

Four Weddings or a Funeral?

By Paul Koelpin

I'll take the funeral . . . any day. I doubt that you could find many pastors who would answer differently. Funerals gather people seeking spiritual counsel at a time of great need; death is life's most sobering event. Genuine comfort for the soul is found only in the promises of Jesus Christ—in the sure hope of "I am the resurrection and the life." While funerals often tax the emotions of a preacher, it is still a humble privilege to speak God's peace at such a critical time. Preachers appreciate the sense of need and fulfillment that are part of a funeral setting.

And what about weddings? I once heard a pastor bristle: "When Lazarus died, the people wanted Jesus for spiritual help. At Cana, all they wanted him for was wine." We may quibble with his interpretation, but his point was clear: weddings can tax our pastoral patience. I agree. Once at the reception after a wedding I had just conducted, the father of the bride offered the following toast: "Live by what the good reverend said, 'We're all just friends.'" I blanched and whispered to my wife, "Did I say that?" (I assure you, that was not my theme.)

But, before we get on a wedding rant, consider that you may preach as many wedding sermons as funerals in your ministry. This will depend, of course, on your specific ministry setting, but (here's the confession) I've preached at far more weddings than funerals. As jaded as we may have become about the "pomp and circumstance" of weddings, don't underestimate the value and, yes, *necessity* of clear law/gospel preaching at weddings.

Weddings and funerals share similarities in setting. Families are gathered together—extended, entangled, and sometimes "broken." The preacher has the supreme privilege of offering direction, support, and counsel from the God who designed and fashioned the family unit. The pastor can concentrate his efforts on the connection between Christ and what life is really all about. People are present who desperately need to hear the Word. You have captive audiences for a clear presentation of God's will, God's grace, and God's guidance. Both funerals and weddings also have the concept of relationship at the core. What better occasions than these to speak

candidly about the "one thing needful"—the relationship of faith, established in Christ and nurtured in the fellowship of believers!

May I be bold to offer several other bits of counsel about wedding preaching? First (and this may seem even too trivial to mention), if you want greater focus on the Word, have the wedding party sit during the sermon. I'll admit that I've done this only once, but it did, I think, put them in a position to hear more and listen better. Second, do not avoid preaching repentance explicitly. Since weddings often assemble an odd mix of relatives and friends, pastors may be tempted to "tread lightly" or to offer more "practical" advice about life as husband and wife. Today more than ever, the preacher needs to expose worldly attitudes about marriage and family. He needs to encourage pious partnerships of repentance and faith. Third, preach broadly; preach to the congregation as a whole. Draw them in to relate God's Word to their lives. I heard murmuring about wedding sermons that complained: "It's always about the couple." I might have rejoined, "What do you expect?" But the point is well taken. See wedding preaching for the opportunity that it is—a necessary and fulfilling chance to focus (or refocus) families on spiritual priorities.

Gleanings

Issue 3 of this series contained excerpts from books on preaching that offered thought-provoking insights. Positive feedback encouraged reprising that idea. Below are gleanings from volumes I discovered in the Martin Luther College library. Again, some of the writers were Lutheran, some were not. I have also added a question or two to assist in the reflection (or discussion) process.

Preaching is not sharing

The content of the sermonic Word is not the preacher's own internal religious history but God's redemptive actions in objective history. . . . In short, the sermon which proclaims the Word always says more than the preacher understands.

For these reasons preaching is not sharing. To be sure, the word *sharing* is much used these days to designate what goes on in preaching, and in many cases the word is aptly used. But to the degree that the sermon is sharing, not preaching, the pew is impoverished. For sharing, like personal witness, operates within the poor and meager limits of the preacher's own religious appropriation. One can only share what one possesses, nothing more. But what preacher *possesses* the Word? The preacher is called to preach the Word, which is always much larger, deeper, richer than one's personal appropriation of it. One can no more share the Word than share one's faith; such control of the Word is not given us. Note again that unless one acknowledges the inherent power and dynamic of the Word, one easily slips into the illusion that one has—indeed *needs*—power over the Word. . . . The pulpit must not seek to share its faith, but call people to faith, which is something very different. (James Daane in *Preaching with Confidence*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980, pp. 47-48)

- Why does Daane react so strongly to personal witness accounts (or sharing) in the course of a sermon?
- Is there a place in a sermon for a human interest story that helps to illustrate an important spiritual truth?

