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# Systems Intelligent Homiletics

*Miikka Niiranen*

This chapter focuses on sermon from the point of view of systems intelligence. The narrative aspects of the functioning of the human mind are discussed, as well as theological themes such as bridal mysticism as applied to the systemic in-between. The systems intelligence perspective is found to be a useful framework to illuminate some key features of a successful sermon.

## Introduction

SINCE THE VERY DAWN of Christendom speech has been an essential feature of congregational life. We can imagine the moved apostle Paul giving the touching farewell speech to the elders in Ephesus after teaching “everyone night and day with tears” (Acts 20:31), Peter rising to defend the gentiles’ right not to be circumcised (Acts 11:5–17), as well as the famous missionary speeches of both of these apostles, first in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14–40) and then among “all nations” in Areopagus (Acts 17:22–31). These and other influential oratorical acts set a standard and they remind us of the potential significance of oratory and speech in the context of Christian spirituality. In the centuries to follow, much of the congregation life took place via pastors<sup>1</sup> whose task it was to teach orally the way of the Lord, and transfer His teachings into the present day using speech.

But how far can a preacher go in the art of rhetoric? Saint Augustine seems open-minded and pragmatic on this question, urging for the use of oratory<sup>2</sup>. In Chapter 7 of the fourth book of *On Christian Doctrine* (1887) he thoroughly explains some of the classical means of rhetoric the apostle Paul uses in his letters: *gradatio, ambitus sive circuitus* etc.

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<sup>1</sup>According to Lutheran Augsburg Confession, the pastor’s office is a divine institution, set by the Lord himself. See CA V.

<sup>2</sup>From *On Christian Doctrine*, Chapter 2: “Now, the art of rhetoric being available for the enforcing either of truth or falsehood, who will dare to say that truth in the person of its defenders is to take its stand unarmed against falsehood? For example, that those who are trying to persuade men of what is false are to know how to introduce their subject, so as to put the hearer into a friendly, or attentive, or teachable frame of mind, while the defenders of the truth shall be ignorant of that art”.

Bringing the question closer to us, one could ask if a preacher can have totally free hand in deciding on the means he can use in the service of the increased effects of his speech. Is he free to exploit technologies and all the special effects possible? Can he use insights and knowledge of communication theories, psychology, performance arts, etc, in his homilies? Is there not the danger that the eloquence of the speech might become more important than the content, thus potentially threatening what the sermon as a system is ultimately supposed to be? Surely do we want to see reverends sacrifice their spirituality for the sake of oratorical impressiveness. In a sermon, spirituality should be the core, and everything else should serve that core in the system that ensues.

In this chapter I shall prose a perspective on sermon, which

1. Perceives sermon as a system, i.e. a whole the parts of which are integrated and affect one another, giving rise to emergent phenomena;
2. Discusses the pastor's actions within that system from the point of view of systems intelligence.

Raimo P. Hämäläinen and Esa Saarinen define systems intelligence in their article "Systems Intelligence: Connecting Engineering Thinking with Human Sensitivity" (2004) as follows:

By Systems Intelligence (SI) we mean intelligent behaviour in the context of complex systems involving interaction and feedback. A subject acting with Systems Intelligence engages successfully and productively with the holistic feedback mechanisms of her environment. She perceives herself as part of a whole, the influence of the whole upon herself as well as her own influence upon the whole. By observing her own interdependence in the feedback intensive environment, she is able to act intelligently.

In this chapter, I approach the systems intelligent sermon as one that serves intelligently the key purposes of a sermon. In a systems intelligent sermon the parts of the system integrate intelligently to yield spiritually relevant outcomes.

These outcomes include an increased awareness of the finiteness of man, a need of redemption and increased faith in the love of God and His might.

A systems intelligent sermon is a system that is intelligent in fulfilling the chief purposes of a sermon, and these should also include effects in people's lives outside the sermon-situation. Thus, a systems intelligent sermon revitalizes people's caring for their neighbours, encouraging them to extend the love of Christ to all people as His teaching indicate.

