

# PREACH

the Word

Vol. 6 No. 4

March/April 2003

## CONNECTING TO THE WORD AND CONNECTING TO PEOPLE

“Steve, you had a very good sermon, but there was not enough for the kids.”

My dad, a dairy farmer, was not afraid to let both of his sons know they needed to take a closer look at the message they were privileged to proclaim and bring something to the kids.

I thank my brother Charlie for stepping in to write articles on sermon illustrations. I am sure that he looks over his sermons, as I do, and then remembers our father saying, “There’s not enough for the kids.”

Thanks again to Pastor Mark Cordes for another article on “Faithful Exegesis and Good Sermon Work.”

Suggestions for future articles and comments can be sent to [scdegner@aol.com](mailto:scdegner@aol.com).



## LOOKING FOR GOOD ILLUSTRATIONS?

Have you ever searched for an hour or more for a good illustration? Have you waded through Luther’s Works for a good quote? Found every one of the illustrations on that CD of illustrations too Reformed? Perhaps you’ve neglected your best resource – your own imagination.

Gary Smalley and John Trent in *The Language of Love* cite four “wells” that we can use as sources of original illustrations. While their book is written to help married couples communicate effectively, it is an excellent resource to help us understand how to create and use good illustrations in our preaching.



**The first “well” is the well of nature.** Jesus went to this well often. “The Word of God is like the seed that is sown. Some falls on the path, some on rocky ground, some among weeds, and some on good soil.” How thought provoking! It caused the disciples to ask about this truth later. That’s what makes a good illustration so valuable. In the afternoon, while you are mowing the lawn, you will think it through one more time, like a cow ruminating its food and making sure it has been fully digested.

Here’s an example: *Repentance is like weeding the garden. You never get all the weeds out. Some are too small to see. Some have left their seeds to germinate next week. A good gardener keeps the weeds out of his garden by walking through it every day, pulling out the weeds as they come up. He never lets the weeds take over his garden. It’s the same in a Christian’s life of repentance. We won’t get rid of all of our sins until Jesus comes and restores us completely. But until that day comes, the Holy Spirit takes a walk through our life every day and pulls up the weeds that want to choke out our faith.*

**The second “well” is the well of every day objects.** Jesus used every day objects in his parables. He told stories about the priceless pearl, the lost coin, and the treasure in the field.

*Did you ever ask for a doggie bag in a restaurant? There was no way you could eat the whole 16-ounce prime rib. What a treat for your dog, Pete! So you took it home. That night, you made a late night snack from the prime rib. Pete came into the kitchen to beg, so you tossed him the bone. It’s a good thing Pete didn’t know what he was missing! But when we promise God our first fruits, and then spend all we’ve earned on our own desires and toss God the bone, God knows the difference, doesn’t he?*

One word of caution. Use objects that people are familiar with. *Some people are like floppy disks. If they’ve been formatted with all the wrong information as a child, it will be hard for them to “read” the gospel. Most of your audience won’t get the point of comparison!*

Continued on page 4

## SERMONS THAT HELPED ME

Veteran preachers have their way of leaving their lasting marks on young preachers. That was certainly the case when I was exposed to the polished and orthodox Lutheran pulpiteer from Southern California, Pastor Alvin Wagner. He was retiring from many years of service to the Lord in two large suburban congregations, and I was just beginning my ministry in a new WELS mission. I craved his ability to make sound doctrine sound good with carefully chosen illustrations.

“Feathers for arrows” – that’s what Spurgeon called well-chosen illustrations. Pastor Wagner had a gift for choosing the right feathers for the arrows. “Windows of light” helped people see the treasures from the Word that he was setting before them.

I once asked him how he was able to collect and organize such a wealth of material for illustrating his messages. He smiled and said very little. Did he not want to reveal his secrets? Was he being modest, or was he hesitant to show a young pastor that his files on illustrations were not all that organized? Looking at my own files, I suspect it may have been the latter.

Shortly after the Lord suddenly called him home to glory, I received a phone call from his wife Ruth that I could pick up a box of old sermons and notes that he had left for me stored away in a closet. They were not that well organized, mostly scrawled out notes to himself. In the box were five notebooks with carefully crafted, handwritten sermons, treasures that were delivered on the Southern California Lutheran Hour in the 1950s. He preached these sermons verse by verse from the First Epistle of John.

The first sermon from 1 John rang a clear note of joy in the Lord with extra emphasis on this verse: “Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.” Here is how he illustrated that the joy we have in the Lord is always complete and full.