Every sermon fights a battle

As a witness to Christ, the sermon is a struggle with demons. Every sermon must overcome Satan. Every sermon fights a battle. But this does not occur through the dramatic efforts of the preacher. It happens only through the proclamation of the One who has trodden upon the head of the devil. We usually do not recognize Satan anyway. We do not find him; Christ finds him. The devil departs from him. Satan waits nowhere so for his prey as where the congregation gathers itself. Nothing is more important to him than to hinder Christ's coming to the congregation. Therefore Christ must be preached. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Worldly Preaching*, New York: Thomas Nelson, 1975, p. 133)

- What does Bonhoeffer mean to emphasize by the assertion: "We usually do not recognize Satan anyway"?
- How does the battle metaphor affect or influence the construction of a sermon?

Preach the truth of the Spirit

[In the church] we are earnestly called upon to find the right path between dead orthodoxy and pious enthusiasm, for both are evil. Certainly it is bad when we on the one hand become cold and indifferent in our life with God. But believe me, a church or congregation can also suffer terrible, almost irreparable damage when there is an outbreak of abnormal enthusiasm in spiritual life. The power of darkness tempts us not only from the left. It tempts is also from the right. It misleads us with the shallow spirit of worldliness, but it can also ruin us with a feverish outbreak of religious excitement. Therefore, in these times there is nothing that we need more urgently for our personal and joint Christian life than the healthy, Scriptural testimony of the Spirit. . . . It must be God's good, pure, holy Spirit who dwells in us. It dare not be a stream of spirit into which every imaginable and questionable tributary empties its strange and muddy waters. (Adolf

Köberle "Between Dead Orthodoxy and Pious Enthusiasm" [Sermon on John 16:5-15] in *The Invitation of God*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1968, pp. 114-115)

- Why is pious enthusiasm (or abnormal religious excitement) such an insidious enemy of the church?
- What scriptural truths about the work of the Spirit are essential for promoting the spiritual health of a congregation?

Preach like Paul

New Testament days were much like ours. That too was a time of breakdown of old institutions. Faith in polytheism largely was dead (except in remote areas like Lystra). Poets openly jeered at the gods. The *Pax Romana* was disturbed by internal strife and "wars and rumors of wars." It was a period of moral degradation. To a society tired of the past and apprehensive about the future Paul carried the "good news," a message of hope. Upon the wreckage of the past it spread like a blanket, bringing a purpose to life that many had doubted ever could be found. The unequalled response of that generation of yearning souls is now a page of history. Today's children of Paul are challenged by a generation even more deeply plunged into despair; a generation probably more hungry than any previous to it; and . . . a generation that could respond with equal enthusiasm to a proclamation of the gospel rightly adapted to its needs. Paul is the example of a healthy flexibility that Christian preaching needs for this hour; a flexibility that enables the preacher *to adapt without compromise*; to alter form without changing substance. (Jay Adams in *Audience Adaptations in the Sermons and Speeches of Paul*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976, p. 68)

- Agree/Disagree: "The New Testament days were much like ours."
- Adams contends that Paul was an "example of healthy flexibility" in preaching. What kind of flexibility or adaptability do preachers need today? What factors might limit a preacher's flexibility?

The preacher need not be tentative

Despite [Fred] Craddock's discouragement, we can still preach propositionally or deductively. Inductive preaching should be in every preacher's kit bag, and respecting our hearers is a must. But the preacher need not be tentative. The pulpit need not be a democracy. Words still work when they are the divine words of Scripture. If we are indeed saying what the Lord says, then we can still say, "Thus saith the Lord." And the Lord's Word will still not return void.