### **The Three Systemic Questions**

Hämäläinen and Saarinen present in their article "Systems Intelligent Leadership" (2007) what they call "three systemic questions". These questions are intended to reveal the most essential features of a system. The questions are:

1. What does the system generate – and to what extent is this what we want?
2. How does the system mould us as human beings?
3. What kind of in-between does the system endorse?

Hämäläinen and Saarinen describe the “in-between” in the following way:

We treat the concept of the “In-Between” (and the “In-Between of people”) as a primitive that points beyond the subject-object discourse, seeks not to objectify the space it names, and calls attention to those features of the human condition that give rise to relatedness, connectivity and interconnectivity, intersubjectivity, reciprocity, loops of interpretation and metainterpretation, and to shared experience. “The In-Between” is felt and experienced rather than is fully cognitively known, and often involves intangible dimensions. (Hämäläinen and Saarinen 2007, p. 15)

Another key phenomenon that Hämäläinen and Saarinen urge us to observe is what they call the *systems of holding back*: “The concept refers to mutually aggregating spirals which lead people to hold back contributions they could make because others hold back contributions they could make.” (p. 26)

Next, we approach a sermon through the systemic questions, indicate some examples of systems of holding back, and try to discuss ways forward.

## What Does a Sermon Generate?

A sermon can deepen the spiritual life of a participant, but it can also generate boredom, dullness and hypocrisy. Likewise, people attending the service might influence the preacher not to give his best. The set-up can amount to a system of holding back.

Let us take as an example a sermon where the content itself is theologically correct but the way it is presented only relates to the rational dimension of the human mind, and lacks appropriate attention to the people attending the sermon and is flat in emotional content. The pastor might, for example, use the daily texts merely as a source for reformulating dogmatic statements without a personal involvement. This kind of a sermon will leave much of the congregation cold. People will not feel uplifted. They respond with dead eyes and growing lack of interest. Because of the lack of positive feedback from his parishioners, the pastor is frustrated. He feels he is dealing with particularly stone-hearted parishioners, and reacts on his part by becoming more content-oriented and emotionally flat than before. He ends up holding back what might be his best sermon because he feels the parish does not deserve it. The parish reacts by sliding into spiritual indifference further still further. A vicious circle is formed, a system of holding back has been generated.

How to avoid such a loop? From the point of view of systems intelligence the key point is to make the system work, and take seriously what the sermon generates as a human system. If the existing system generates boredom and

indifference, that should be acknowledged – and as a sign of the fact that the sermon system is not working. It does not matter if the sermon at the same time generates theologically correct statements because that is only *part* of the system in question and only a part of what is generated.

Jerome Bruner argues in his classic “The narrative construction of reality” (1991) and other writings<sup>3</sup> that “we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative”<sup>4</sup>. In the context of a sermon, it is critical to ask: what kind of stories and narratives does the sermon as a system generate in the minds and lives of the people attending it? In other words, a key aspect of what a sermon generates as a system is provided by the *narratives* it generates.

Part of Bruner’s theory is captured by the concept of *narrative accrual*. By this he refers to the fact that the stories told in a culture tend to accumulate as common knowledge or storage of background assumptions, which then form a basis or a network for new stories to evolve from. He calls this feature of a narrative its *canonicity*. Bruner further states that we as people have an ability of *context sensibility* and *negotiability* that enables us to understand a story and sort of fill in the possible gaps between the story’s details in order to comprise a meaningful whole against our background knowledge.

This kind of cumulative effect (narrative accrual) combined with the ability to embed narratives into one’s own life (context sensitivity and negotiability) is important to acknowledge. A preacher could for example apply these two elements of a narrative of the salvation history according to the Bible, starting from the Fall of Adam and Eve and from the state of humanity after it. Everything else in the Bible can be framed against this plot-turn. When a preacher outlines this side of biblical narratives, he relates his parishioners with the truly large scale: the whole of mankind has fallen, including each individual sitting in the church.