*“The strange thing about Jesus” said a Japanese student, “is that you can never get away from Him.”*

*And you can’t, if you truly understand the things here written of Him! “When I learned to know Jesus as my Savior,” said Martin Luther, “he became my one and all; everything else became as nothing to me in comparison to Him!”*

*“What the sun is to that flower,” said Tennyson in his garden, “that is what Jesus Christ is to me!” And in the same vein the godly Countess Elizabeth wrote her hymn: “Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus, can my heart-felt longing still!”*

*That may sound strange to unconverted ears—it may be called a hyper-enthusiasm—but I soberly guarantee you, my friend, that when you truly grasp what the Holy Spirit here declares of Jesus, you will never be satisfied with a perfunctory Christianity but will find the same Christ the center, power, joy and dynamic of all your thinking and living. Strangely, wonderfully, you will find yourself in fellowship with him and the heavenly Father that hath sent him.*

I listened to some of the taped sermons that he preached in “retirement” at the Wayfarer’s Chapel in Ventura. One sermon that stuck with me was “Behold a Greater than Solomon Is Here.” That sermon also found its way into print in the book of sermons by Pastor Wagner, *Behold a Greater than Solomon*. (Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1989, bookstor@blc.edu, \$14.95)

Here is another example of how he used an illustration to underscore the truth that Jesus is always near us.

*Into a small secret gathering of Christians behind the Iron Curtain walked some Russian officials one night, taking down their names and telling them to expect a court summons. When they had finished the listing, an elderly believer spoke up and said, “Sirs, there’s one forgotten.” “Who’s that?” growled the chief officer. “The Lord Jesus Christ,” was the answer, “he is also here.”*

Wagner goes on to say in the sermon, *Oh, what courage it gives and comfort to have him, the Greater than Solomon, here. What need of fear, as long as he is near! Greater is he than all that threatens us. Why be nervous and ruffled, disturbed or disheartened? Hasn’t he said also, “Lo, I am with you always, even*



*Pastor Wagner had a gift for choosing the right feathers for the arrows. “Windows of light” helped people see the treasures from the Word that he was setting before them.*

*unto the end of the world?” (Matthew 28:20) And, when in spite of this definite promise, we sometimes tremble, shouldn’t we calm ourselves with his “Behold a Greater than Solomon is here,” here at our very side, not in some vague shadowy way as a benign influence, but here in reality, invisibly yet none the less personally – our dear, ever-loving, always-present, prayer-hearing Savior? [ibid, p. 6]*

*“More light, the sermon needs more light!” Who of us has not read through a sermon, and realized that it needed more light. Merely throwing open a window will not get the job done. The window needs to illustrate the treasure that is being set before God’s people without drawing attention to the preacher.*

Pastor Wagner loved to tell the story of Jesus and his love, and he loved telling stories to illuminate that story.

Steven Degner

# “THE EXEGETICAL GROUNDWORK OF GOOD SERMON PREPARATION”

We often hear that Luther said, “Lose the languages, lose the gospel.” But the flipside is also true: Use the languages, use the gospel.

Good exegesis heals us where it hurts with the gospel. Most unchurched people assume everybody has “the gospel.” “Churches just have their own interpretation,” they say. But let them sit down with a language-equipped pastor to compare those “interpretations” with the original Bible-words, and the Holy Spirit helps them see the devil’s lie in the “other interpretations.” One new eighty-year-old WELS member coming off thirty-five years of being unchurched reasoned, “Pastor, I know why those other churches went astray. They did not learn their Greek and Hebrew.”

---

**Good exegesis impresses the memory with unforgettable images and illustrations so that the preacher is free to deliver the message eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart with God’s people.**

---

Good exegesis keeps Christ-crucified warm in our hearts, vibrant in our preaching, and living in our ministries. If we would dedicate more time to exegesis, meditation, and personal devotions, most of our time management problems would disappear. Nor ought we think ourselves immune from today’s religious scholasticism, “always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth” (2 Timothy 3:5,7).

Good exegesis impresses the memory with unforgettable images and illustrations so that the preacher is free to deliver the message eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart with God’s people. It takes us from the חַטָּא of sin to God’s חַסֵּד and on to χαρις and δοξα – all to communicate God’s wonderful solution to my sin. And this is not easy work.

Remember how Luther labored with Hebrew when he and University of Wittenberg professors Melanchthon and Aurogallus tried to translate a Teutonic Old Testament? “We are sweating over the work of putting the prophets into German. God, how much of it there is, and how hard it is to make these Hebrew writers talk German! They resist us, and do not want to leave their Hebrew and imitate our German barbarisms. It is like making a nightingale leave her own sweet song and imitate the monotonous voice of a cuckoo which she detests.”

But where God says, “Your חַסֵּד is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears” (Hosea 6:4), he teaches us that his חַסֵּד is *unfailing love* that shines like a bright star against the dark night of my sin. Augustine observed, “God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love.”

We learn this best in God’s school of grace in the recurring course called tentatio, “testing.” Through the groggy morphine after my back surgery stepped the beautiful feet of two different preachers. Both spoke the same Gospel which I have been privileged to proclaim to others struggling with pain and impatience. Both said what I already knew. But “*how sweet the Name of Jesus sounds in a believer’s ear. It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, and drives away his fear*”(CW 358). This χαρις was for me. Who can exhaust the wonder of it? And who could be satisfied if God did not at times let us grieve over our sins, our shortcomings, and the just plain stupid things we sometimes say and do?