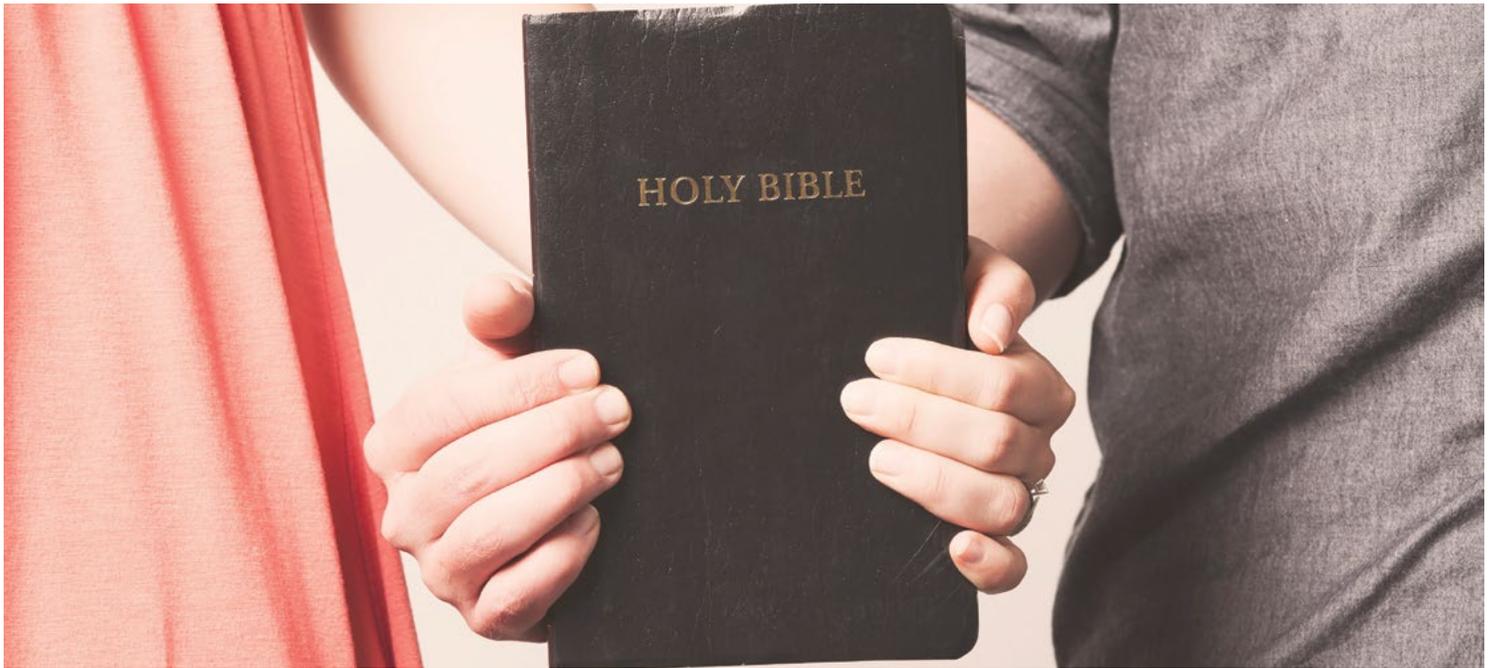
We preachers are not men without authority. The authority crisis of the pulpit is either imagined, not real, or it is of our own making by our looking for our authority in all the wrong places. When we step into the pulpit armed with the sword of the Spirit which God has given us, we, just like Jesus, come as one having authority: the authority of the Holy Scripture. (Carl Fickenscher II, "The Divine Preaching of Jesus: As One with the Authority of Scripture" in *The Pieper Lectures: Preaching through the Ages*, The Luther Academy, 2004, p. 31)

- Explain: "The pulpit need not be a democracy."
- What Bible references underscore the authority God gives to preachers?

God's Treasure . . . From a Clay Jar

During this wedding season, it seemed appropriate to offer a few thoughts from a wedding sermon—and from a book you might be inclined to avoid.

