

PREACH

the Word

Vol. 8 No. 3

January/February 2005

according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:1)

PREACHING TO GOD'S LITTLE ONES

A yellow sticky note a decade old juts from my computer monitor: somebody's list of Martin Luther's principles for teaching the Gospel to tender hearts.

- 1 Adapt instruction to the capacity of children
- 2 Make learning pleasant
- 3 Awaken minds through skillful questioning
- 4 Study things as well as words
- 5 Temper discipline with love

Early Childhood Education is a topic all its own. These five ideas apply, however, in a surprising way to teaching any audience of "these little ones who believe in me" (Mt 18)... regardless of setting, education levels, wealth or its absence, sexes, skin colors ... or age!"

Writing for Talking

The big, white-haired Brit in a tweed coat was handsome and at ease as he leaned toward his listener. Alistair Cooke sat in a leather armchair, a twinkle in his eye, hosting PBS Masterpiece Theater during the 1970s and '80s.

Wider fame came to him as a journalist: Cooke wrote 2869 *Letters from America* while England and the world listened to him over the course of six decades.

"During the end of the war [WW II], the BBC in New York invited various famous exiles ... to come and talk to the underground in France – famous, famous, great literary men,' Cooke said. 'And I had the privilege of sitting in the control room, and I thought 'I will learn about broadcasting from listening to these men'...

'What I learned is that *they were dreadful broadcasters*. They wrote essays, or lectures, or sermons, and they read them aloud. And I suddenly realized there was a new profession ahead. Which is writing for talking. Putting it on the page in the syntactical breakup and normal confusion that is normal talk,' he said."

("Broadcaster Alistair Cooke Dies at 95," (AP) *Omaha World-Herald*, 30 Mar 04).



What winsome Alistair Cooke called *writing for talking* is also a part of what the Lutheran preacher must do every week. "Politicians and diplomats come and go, but Cooke's weekly lessons have, for half a century, *translated one nation for the understanding of another* ..."

("Beloved BBC Voice Signs Off," Frank J. Prial, *The New York Times*, March 2004).

The preacher takes the wonderful works of God, timeless and universal, and he presents them to a human being who lives on a specific street on a specific day.

Three from Walther

- 1 "A preacher of the Law must make a person distrust himself even in the least matter until his dying hour..." (p. 134)
- 2 "If we accept what [God] gives, we are said to obey him. It is an act of kindness on God's part to call it obedience. And indeed, when we do obey him thus, we are also fulfilling the First Commandment, for faith is commanded in the Law, not in the Gospel ..."

We have previously noted that Luther speaks of faith as a return to the First Commandment. To accept the grace of God as soon as it is offered to me, to take comfort in it, to thank God for it, and not to be so insolent as to try to achieve by one's own effort what the Father in heaven is offering by grace, that is the sublimest way of fulfilling the First Commandment." (p. 288)

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- 3 “If Christ came into the world to publish new laws to us, we should feel like saying that he might as well have stayed in heaven. Moses had already given us so perfect a law that we could not fulfill it.” (p. 70)

Second Time Around

When I was a boy, my mom would pay me a dime for every book I finished. I was motivated and couldn't read fast enough. Over the years, however, my reading slowed way down. The print before a pastor requires that he understand it before he turns the page.

If it's been a year since you've read through a certain book of the Bible devotionally, much information needs to be re-learned.

A MEMORABLE HOMILETICS COURSE

Pastor Paul Eickmann, Watertown, WI

After eighteen years of WELS education, including four semesters at Mequon, I thought I had been confined long enough. That's how I came to participate in Professor Martin Kiunke's 1953 homiletical seminar at the Evangelische Lutherische Hochschule, Oberursel im Taunus, Deutschland.

The professor's purpose, I think, was to give us as nearly as he could the feeling of being responsible for the week-by-week proclamation of the Gospel in a Lutheran congregation.

He began by giving us a brief introduction to preaching. Meanwhile we prepared a detailed outline and a sermon, which he corrected. After that he gave us a text each week to pray over, chew on, and then prepare in some form. One period it was several basic outlines on one text (one line for every paragraph). The next period it was a detailed outline.

We tried a sermon in what our instructor called “Telegrammstil,” the economical style of a telegram:

Father waiting long time. Sees son far off. Doesn't wait; runs to meet him. Son confesses “Not worthy.” Father won't let him say ‘Make me hired man’ ...

You get the idea. I have tried it since. This approach saves time in the writing, but needs rigorous, repeated oral practice to avoid ho-hum language and style. Another warning: “Elderly preacher runs overtime!”

The treat for the class was not so much in listening to each other's amateur attempts as it was in observing a master at work. The professor always did the assignment, too. He would read his efforts after we had presented ours. His theme for The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins at the beginning of Advent was just two words: “Zu spät!” – “Too Late!” (That warning has rung in my mind ever since. How many of my themes are still remembered by a hearer fifty years later?)

