

PREACH

the Word

Vol. 10 No. 6

July/August 2007

CONSUMERS OF GOOD SERMONS

Which was the best movie of Memorial Day weekend 2007?

Although "Spider-Man 3" hauled in \$151.1 million three weeks earlier, it was not the best movie of Memorial Day weekend. On that weekend it surrendered to "Shrek the Third," as Shrek outperformed Spidey by \$51 million. But neither of them topped the debut of Disney's third Jack Sparrow adventure, "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End." Its Memorial Day total of \$142.1 million broke the previous four-day weekend take of \$122.9 million by "X-Men: The Last Stand."

So, I guess it doesn't matter which movie you thought was best. The pundits have spoken with their cash. That, apparently, is what makes a good movie these days.

With these computations in mind, I suggest that we cancel the World Series this fall and simply award the Major League Baseball trophy to the team with the best attendance. And why not revoke the operating licenses of all department stores, restaurants, and cell phone providers except the ones with the most sales?

And then there's our preaching. One of the brothers in my circuit confessed that he had himself a dilemma in one particular sermon. The crowd was admittedly thin that day. Four worshipers. Two grandparents and their two grandchildren, to be exact, unless you count the organist. Then there were five. One grandparent exited with one grandchild and a minute later the other pair did the same. The organist had some other pressing matter and was nowhere to be seen. Which left the preacher. Alone. Preaching with not a soul to hear that seamless transition impeccably memorized for the perfect delivery.

What would you do if you were in that pulpit at that moment? At the very least you'd wonder if you should stop. But then what? Do you wait for the organist to return? At least one worshiper? Two?

His sermon needed to be preached. Not because of the seamless transition or perfect delivery. Because it was God's Word, which needs no consumer pundits to sell it. This preacher did what any of us preachers would do. He kept preaching.

"When asked why they continue when there is no congregation, their reply is straightforward: we have been called to witness to the sovereignty and grace of God in the world. Some practical heads may say it makes no sense, but there is a respect in which



it makes all kinds of sense. There is a non-contingent, unconditional quality to the word we preach; it does not wait for a favorable response in order to be the true and proper word" (Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 43).

Where would we be today if Noah, Moses, Jeremiah, and Jesus had waited for favorable consumer response in their preaching? Well, our task is the same as theirs. The word we preach is the same as theirs. The fire that burns in our bones gropes at the chance to say what we must say because God has said it first. The seeds we scatter here and there have life in them and will find a way – God's way – to sprout and bear fruit.

That's true whether your sermon made the most money on Memorial Day weekend or not.

Martin Franzmann captures this important truth in a hymn that will be sung by congregations welcoming their new pastors in this summer's installation services.

Preach you the Word and plant it home
To those who like or like it not,
The Word that shall endure and stand
When flow'rs and mortals are forgot.

We know how hard, O Lord, the task
Your servant bids us undertake:
To preach your Word and never ask
What prideful profit it may make.

(*Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, 544:1,2)

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TOP TEN ISSUES OF PLAGIARISM FROM THE PULPIT

“All preachers borrow from others, and should,” writes Thomas G. Long, professor of preaching at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, in an article called “Stolen Goods: Tempted to Plagiarize” from *Christian Century* magazine online (<http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=3195>). “There is a difference between being a debtor and being a thief. All preachers stand on the shoulders of biblical scholars, theologians and faithful witnesses from across the generations. We do not owe our congregations an original essay; we owe them a fresh act of interpretation.”

But, Long admits, gray areas remain. Actually, they abound. If I preach a Lenten sermon from a sermon series published by Northwestern Publishing House, am I obligated to tell my hearers that it didn’t originate with me? What if I just utilize the structure and some memorable phrases, do I need to acknowledge the source then? And what about the sermon helps here in *Preach the Word*? Is this open source material? Intellectual property?

“Preachers who strive to tell the truth, who seek to honor the communion of saints, who desire to maintain the trust of the faithful community – that is to say, preachers with ethical integrity – will wrestle with these questions and make the best decisions they can. Pulpit plagiarists, however, in the name of expediency, will grab what they wish wherever they can find it and claim it as their own. Their stolen sermons may occasionally sparkle, but in the end they will have spread the banquet table of God with the empty calories of homiletical fast food” (*Ibid*).

Sooner or later...coerced by a congregation member who googles a few phrases in your sermon to discover it’s already been preached...or pricked by a sensitive conscience burning with guilt, preachers will wrestle with questions like these. So let’s begin the wrestling now. On our terms. With calm objectivity.

Below are the top ten issues related to plagiarism from the pulpit. But you’ll find more questions than answers. If you have another question, or believe you can help us all begin to grasp an answer, please visit the *Preach the Word* Web site at www.wels.net/ptw and click on the “Preach the Word Discussion Board” link. It will take you to a discussion board where each of these ten issues is posted, waiting for your input.

#10 Historical

Preachers have always shared material. Martin Luther quoted church fathers extensively and even dabbled with sermons prepared by the medieval

church for theologically illiterate clergy. It’s the way we’ve always done it. But is that reason enough to continue? And does the world of communication operate by different rules today?