Likewise, and moving a step closer to particular human communities, a reverend could assess the church history from the viewpoint of an accruing narrative. In this case the Bible as a whole could be the initial state of the accumulating variable and some eras or particular events in church history would then be new *breaches*<sup>5</sup> of a narrative sprouting from the current knowledge storage<sup>6</sup>. Good examples of these could be the times when the gospel has particularly forcefully become present in people’s deeds or had salience and has transformed individuals’ lives and the lives of their neighbors, communities and even societies, or when Christians have shown exceptional courage and endurance in tribulations.

On a more personal level, we can also consider the sermon and the sacraments of the Church as mediators that bring the incarnation-breach as a divine intervention into the life of an individual Christian. The sermon in a congregation’s service can

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<sup>3</sup>See for example Bruner (2004) and Bruner (2002, pp. 69–87).

<sup>4</sup>I do not claim that human mind uses any kind of story to organize human experience. Bruner lists in his article ten key features he finds typical of such narrative. Here, three of them are applied and mentioned by name: narrative accrual, canonicity and breach, context sensitivity and negotiability.

<sup>5</sup>Bruner uses this term to denote a particular manifestation of some classical generic plot

<sup>6</sup>The Roman-Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians would probably like to use the term Church Tradition to signify this storage

be seen as such a mediator especially when interpreted in the context of the Word of God as *sacramental* Word. This means that the Word has an inherent ability to affect what it says, because Christ is present in his Word. As St. John puts it in his Gospel, Christ is the “Word made flesh” (Jn 1:14)<sup>7</sup>. Thus a pastor could teach his parish so that while listening to a homily, the parish as a collective and its members individually are connected by the sermon to the eternal story where they have an important role that makes a difference. This way they contribute to the narrative accrual by forming their own mutually affecting particular narratives. Through his context sensitivity a preacher can collect the individual particular narratives as an emerging, congregational narrative and combine this with a biblical one in his sermon. This could be done for example by referring to some concrete situation in life in which some parishioner could be at the moment. To come up with the relevant kind of narratives, a preacher should be sensitive enough to the particular people present; he needs to open himself to the views of others using for instance the five techniques mentioned by Hämäläinen and Saarinen (2004, p. 12); he needs to get to know his congregation<sup>8</sup>. This way perhaps his sermons could be like the stories of great leaders that “wrestle with those that are already operative in the mind of an audience”, as Howard Gardner states (Gardner 1997, p. xv).

Through a homily that uses narrative features<sup>9</sup>, parishioners can combine the basic articles of faith learned in the catechesis teaching with real life<sup>10</sup>. Here the central idea of making use of the three features of narratives was the following: narrative accrual together with canonicity and breach was applied first to salvation history of the Bible, then to the history of the Church. Through context sensitivity and negotiability the pastor relates to the life narratives of his parishioners and through this feature combined with the sermon and the sacraments the parishioners relate to the narratives of the Bible and the church. Here the sermon as a system

<sup>7</sup>More about Martin Luther’s view on Word with sacramental feature, see Cary (2005)

<sup>8</sup>An interesting approach on communication as *withness*-understanding is presented by John Shotter (2006). Shotter thinks that human communication processes are not simply Cartesian “arrangements or configurations of otherwise independently existing separate parts”. Instead, they are “indivisible, unitary, self-structurizing wholes”. If this is true, an approach to produce a homily that tries to be as general as possible is doomed to fail since human communication is understood best in a specific, particular context. He further describes this *withness-understanding* in a somewhat lively manner: “In the interplay of living movements intertwining with each other, new possibilities of relation are engendered, new interconnections are made, new ‘shapes’ of experience can emerge – third ‘shapes’, third forms of life, conceived when two or more forms of ‘flesh’ rub up against each other.” If a sermon is a success, a mutually nourishing manifestation of this interplay has occurred; the reverend has sensed deep, reciprocal concentration due to his words having resonated with the experiences of his parish.