<p>Sermon Excerpt – Song of Songs 8:6,7 (Wedding Address) Theme: Picture Perfect Love</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p>What an idyllic setting! Gorgeous weather. Beautiful couple. A delightfully decorated church. Bridesmaids dressed in beautiful dresses. Groomsmen in their finest suits. And the celebration of love and a new, young family. This scene is “picture-perfect.” After all, this is what a wedding is all about, isn't it? It is sight and sound and ceremony and romance. At least that's the world's perspective.</p>	<p><i>Accentuate visual appeal and emotion to emphasize its ephemeral nature.</i></p>
<p>The verses of your wedding text invite us, rather, to understand love by means of word pictures—images of intense love, committed love, priceless, invaluable love. Song of Songs is an invitation to Picture Perfect Love. It is clear from the wider context of Scripture that perfect love is made real in Christ. We want to picture Christ's perfect love because his love is modeled in Christian marriage.</p>	<p><i>God's Word provides the timeless foundation of faith and love.</i></p>
<p>How did Solomon picture love?</p> <p>Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm;  the “seal” is personal—a sign of ownership and guarantee—this is a relationship of security</p> <p>for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave.  love is steadfast; “there is no going back”</p> <p>It burns like blazing fire, like the very flame of the LORD. (NIV 1984 note.)  love, kindled by the LORD, is intense</p> <p>Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away.  love is never threatened even by catastrophe</p> <p>If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned.  money can't put a price on perfect love</p>	<p><i>Explore the images suggested by the Song's word pictures. How do they connect to Christ?</i></p>
<p>Can you think of a love that is all of the above—a perfectly intense and enduring love? Yes, Jesus Christ loved even when he was hated and despised. He loved what was unlovely. What Solomon pictures in the imagery of poetic verse is made real in what Christ did among us on this very earth. God's jealous love was literally, as Solomon described, “as strong as death.” Jesus was sent from heaven to die because God so loved the world. What irony in this image! The bands of death could not and did not hold Christ. This side of heaven the grave always seems unyielding. But Christ broke the cruel clutch of death on Easter morning. Those who die in Christ—bound in the bond of his perfect love—will live forever.</p>	<p><i>The New Testament uses the marriage relationship to picture the perfect love of Christ. Christ is the Bridegroom, the church (believers) his Bride (Ephesians 5, Revelation 19 & 21).</i></p>



<p>In Christian marriage you model the intense, committed, unquenchable, priceless qualities of Christ’s love. In other words, marriage must bring to it more than purely human feelings—surface emotion. There must be depth and substance to the relationship that you have and display. This is possible because love has been “fleshed out” in Jesus Christ. Christ has supplied you with forgiveness. He has showed you the way to love.</p>	<p><i>By God’s design and intention, Christian marriage is an incubator of Christ-like love.</i></p>
<p>There will be times when romantic love is not the first emotion that you will feel for each other. Take away all of the finery, the trappings of this picture-perfect scene, all the support of family and friends, when life is just the two of you on your own—then the vulnerability becomes more obvious.</p> <p>Envy, spite, anger, and jealousy can flow so easily from the selfish heart. When my schedule is interrupted, when your advice comes like a command or an order, when I am giving more than receiving, there is a tendency to become frustrated or defensive. Love may not always be romantic and intense when life becomes troubled and tense. Jesus provided perfect love to cover our sin. How much better to confess sin to God and to each other . . . and to be absolved in Christ. Picture the perfect love made real in Christ as a model for your marriage.</p>	<p><i>Be explicit about the complications of our selfish natures.</i></p>
<p>Satan will attempt everything to drive a wedge into what is a good and God-pleasing relationship. He’ll do what he can to keep you distant. He’ll try to make you cold and indifferent toward the needs of each other. Remember the images of this wedding text. Christ has sealed you in his gospel—his almighty commitment to love you. Reach out to each other. Talk to each other. Read God’s Word with each other. Pray with each other. God’s gospel creates the bonds of love that will keep you close and committed with an intense, undying love—on this you have God’s promise. Amen.</p>	<p><i>Satan wants to ruin marriage. The gospel will not let this happen—it restores relationships.</i></p>