#9 Practical

We are busy people, and the expectation for quality speaking demands more of preachers today than ever. Using another’s skillfully prepared sermons or resource material saves time that we can give to other worthy tasks of ministry and it increases sermon quality. Makes sense, doesn’t it? Good stewardship? Or mixed up priorities?

#8 Doctrinal

Abrasive false doctrine becomes less abrasive when it’s really good public speaking. Deceptively false doctrine becomes more deceptive when it’s really good public speaking. Will the confessional preacher, especially one who regularly turns to a non-confessional source for sermon helps, unintentionally stand in the pulpit as a wolf in sheep’s clothing?

#7 Legal

Citing the use of another’s material is the letter and the spirit of the law. But what should be cited and what is public domain? Should sermons have footnotes? Does a congregation want a sermon interrupted by bibliographical announcements?

#6 Informational

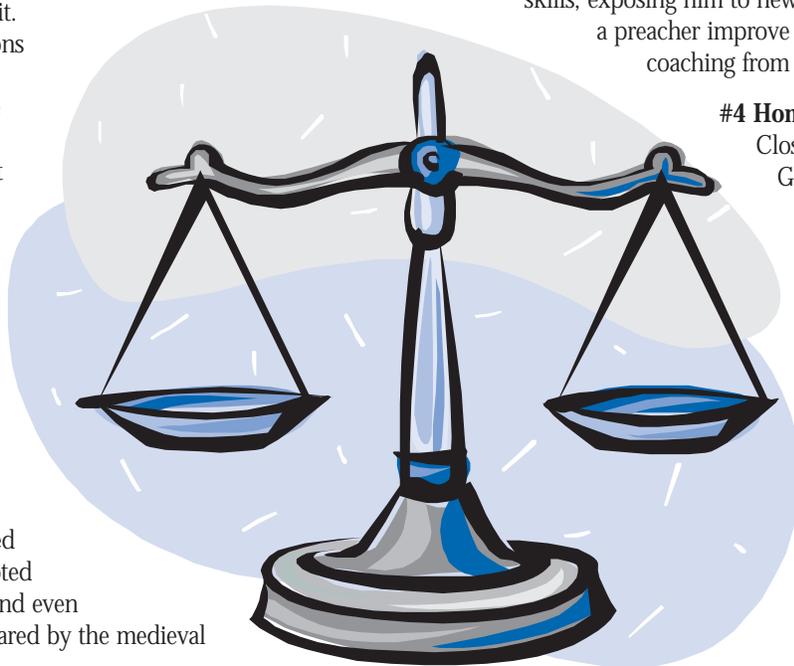
Listeners (and especially readers if sermons are posted on the internet) can google a sermon portion, quote, illustration, or theme and find that it has already been said ... perhaps exactly as their preacher said it. Is that enough reason to be cautious? Or should preachers just come clean and explain that lots of quality sermon material is available on the internet and is worthy of repeating?

#5 Educational

Preaching the sermons of others helps a pastor grow in his sermon skills, exposing him to new methods and messages. How can a preacher improve his game if he doesn’t practice with coaching from the experts?

#4 Homiletical

Closing commentaries and Hebrew or Greek dictionaries in favor of magazines offering prepared sermons ruins the homiletical process. It robs the preacher of his responsibility to discover the divine and his opportunity to be creative. Can sermon resource materials serve the homiletical process without destroying it? And c’mon, now, can pressured preachers really be responsible enough to use them without harm?



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PREACHING BY FRED B. CRADDOCK

Below is the final study guide for Craddock's book, *Preaching*. Remember, all of the study guides are posted on the *Preach the Word* Web site in their entirety. They offer a great discussion starter for circuit, conference, or study groups, or for personal development.

Study Guide #11 – The Sermon in Context

Pages 31-50

How is the experience of a person reading a printed copy of your sermon on Tuesday different than the experience of a person listening to your sermon on Sunday morning?

Historical Context

"All of us have significant persons, living and dead, who sit in our balconies and we hope they are pleased with our preaching" (p. 33). Name at least three preachers who influence your preaching.

Exercise: Try the suggestion Craddock gives on p. 34. Spend an evening with some parishioners and ask them where they got their ears. Which churches and preachers have affected the way they listen to sermons? "The next Sunday, the church will have one improved preacher and several improved listeners" (p. 34).

Pastoral Context

"Are preaching and pastoring contradictory ...? There are those who are persuaded that the same person cannot wield the two-edged sword of the Word of God and also tend the flock" (p. 38). What might persuade some to believe that a man cannot serve as both pastor (shepherding the flock) and preacher (proclaiming the Word of God)? In what ways does pastoring and shepherding make a man a better preacher (pp. 38-41)?

Liturgical Context

Explain what Craddock means by, "It can be very shattering if what is often heard is finally heard" (p. 47).

Theological Context

Theology is but one of many voices bidding unimportant sermon subjects into the wastebasket (p. 49). On what basis? What are some other voices that help preachers filter their notes and ideas into a unified sermon?