<sup>9</sup>What is interesting, it seems that a narrative is not only an antonym of rationality, but can be used to bring the dogma alive in a fresh and lively way. Maarten Wisse describes the power of a narrative when teaching dogma: “narrative claims may well be equally or more powerful than the claims of an abstract dogmatic formula. A narrative may combine the strength of a real life picture with the power of rhetoric; thus one is moved by the story almost without having the ability to decide whether one agrees with the message or not. This cannot, of course, be taken to count against narrative. On the contrary, it must count in favour of it.” (Wisse 2005).

<sup>10</sup>A kind of mixture of latent and direct learning is discussed in the article of Dane and Pratt (2007). They claim that the use of intuition is especially effective in judgemental issues, such as moral situations. According to them, the ability to use intuition is increased through explicit and implicit learning.

helps the Christians establish themselves as a spiritual community to whom God is performing his saving actions. The aim of the narrative is to convince the people listening to the sermon of the proposal that they are among those for whom Christ incarnated, lived, died and was resurrected.

### What Kind of In-Between Does a Sermon Endorse?

Consider a situation where the congregation of maybe 20–40 people sits still in a church with the capacity to seat 500 people. The pastor preaches with monotonous voice, looking like he has left his otherwise buoyant personality in the sacristy. Hymns sound like melodic whisperings and it seems that everyone attempts to sing very quietly so that people behind them would not hear who is out of tune. Only a few people greeted each other before the worship and the congregation disappears to their homes quickly after the organs of the last song have quieted. And this repeats week after week, year after year.

How to turn the direction of a congregation that has drifted into languour? The pastor is clearly in the key position here. Surely one of the potential forces at his disposal is his sermon.

It is clear that besides inspiring deepened faith – and *because* of inspiring it – a sermon should generate a particular kind of “in-between” among the people in the congregation and between the pastor and his parish, as well as in the relation of the parishioner and God. A key point of a systems intelligent sermon concerns the nature of the in-between the system generates as a system. It is important to observe that this question concerns a dimension of the sermon which is not reducible to the content of what is spoken. The emphasis is not on what is spoken as theological statements. The focus is on what kind of an in-between is being created by the sermon as a system.

In order to illustrate some of the possibilities of a systems intelligent sermon, let us first open up the in-between of the pastor and his congregation from the theological viewpoint of *bridal mysticism*. The relevant biblical basis is in the writings of the Old Testament prophets who describe God as a husband and the people of Israel as the wife<sup>11</sup>. This image is later elucidated in Jesus’ talk of himself as the bridegroom (Mt 9:15, Mk 2:19). The image is elaborated by Apostle Paul (Eph 5:25) and it reaches its eschatological culmination in the Revelation:

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Rev. 21:2)

According to many Christian churches a pastor is a representative of Christ and speaks as in the position of Christ and for him<sup>12</sup>, thus bringing the Logos, the incarnate Word, present through his sermon. Therefore it is not far fetched that a pastor actually has an obligation and a permission to treat his congregation

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<sup>11</sup>For example, see Isa 49:18, 61:10 and Jer 2:32.

<sup>12</sup>The view is based on for example Isa 55:11, 2 Cor 5:20 and further developed by for instance Ignatius of Antioch (IgnMagn 6:1) and adopted also by the Lutheran Church (Ap XIII).

with the same kind of care that Christ treated people during his times on earth. If we keep in mind the dimension of the sacramental nature of the Word, we can conceptualize a sermon as a system which involves Christ in an in-between with his Bride. The tremendous challenge and possibility for the preacher is to facilitate such a system, and the in-between that it involves.

Bridal mysticism is one image the Bible gives to the dialectics of Christ and the Church. When time passes and this image of a pastor and a congregation representing Christ and his Bride is inscribed on people's memories, even a short reminder of it in the beginning of a sermon can create an atmosphere of positive anticipation, when a soon-to-be-married couple waits for the wedding with great excitement: something truly significant is about to emerge.