We spent a few weeks on occasional sermons – at least one for a wedding and one for a funeral. What was distinctive in these

Think of the Old Testament blood sacrifices or the fruit of the Spirit. The kings of Judah or Paul's different missionary journeys. The Psalms of Ascent or John's Seven Letters.

Minds work differently and experiences are varied, but here's something to ponder. If I finish reading a Bible book one morning, but the next day immediately return to the beginning and re-read it, that book seems open to me like never before. Outline and patterns and names and themes and lists seem exposed, like a path in the woods after the trees have dropped their leaves.

Of course it's one thing, after finishing *Philippians*, to jump right back in. It takes a real battle of wills to reread *Ezekiel* after camping outside its walls for two weeks. But God's Spirit makes it worthwhile – the second time around.



exercises was the fact that the instructor would give us quite an exact situation: “The marriage of a postal employee in his thirties to a widowed childhood schoolmate,” or “The death of a faithful member of the congregation after an illness lasting several years.”

We were to find a text and write an outline, keeping in mind the professor's instructions “Nicht Taten, sondern Daten” – “not deeds but data.” The sermon should not center on the people involved, but on Christ. We were to preach Law and Gospel, but in terms that fit the situation of the hearers' lives.

In the case of the funeral, consider the life also of the departed Christian. I have heard it said since that “All occasional sermons are the same.” Yes, it's the same Gospel, but *different people get married, die, and mourn*. The Good News is best proclaimed in a text and in terms that include the data of real-life situations.

One piece of Professor Kiunke's advice was so memorable that I quoted it for many years to my beginning Hebrew students at NWC: “Meine Herren, das ist ein Dienst der Liebe, dass Sie das Alles so anschaulich wie möglich machen.” (Gentlemen, it is a service of love that you make everything as clear as possible.)

To use memorable language and vivid illustration, to proclaim the Gospel in the unique terms of a given biblical text, to keep the present spiritual needs of particular Christians in mind ... all this is the preacher's service of love to Christ and his people.

CHORE OR PASSION? “When Gospel Preachers Work at Preaching,” part 2 of 2

Pastor Phil Spaude, Casper, Wyoming

We know that people park the Chevy and come inside on Sunday morning for many reasons. Some like the music, others like the time to pray. Some like the beautiful building, others the support of their friends. I don't know about you, but guests volunteer comments again and again on mainly just two matters as I visit them. “I felt welcomed,” or “I liked the message.” I never hear much about the beautiful pre-service music or the timely prayers, the well-sung liturgy or the double-frosted brownies. Should this surprise us? “There is nothing that so attaches people to the church as good preaching” (Apology AC, Article XXIV).

It's a Matter of Grace

You are the man, not someone else. God chose you to preach not because you applied yourself and graduated fifth in the class or you claim membership in Mensa or because you are a wordsmith. God chose you to preach his Word because of grace. Relatively few people in the general population ever deliver a speech, much less get to preach a twenty minute sermon. We tend to be in awe of people with unique positions – like the surgeon who cuts to heal or the judge who sentences to bring about justice. God has graced you with a unique position.

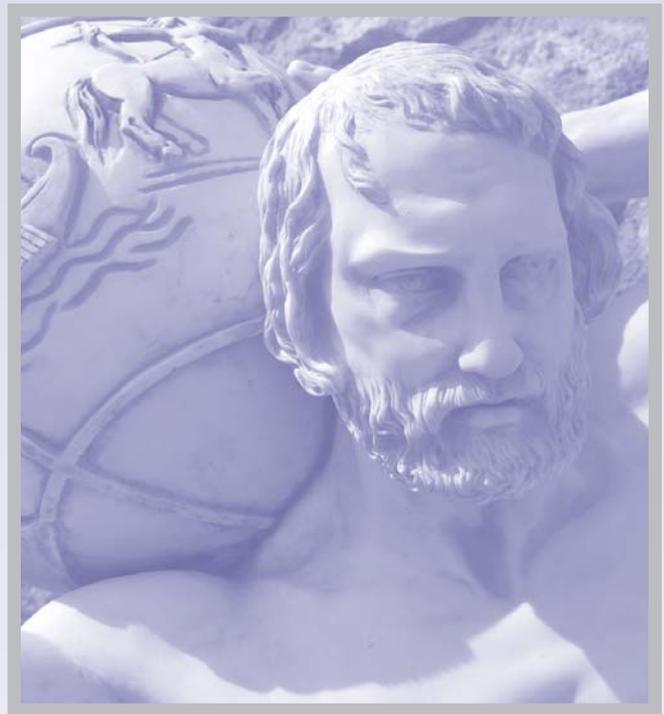
Where I used to live in the Bible Belt, pastors were better known as preachers, a reference to what the general public sees as their primary task. There may be fifty preachers in your city, but how many were trained as you were to use Law and Gospel instead of simply telling stories of human interest? How many were trained to use the Law to cut and the Gospel to comfort? How many, rather, use the Law mainly as a guide? How many of the fifty use the Gospel to forgive and empower, instead of using philosophy? How many churches are there in your community for hurting and searching people to hear a true teacher proclaim to them Christ the Pearl of Great Price or Christ our Righteousness?

