

I recently read Will Willimon's latest book, *STORIES*. It contains a wealth of material on a pastor's life, including a great deal on preaching from this master of the pulpit. Willimon has been chaplain of Duke Chapel for many years, a professor at Duke, and a Methodist Bishop. He has returned to Duke where he continues to preach and teach. I have been a devoted reader of his since discovering him many many years ago. He has been a wise source of pastoral insight, as well as a fantastic homiletics teacher via his writings. This piece, called *KLEPTOMANIA HOMILETICA*, is from his latest book. *And in the spirit of the article, I lifted it to share it with you.* I've edited it slightly for (some) brevity.

"Give back to those who ask, and don't refuse those who wish to borrow from you.' (Mt 5:42)
Preachers get by only with a little help from generous friends.

"A few years ago, I got a call from a reporter in the Northeast. "What is your position on preachers plagiarizing the work of other preachers" she asked.

"Oh, I guess Craig Barnes (another wonderful writer I have 'used' through the years) has been whining about my lifting some of his material," I said, with contempt. "His vast web footprint begs for borrowing."

"No. This week a prominent pastor in the city will be removed from his pulpit because he's been caught downloading some of your sermons from Duke Chapel. Re-preaching. Word for word. The laity discovered it. In fact, a layperson has been secretly handing out copies of your sermons to other laity on the last 2 Sundays. They sit there in the service and follow along. Caught him red-handed. Don't you think the preacher should have at least changed the titles?" she asked.

"Sometimes I despise laity.

"Stephen Colbert employs something like 20 writers to help him come up with a nightly 10-minute monologue. It's nuts to think that I, much less any preacher who went to a seminary not as good as mine, can come up with a weekly sermon on Jesus, solo. An accountant can be solitary, keeping her eyes on her own work, refusing to ask for help, and do double entry bookkeeping just fine. But no preacher can afford to work alone.

"If you are going to define and then condemn sermonic plagiarism, then you must come up with a definition of stealing that's so broad and charitable as to be meaningless. Source critics tell us that Luke and Matthew routinely ripped off Mark. The Bible is better for it. What if Matthew had not said to Mark, "Let me see your Gospel. I think I can work this up into something mighty fine," or Mark had refused Matthew with, "Hey, it's my intellectual property?"

"I define 'heresy' as the arrogant attempt to be theologically original, breaking free of the resources of the *communio sanctorum*, (the communion of saints), refusing dependency on the 'great company of preachers' (Ps 68:11), going rogue.

"Loved your sermon!" a woman gushed as she emerged from Duke Chapel after service one Sunday. "Loved it when Tom Long preached that sermon here in April, 1991. Shouldn't you at least have transposed some of the details?"

"Laity!

“For years I’ve written for PULPIT RESOURCE, filling it with material to help pastors get going on next Sunday’s sermons.

“Aren’t you worried that some unscrupulous pastors may simply preach your sermons verbatim from PULPIT RESOURCE?” critics ask.

“I wish. As long as they do it with a Southern accent. Better my sermons than Adam Hamilton’s, I say.

“Jean Valjean stole bread only to feed his starving children. Me too. Kleptomania, the inability to refrain from stealing, is usually done for reasons other than personal use or financial gain, says the DSM (DIAGNOSTIC and STATISTICAL MANUAL of Mental Disorders). Stealing isn’t really stealing if it’s done unselfishly for the good of my neighbor. I’ve never taken anything from any preacher that was not done in service to my listeners. My sermonic borrowing is an indication of how much I love my people.

“Sure, Ephesians says, ‘Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands.’ Cite that passage to rebuke me and I’ll insist that you quote the rest of the verse: ‘So that they will have something to share with whoever is in need.’ (Eph 4:28, paraphrased). I took Tom Long’s story of a group of men standing under an oak tree at his home church in Georgia, moved all of them to a larger church and a dogwood in South Carolina, and nobody was the worse for it. I doubt Tom preached that story to more than a couple of hundred; I’ve shared it with 2000 Baptists in Canada and they ate it up. I’m sure Tom would be flattered that his work did good all the way up in Canada. It’s not stealing if you can improve on what you took.