These observations highlight the exceptional and delicate nature of the "in-between" of a systems intelligent sermon. Surely a lot of sensibility is called for, of the kind Hämäläinen and Saarinen emphasize as a cornerstone of systems intelligent behaviours, from a preacher! Mere command of the content is not going to be enough!

Consider another possibility from secular arts. Esa Saarinen writes about his lecturing methods in his article "Philosophy for managers" (2008): "My own practice is strongly focused on making philosophical reflection contextual and thus embedded in the manager's life. My philosophical approach for managers is essentially a re-contextualization of philosophical practice in the realities of the manager." Saarinen and Sebastian Slotte (2003) articulate the purpose of such lecturing as "the enhancement of real-time reflection on their own lives by the people in the audience". The goal of the lecture is thus focused on "triggering thinking rather than on advice or ready solutions".

The key ideas here include those of re-contextualization and personal reflection. As Saarinen makes philosophical ideas practical, personal and contextual, pastors could do the same to Christian doctrines. My point is to emphasize that this involves re-conceptualizing the sermon as a system as a whole that involves elements not reducible to the theological content of the sermon.

In addition to the image of Bride and Groom, also the expression "brothers and sisters in Christ" of a congregation explicitly refers to a particular form of the "in-between". A dedicated pastor is in a strong position to generate further openings for his systems intelligent behaviour. He might for instance apply the insights from Deborah Tannen's analysis of a family being a "pressure cooker in which relationships roil" (Tannen 2003).

A further perspective for the in-between of a systems intelligent sermon is provided by a key idea of Christian ethics.

In Christian ethics, the figure of Jesus Christ is set as the example, whose 'intentional state entailment'<sup>13</sup> should become a part of every Christian's identity and which manifests itself as 'social objects'<sup>14</sup> that reach their concrete form through the *parenesis* teaching of the New Testament. This does not mean that Christians should imitate some specific acts of Christ but rather an attitude or angle to life, one that is based on love and care for others. Because the parishioners

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<sup>13</sup>See Bruner (1991, p. 7).

<sup>14</sup>See Stacey (2005).

participate in Christ through faith and baptism, their acts should become initiated more and more by the “new creation”<sup>15</sup> (2 Cor 5:17, Eph 4:24). Only after that come the actual ethical norms and commandments. Naturally, these norms are not considered insignificant, but could be compared rather to the fruits of a tree: they are important but not independent and therefore need to be filled by the nutritional fluids flowing from the trunk. Fruit, in this instance, is representative of the ethical norms becoming a living practice through deeds. Fluids stand for the “new creation” giving the motivation to follow the norms voluntarily.

## How Does a Sermon Mould Us as Human Beings?

Consider one of the key notions of Christian thinking – *sin*.

Some Christian thinkers, for example C. S. Lewis, state that an important aspect of sin is isolation, the distancing from other people and God (Vaus 2004, pp. 198–199). Luther also describes our nature that is tormented by the original sin – old self – so that it is “curved in upon itself” (Luther 2006, pp. 159–160) and according to some translations, one meaning of “Koine” Greek word for the devil, makes a suggestion in the same direction, namely “dia-bolos” literally means “one who throws apart”<sup>16</sup>.

In a parish where this kind of community-related sin prevails, people might think that staying separate is an acceptable way of living congregational life. The situation, like any status quo, might also strike people as unchangeable. Should that be the case, the dictum “Structure generates behaviors” (Hämäläinen and Saarinen 2007, p. 13) would come across in a sad and life-diminishing way. However, a sermon can offer medicine<sup>17</sup> for this highly contagious disease. In Lutheran theology the dichotomy of Law and Gospel is essential, “a special brilliant light”, as the Confession states (FC V). The Word of God is considered to have two roles, where the function of Law is to confront us with our sinful nature so that we wake up to understand our dreadful state<sup>18</sup>. The purpose of the Law and this confrontation is to prepare a way for the Gospel. Through preaching the forgiveness of sins the Gospel can become true for an individual and Christ can offer his cure to the wounds caused by sin. St. Paul uses strong vocabulary in describing this process saying the “old self” is “crucified with Him” and we are “united with Him in his resurrection” (Rom 6:1–14).