---

**Augustine observed,  
“God loves each one of us as if there  
was only one of us to love.”**

---



But God reveals that his *glory* is to love lost sinners like me. God is absolutely independent. No one can say he is wrong to punish my sins with a world of iniquity on his own Son. Truly in Christ Jesus we see the δοξα – glory of the LORD, the God of free and faithful grace, who can condemn the self-righteous and forgive those he leads to repentant faith.

Once more Luther: “To attribute glory to God is to believe in him, to regard him as truthful, wise, righteous, merciful, and almighty, in short, to acknowledge him as the Author and Donor of every good. Reason does not do this, but faith does... To be able to attribute such glory to God is wisdom beyond wisdom, righteousness beyond righteousness, religion beyond religion, and sacrifice beyond sacrifice. From this it can be understood what great righteousness faith is and, by antithesis, what a great sin unbelief is.”

If you have for me a cross, and its shadow come, turning all my gain to loss, shrouding heart and home - let me think how your dear Son to his glory came, and in deepest woe, pray on, “Glorify your name.” CW 75:4

Mark Cordes

Continued from page 1

**The third “well” is the well of imaginary stories.** Jesus told the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. This story demonstrates one of the strengths of this kind of illustration. You are brought into the story in a personal way. You can almost feel the dogs licking your sores. Hell becomes so real you almost sweat from the heat. And then it presents you with an unexpected punch line: the only way to believe is through the Word. There is no other way! What a powerful way to drive home this truth!

This is the well that Jesus turned to most often. He told about the Pharisee and the tax collector, the unjust judge, the lost son, the persistent friend at midnight, the rich fool, the ten virgins, the ten talents, the good Samaritan. The advantage of an imaginary story is that you can make up a story that will fit your point exactly.

A good story allows you to see the truth and not just hear it. Do you think either the Pharisees or the tax collectors missed the point of the story about the two men who went up to the temple to pray? Is it possible to read the story of the lost son and not see the Father’s love for you?

One warning is in order for using your own imaginary story. Don’t make it too fantastic or unrealistic. You will lose the emotional impact and the heart of your listener. Look at the stories Jesus used. They all could have happened.

**The fourth “well” is the well of remember when.** Somewhere in our training, we may have been warned to stay clear of “personal testimony.” Personal testimony has its place, if it is used with humility and if it demonstrates God’s grace. Did Jesus ever use the well of remember? I can’t think of a specific illustration that he used. He must have told his disciples about his temptation in the wilderness because he was the only one to witness it. Perhaps he told it in the context of explaining how the devil works.

We do have Paul’s example of using personal testimony when he explained about his thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12. He used it again in Galatians when he told about his conversion in the wilderness. The strength of using personal testimony is that you can speak with power and conviction. You were there!

*Remember when the tornado ripped through our town and destroyed our church? In the days and weeks after that tornado, we wondered what good could come of it. Now, in hindsight, we have seen God’s goodness. We have seen the generosity of thousand of WELS members who showed their love to us. We have a new sanctuary that is large enough to fit our congregation without crowding. God gave us a good insurance settlement because he led one of our members to review our insurance just six months before the destruction. Can you find a better example of the truth that all things work out for our good? It’s easy to apply this truth to the past. It’s only by faith worked in us by the Holy Spirit that we will apply it to our future!*

There is another well that Trent and Smalley did not mention in their book. It is the well of Bible stories – perhaps the deepest well of all. We’ll explore this in our next installment of *Preach the Word*.

Charles Degner



## CAN YOU USE THIS?

### Not Ashamed of Jesus

A thirteen-year-old boy was ashamed of his mom. She helped serve school lunch, cheered for him at sporting events, and picked him up every day after classes. She had once been pretty, but scars—nasty scars—covered one side of her face. He could hear his classmates whisper, “What happened to her?”

One day he asked his mom to stop coming to school. His mother knew he was ashamed of her. The time had come to tell him the story—the real story—of how her face was badly burned.

Thirteen years earlier she woke up in the middle of the night and smelled smoke. Fighting through the flames, she ran into the nursery, grabbed her little baby, wrapped him in a blanket, and fled, getting badly burned in the process. He saw his mother’s scars in a new light. Tears streamed down his face, evidence of his love for her who had saved him from death.

We are not ashamed when we look at the nail-scarred hands of Jesus and hear of his love for us.

**PREACH**  
*the Word*

*Preach the Word* is published bimonthly by the WELS Commission on Worship  
2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398 414/256-3265  
FAX, 414/256-3899 • <brygerlach@aol.com>  
<www.wels.net/worship>

Steven Degner, editor <scdegner@aol.com>  
Wayne A. Laitinen, managing editor <wlaitinen@newulmtel.net>