“As I’ve always said, ‘Don’t just borrow sermon material; steal it.’ Picky you responds, ‘Hey, Picasso said that, not you. To quote more accurately, the great artist actually said this to his fellow artists, ‘Good artist copy, great artists steal.’ Well, it turns out that Picasso likely never said that at all, but if he did, he likely stole it from T.S. Eliot who said, ‘Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better.’ Take that, all you fastidious OCDs who are always demanding attribution.

You say, ‘Hey, isn’t that a story from David Buttrick?’ I’ll say, ‘I have no idea how that got in my bag.’

Stanley Hauerwas said, ‘If you think you’ve had an original thought, it means that you forgot where you read it.’ Or maybe Oscar Wilde said that. Benjamin Franklin? Who cares? Hey, how do you know that I didn’t say it?

Walt Brueggemann had a great story about a woman in a wheelchair and his meaningful conversation with her. All I did was take Walt’s seat in that hospital room, have her retell the story to me, repackage her touching vignette, retell it with a Southern accent, connect it with a text from Genesis rather than the Psalms, and work it up into a more moving illustration than Walt’s. And who was the worse for it? I can’t help it if Walt, being from the Midwest, is not as good at storytelling as I. Just trying to help Walt obey Matthew 5:42.

“When possible, if you are going to snatch something from a fellow preacher, it’s usually good to ask in advance, but not always. I apologized for preaching an illustration of Jana Childers’, and she generously said, ‘I don’t care. I don’t need it anymore.’ Then Jana spoiled it by saying, ‘I don’t even believe that anymore. It’s a sappy story anyway. Take it; it’s yours.’.....

“Footnotes are impossible in sermons and attribution (‘As I read in a recent book by the Right Reverend Bishop N.T. Wright last week...’) can come across as pompous and presumptuous. Though

occasionally I will give credit by saying to the congregation, 'All you bean counters, don't bother to google this story to find its true origin. It's from an April 1990 sermon by Fred Craddock. I recount Fred's story today as if it were my own as my humble homage to a great preacher.'

"Some years ago, somebody published a collection of women's sermons. After a long preface that argued forcefully that women preach in a way that is quite special, very perceptive, even unavailable to men, the book's first sermon was one that a woman on the West Coast had purloined from me! A sermon on John 3 that I had preached a few years before at Duke Chapel. Should I be flattered or incensed? When I complained to Stanley Hauerwas, he replied, 'By God, you *do* preach like a woman! Besides, you've got too long an incriminating paper trail to be indignant that a fellow preacher snatched from you.'

"I know it's good to take sermon illustrations from your own life, but let's face it; my life hasn't been that interesting. People make way too much out of creativity and personal insight. I'm always grateful when, in the middle of my sermon preparation on a tough text, I stumble across a fellow preacher who can help me lift the luggage. If a preacher is vain enough to put stuff out on the web or to publish it, it's fair game. If I pay \$19.95 for a book of your sermons, they're mine.

"So, go ahead, all you possessive, miserly preachers. Lock it down, smack a copyright on it. You won't keep this professional purloiner from poaching your preachments (Mt 24:43). In the dead of night some Saturday, I'll creep in with a ski mask, crowbar, and flashlight, take your precious metaphor, and make it my own.

"The ski mask and flashlight I stole from a speech by poet Billy Collins." (p. 11-15)

So, my dear friends who listen to -- or read what I preach, now you know the backstory! I'm incredibly grateful that my mother taught me to love reading, and that I live in an age when so much wonderful printed material is available through so many media. Also, one of my homiletical professors said to us in seminary: "Start a file -- any quote, story, illustration that grabs you -- keep it, and it will help you with what is a rather arduous task week after week, year after year." I did -- and there are now over 60,000 entries that I have to draw from. What you just read is a very recent addition! Otherwise, I'd have nothing to offer you on weekends. Thanks for putting up with my homiletical nonsense! May God have mercy on my plagiarizing soul! (all for the love of you, of course!)