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<sup>15</sup>However, the actual deeds of this kind of ethics are naturally in accordance with the written ethical norms, such as the Decalogue and the Golden rule. The Lutheran scholars strongly stress that the “old self” does not cease to exist. For further details on Christian ethics, see Rom 7:17–23, CA XII, Apology XX. For a recent discussion, see Eyer (2000).

<sup>16</sup>The source of the translation for the words “dia” and “ballo” is [www.zhubert.com](http://www.zhubert.com) [2008-06-01]

<sup>17</sup>Interestingly according to St. Augustine the sin, despite having a personal origin, is a sort of *illness* (Augustine 1887). On the other hand, he presents Christ as a doctor, *Christus Medicus* who cures the illness.

<sup>18</sup>The Law here works in a similar manner as theory in Martha Nussbaum’s article (2007). Nussbaum states that when assess our ethics, theory produces *estrangement* or *defamiliarization* due to using unfamiliar language of the theory. In our case this happens by perceiving our lives from the point of view of God’s Law.



How is this cure received? The Bible is rich in referring to *communion* with God and with the fellow members of congregation. In St. Paul's letters, the idea of *participating in Christ through means of Grace* is very much present. Notice the relationship-intensive metaphors here! Likewise, baptism is joining into Christ<sup>19</sup> and the Holy Communion is receiving the body of Christ<sup>20</sup> while the members receiving it *are* part of the body of Christ<sup>21</sup>, which is the Church. In a systems intelligent sermon with connectivity strongly present as part of the very core of systems intelligence, the preacher as the leader or facilitator of the emergence of the system could and should build on such connection-oriented aspects of the Christian doctrine, and adjust his actions to that overall scheme accordingly. As a result<sup>22</sup> of the *unio cum Christo* the love of Christ starts to influence people's minds and actions creating the kind of in-between described above. The congregation can be a place where the parishioners can flourish and create positive spirals of spiritual uplift and of hope. The fruits of the Spirit flourish: "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Gal 5:22).

The preacher could also have in mind the explanation of Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* on the eighth commandment (Luther 1921) where he stresses that the parish should exercise an atmosphere of mutual respect.

We should fear and love God that we may not deceitfully belie, betray, slander, or defame our neighbor, but defend him, [think and] speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything.

## Conclusion

The idea of a systems intelligent sermon is to approach sermons as a rich system of potentially huge spiritual impact. In this chapter, I have discussed some ideas as to what is particularly important to acknowledge if the sermon is conceptualized from this angle. My emphasis has been on the positive options opened by the special nature of the sermon, particularly in the dimension of the "in-between".

The chapter is an attempt to indicate how some of the key concepts of systems intelligence can illuminate a sermon in the service of a theologically relevant spiritual uplift.

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<sup>19</sup>Rom 6:3, Gal 3:27.

<sup>20</sup>Mt 26:26, Mk 14:22, Lk 22:19, Jn 6:51, 1 Cor 11:24.

<sup>21</sup>1 Cor 12:12-31, Rom 12:5, Ef. 1:23, Col 1:18.

<sup>22</sup>We will not go here into the debate about the causes and effects in the justification. If interested in a more detailed discussion, see Braaten and Jenson (1998). However, we focus here on the practical observation that the increased desire to carry out the deeds considered as fruits of the Spirit, chronologically usually follows the proclamation of the Word.

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## Abbreviations

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| CA      | Augsburg Confession                           |
| Ap      | Apology of the Augsburg Confession            |
| FC      | Formula of Concord                            |
| IgnMagn | Ignatius of Antioch: Letter to the Magnesians |

## **Author**

Miikka Niiranen is an electrical engineering student who involves himself with theology in his spare time. His father is a Lutheran pastor.