A fuller version of Study Guide #10 is posted online at www.wels.net/ptw.



AN INTERVIEW WITH THOSE WHO TEACH TO PREACH

Always striving to provide the greatest and the latest preaching helps, this editor interviewed a former homiletics professor and a current homiletics professor, one having taught and the other still teaching at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Thanks to Rev. Joel Gerlach and Prof. Richard Gurgel, respectively, for taking the time to share their insights with *Preach the Word*. Excerpts of their answers are printed here, while the answers in their entirety are posted on our web site.

So where do we find mentors today?

Rev. Joel Gerlach: "I know that there are WELS pastors who, if I were a beginning preacher today, could serve as mentors to me. I can read their sermons on their church's webpage."

Prof. Richard Gurgel: A book that is growing in popularity is called "*Christ-Centered Preaching*" by Bryan Chappell ... The next two, their theology at times as far as love for the Scripture leaves a little to be desired but masters of the homiletical craft, would be Eugene Lowry, "*The Homiletical Plot*," ... And then the pioneer of what's often called the new homiletic is Fred Craddock and his book "*Preaching*" ... Those would be the three authors I think that I'd have the most confidence to point to and say you won't feel like you've wasted your dollar when you've purchased a book by those three.

Can a Lutheran preacher benefit from studying style, and not just substance?

"Every preacher has his own style," Rev. Gerlach reminds us. Then Prof. Gurgel begins his response by admitting, "That's a challenge, to separate homiletical theory from theology..."

How can a congregation help their pastor in his preaching?

Rev. Gerlach and Prof. Gurgel offer five practical ideas.



(Videos of the complete answers to these questions are posted online at www.wels.net/ptw)

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So then, let this be both your comfort and your challenge. “We are bidden to preach, but we are not bidden to justify people and make them pious . . . Only the Word of God is entrusted to Moses, not the responsibility of making Pharaoh soft or hard by preaching. The Word is entrusted to him; this is God’s will, and this Word he is to proclaim even though no one may want to listen to him” (*What Luther Says*, Concordia Publishing House, p. 1117).

We keep on preaching even when the five worshipers are nowhere to be found. We speak a message of authority and objectivity that is not up for debate or discussion. We take on only that for which God has made us responsible, and let him handle what belongs to him alone. We say what we say because it needs to be said, not because it will be heard or applauded. We study, prepare, improve, deliver and, at the end of the day, we rest because the word we preach is not our own.

Daron Lindemann

SERMON HELPS

The Sermon Helps section is going under construction. Should it continue? Do you benefit from it? Should it change? E-mail your suggestions to Daron Lindemann at dilindemann@gracedowntown.org.

Pentecost 6

 *From the sermon “Go Find Elisha” posted online at www.wels.net/ptw*

When my son was about four he was obsessed with becoming a fireman. He talked about it and talked about it. Siren sounds filled our house. Finally, my wife said to him, “You know that being a fireman is a dangerous job. Many times firemen get hurt (understandably, she was just a little tired of the siren noise). The little guy reacted rather seriously. He furrowed his brow. He looked worried and crestfallen. Then he said, “Well, okay. Maybe I’ll just be a pastor then.” How do people become ministers of the gospel – teachers, pastors, staff ministers? By default? Lack of talent for doing anything else?

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#3 Ethical

Is it honest for a preacher to speak from the pulpit the exact words already spoken or written by another, with no mention that they are not the preacher’s own? Does this unethically deceive the listeners?

#2 Pastoral

The preacher is most often the pastor and shepherd of the congregation, whose familiar voice comforts and guides the sheep. Does the use of canned sermon material – whether cited or not – betray that intimacy? If the listeners don’t know, does it really hurt them?

#1 Moral

Copying copyrighted material without proper citing is stealing. Even copying non-copyrighted material without proper citing is stealing. Is there some material that isn’t protected from such use? May some users operate above the law? Can we define plagiarism as a sin in black and white terms?

To respond visit the *Preach the Word* Web site at www.wels.net/ptw and click on the “Preach the Word Discussion Board” link. Log in and, please, share your thoughts. We’re listening. Wrestling.

NEW! DISCUSSION BOARD FOR PREACHERS

Preach the Word has created a space on the internet for preachers to collaborate, discuss, question, and share. Log on to www.wels.net/ptw and click on the link to explore the new discussion board. The page includes a welcome message that provides more details about using this exciting new tool for your preaching, including how to log into the board as a new user.

Initially the discussion board contains ten posts so that you can read and respond to any or all of them. The ten posts correspond to the “Top Ten Issues of Plagiarism from the Pulpit” listed in this newsletter.

Does the world of communication operate by different rules today than in Luther’s era? Using another’s skillfully prepared sermons or resource material saves time and increases sermon quality – is that good stewardship or mixed up priorities? Should sermons have footnotes? Can we define plagiarism as a sin in black and white terms?

Share your thoughts today!



Preach the Word is published bimonthly by the WELS Commission on Worship
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