply expressed gratitude for giving them meaning:

I would tell him how much his preachings help me in my life and how much I love going to Mass to hear him speak. He connects so well with others and keeps everyone interested.

Keep up the good work. I am always listening.

Thank you Father for how you guide me to be more faithfilled. I like how you are comforting and always there to help. I can't thank you enough.

From the results of this study, it is apparent that we have pockets of connection. Yet there is still work to be done. If the young assembly theologically absorbs and adjusts to the message that it hears, then the fruit of the preaching can be discerned in the life of that assembly. In evaluating the impact of preaching, is there a long-term behavioral change among young listeners? Do they resemble the gospel that is preached?⁴³ Long-term impact also creates kinship.

⁴²Robert J. McCarty, “Young People are Listening! Preaching and Liturgy with Youth,” *Seminary Journal* 13 no. 2 (2007), 27.

⁴³Ronald J. Allen, “Assessing the Authority of a Sermon,” *Encounter* 67, no. 1 (2006), 74.

“Homilies connect preachers with listeners and listeners with one another.”⁴⁴ Is there a bond between hearers and between listeners and preacher? Has the community encountered God? Does the preaching resound—not simply through the individual hearer in a solitary spirituality but as a communal trumpet blast of faith?

The resonance of faith as modeled by the response of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is the goal. Yet the competition is fierce. Like an expert builder, the marketing world constructs “brand resonance” methodically: the fervor for Nike basketball shoes, the zeal for the Notre Dame football team, the passion of those who will not buy anything but a Honda, the eagerness for a Coach purse and the enthusiasm for a “Let’s Rock Elmo” action figure, is not accidental.⁴⁵ If only Jesus were positioned so painstakingly!

When preachers connect, faith life has resonance. One element of the continuing pursuit of excellence in preaching is to attend to data like that uncovered in this study. What is being done well? Where is there room for growth? What factors impact young people’s response to preaching? The next chapter will look at the quantitative responses from this study to see what young people have to say about the strengths and weaknesses of their connection with Catholic Sunday preaching. On their personal roads to Emmaus, what resonates for them?

⁴⁴Harris, 125.

⁴⁵For a detailed analysis of brand resonance and the steps to build it, see Kevin Lane Keller, “Building Strong Brands in a Modern Marketing Communications Environment,” *Journal of Marketing Communications* 15, nos. 2-3 (April-July, 2009), 139-155. <http://web.ebscohost.com.ezp.slu.edu/ehost/detail?vid=3&hid=104&sid=83b73351-083b-4d07-9729-567359ddec26%40sessionmgr114&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZvc3QtbG12ZQ%3d%3d#db=buh&AN=42411097> [accessed July 10, 2010].