“There is nothing that so attaches people to the church as good preaching” (Apology AC, Article XXIV).

It's Not Quitting Time Yet

I've done it. You've done it. At times we feel our work is over when we type the last AMEN on the bottom of page three and hit “Control Save” one last time. You breathe a sigh and think “Four or maybe five good times through this and I'm ready!” Wait; it's not quitting time yet. Should that be your final draft?

As you start to memorize, aren't there thoughts that can be expressed better by more colloquial expressions? Why not write those changes in the margin space? Did you try to get rid of those tiring passive verbs better suited for written



communication? Does the word count in that sentence resemble the number of cars in a coal train headed through Nebraska? Are there a few five- or six-syllable words that need a livelier two- or three-syllable model? When you use a pronoun like “it,” do people really know what you are talking about? Where in my text are Law and Gospel? Where did I make a transition without a common thread?

I may have taken my last single-engine plane ride. I'm comforted, however, by the thorough inspection and the use of the checklist that its pilot uses without fail. I'm more likely to get on board when I see that kind of attention to detail. Attention to detail in a plane saves lives. How does that apply to the art of sermon writing?

Back in school you learned the amusing story of how Heracles tricked Atlas into bearing the weight of the earth and sky on his shoulders. Well, our flesh tricks us into thinking that Sunday's preaching deadline is like the weight on Atlas. Human beings will always die unexpectedly. Your kids or wife will get sick; associates will get laryngitis. A vicar may not be available next year. If you serve outside the parish you may get calls at 6 pm on Saturday night (“Are you available...?”) But God is good. The Holy Spirit will enable you to knife your Old Adam and quit complaining and whining so that you can see the huge blessings God produces when Gospel preachers work at preaching.

God chose you, trained you, and equipped you to preach yet again – this Sunday, about twenty minutes after the bell rings.

YOU CAN PRINT THAT

- 1 “The assurance of a divine call stirs up ministers of the Word so that each one, in his station, in the fear of God, performs his functions with greater diligence, faith and eagerness, without weariness. And he does not let himself be drawn or frightened away from his office by fear of any peril or of persecution, since he is sure that he is called by God and that office has been divinely entrusted to him.” Martin Chemnitz (*Ministry, Word & Sacraments – an Enchiridion*)
- 2 “We measure the success of the church by the number of dollars in the treasury. If you doubt this, ask yourself when a church gets real panicky. It is not when they have only 40-50% of their members at worship, only 20% or less in Bible study, and 5-10% witnessing, but they panic when the budget is not met. In the meantime we specialize in printing budget needs in every bulletin ... we conduct bazaars when we should be teaching and equipping the saints for ministry, put memorials with people’s names on everything they give, and make a big thing about barely meeting the bills.”
Waldo Werning (*Supply-Side Stewardship*)
- 3 “We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”
(Hebrews 6:12)
- 4 “This is our greatest certainty, that we know where our sins are laid. For the Law lays them upon our conscience, but God takes them and lays them upon the shoulders of the Lamb ...
... Sin has only two places where it can be: it is either with you, so that it lies on your shoulders, or it lies upon Christ, the Lamb of God. If it lies on your back, you are lost, but if it lies on Christ, you are free and blessed. Choose then, and take whichever you desire ...”
Martin Luther (John 1)
- 5 “When we speak of [a writer’s] style, we don’t mean his command of the relative pronoun, we mean the sound his words make on paper. All writers, by the way they use the language, reveal something of their spirits, their habits, their capacities, and their biases. This is inevitable as well as enjoyable.”
E.B. White (*The Elements of Style*)

The Sound Words Make on Paper

*This little child so few days old
is come to rifle Satan’s fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake
though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak, unarm-ed wise
the gates of hell he will surprise.*

*With tears he fights and wins the field;
His naked breast stands for a shield.
His battering shot are babish cries,
his arrows, looks of weeping eyes.
His martial ensigns: Cold and Need,
and feeble flesh his warrior’s steed.*

*His camp is pitch-ed in a stall,
his bulwark, but a broken wall;
The crib his trench, haystalks his stakes,
of shepherds he his muster makes.
And thus, as sure his foes to wound
the angels’ trumps Alarum sound.*

*My soul, with Christ join thou in fight,
stick to the tents that he hath pight.*
Within his crib is surest ward;
this little babe will be thy guard.
If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy,
then flit not from this heavenly boy.*

* *pight = pitched, set up*
Robert Southwell (b. 1561)
from *Worship Supplement*, CPH, 1969

Those words have the dust of centuries on them, don’t they? Speak them out loud, though, and they wake our sleeping senses. Holy Spirit, give our little words grit and color and life. Keep them faithful to your written words. Amen!

Pastor Tom Jeske
Omaha, Nebraska

QUESTIONS? COMMENTS? If you have any questions or comments about *Preach the Word*, feel free to contact this year’s editor directly at tomjeske@phonet.com

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