

Preach the Word

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How are you?

By Tom Westra

"I'm good." (*Or do you want the truth?*) "I'm busy. Insanely busy. I have not seen the top of my desk in two weeks. (*Who am I kidding?*) In two years! My inbox runneth over. I haven't updated the church's webpage, followed up on last Sunday's visitors, started a text study or gotten hymns to the organist. Three members are in the hospital and another just went into hospice. There's a voice mail from a distressed sounding member who says they need to see me *today*. My wife wants to know if I heard the faucet dripping last night or if the raccoons in the attic were making too much noise, if I remembered that *both* our boys have games tonight, and if I am aware that we haven't been out on a date since our anniversary...three years ago. And I just got called for jury duty? Are you kidding me? How did my life—how did *our lives*—get like this?"

I have to say that when I was asked to write for *Preach the Word* my second thought was, "I don't have time. Even if I did, I'll just give already busy pastors suggestions for things they don't have time for. (*My first thought was I'm not qualified, but I'll save that for a later issue.*) I just told you enough about myself that you're not interested in my advice on time management. But might I suggest the following?

1) Leave a margin.

"Margin is the space between our load and our limits" (Dr. Richard Swenson, as quoted by Kevin DeYoung, *Crazy Busy*, Crossway: 2013, 27). "Planning for margin means planning for the unplannable. It means we understand what's possible for us finite creatures and then we schedule for less than that" (Kevin DeYoung, *ibid.*). We pack our lives so full that if no one else is admitted to the hospital, no one else calls for counseling, no one

else sends us an email that demands a response, then maybe, just maybe, we live another day. But when the inevitable interruptions come, everything goes south in a hurry. We get cranky. And our family takes the brunt of it.

One in four WELS pastors resigns before reaching retirement age. Is burn-out part of the problem?

2) Prioritize.

We all want to do more—more outreach calls, more visits, more continuing ed, more everything. But in our attempt to do more, have we let slip the one most important thing? "If I respond to every email, show up at every possible meeting, and have coffee with every person asking for 'just a few minutes,' I won't have the time to adequately prepare for my sermon" (DeYoung, 61).

"Being a shepherd isn't the same thing as being a sheep dog! Caring for people doesn't mean fussing around them...when a man should be in his study and on his knees. Collecting a congregation by assiduous visiting, but having no sure word of God when they come together in worship, is only to disappoint their expectations... and to fail in a task so solemn and exalted that no part of our duty can exceed its importance." (W.E. Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Construction*, as quoted by Thomas Franzmann, "Where are you going preacher?", essay presented at the California Pastoral Conference, January, 1977, p. 3, WLS Essay File).

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Not to suggest that we don't make calls. It's not either/or. But remember "there is nothing that so attaches people to the church as good preaching" (Ap, XXIV:50). Well-meaning people will ask you to do things that take time away from your sermon. Rarely will they ask you to spend more time in sermon prep.

Be sure to include your own devotional time in setting your priorities. You've probably used the illustration of the oxygen mask in the airplane. The flight attendant says to secure your own mask first and then the mask of the child traveling with you. The reason, of course, is that you can't very well help them if you have passed out. First, breathe deeply in your own devotions and Bible reading of God's grace, mercy, and peace. Then you will be able to help others.

Include your family. Recently I heard someone say, "God has provided many people to help care for the congregation. He has provided your wife with only one husband, your children with only one father."

There may be times when you step into the pulpit with a minimum of preparation. You can't very well put off taking your child to the ER until Sunday afternoon. But work to make those times the rare exception.

3) Where there is sin, confess.

Do I make myself busy because it makes me feel important? "Obviously (my) life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if (I am) so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day" (Tim Kreider, "The Busy Trap," *The New York Times*, June 30, 2012).

"But I'm busy because I want to help people," I object. "After all, didn't Jesus say, 'If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two'?"

True; but I need to check my heart. Am I doing all these things because I love other people or because I want other people to love me? Because I want to be a servant, or because I want to be recognized for my service and sacrifice? "The heart is deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9)" Or have I become the mythical Atlas, carrying the world on my shoulders because I don't trust God to care for it, at least not without my help?

Recently, in a faculty meeting, we were going through the spiritual growth Bible studies produced by our Synod a few years ago. We were asked to apply John 1:20 to our ministries: "(John) confessed freely, 'I am not the Christ.'" Have we forgotten?

In Mark's Gospel we read:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" (*More people to see, Jesus. More to do.*)

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." (1:35-38)

I share this not to say "Jesus, though incredibly busy, knew how to organize his time to get the important things done. Do the same." I share it to say "He did that for you." He did his Father's will perfectly, including scheduling his time, so that his perfect life could count for you. When God looks at you and me he doesn't see sinful pride or lack of trust. He sees the robe of Christ's righteousness covering us, all our failures washed

away by the innocent blood of his Son. Here, then, is my fourth encouragement:

4) Find your rest in Christ.

And in the peace of forgiveness, embrace the busyness. "As lab'ers in your vineyard, Lord, give us work to do, content to bear the burden of weary days for you." Everybody's busy. What a blessing to be busy with the work "that makes (his) kingdom come (CW 559:2). Leave margins. We want you to be doing this for a long time.

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"Be diligent in these matters (preaching and teaching); give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:15-16).



How can I improve my preaching?

“Be prepared.”

Last issue I shared some of the responses I received to a survey I sent out to sanctified brothers and sisters who have heard a lot of WELS preaching. My goal with the survey was to learn how I might improve my preaching and then share insights with you. The theme last time was “Be excited to tell me about the love of Jesus.” This month: “Be prepared.”

Several survey responses had to do with the amount of time a pastor puts into his sermon.

- “Pastors have too much to do, too little time. As a result they do not take enough time for sermon preparation.”
- “I’m not suggesting that pastors don’t prepare, (but) I know that some prepare more than others. I’ve read how much time (some) spend on their sermons. I know my pastor doesn’t spend that much.”
- “Prepare yourself. Ask, ‘do I have the knowledge, the energy, and the skills to deliver this message?’”



- “Prepare the message. Ask, ‘what is the point the listener should go away with, why is this point important, how do I get this point across to my congregation?’”

I’ll use that last comment as my outline for what follows.

What is the point?

To distill a text to one main proposition, one telic note around which the sermon moves, one unifying theme that glues the entire sermon together and makes it stick in the mind of the listener, that to me is still the hardest work of preaching. Without that telic note, the sermon is not really a sermon and likely will not bring joy to or edify Christ’s holy people. “Too much preaching fails because the preacher has not clarified his objectives and goals.” (Franzmann, *ibid*, 1)

When there is no discernible theme holding everything together “listeners quickly tire of chasing ideas and anecdotes across the theological landscape in an effort to discover where their pastor is going.” (Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, Baker, 2004, 44) Finally, in mental exhaustion or in confusion, they give up and begin counting the bricks on the chancel wall until rescued by the “Amen.”

Arriving at that one main proposition begins with our text study. In the very first issue of “Preach the Word”, Professor John Jeske wrote:

(Text analysis) is an indispensable part of sermon preparation. Rightly done, it will safeguard the preacher against treating his sermon text superficially. It will help to make sure he won’t pick out a random thought or two from the text (perhaps even a thought peripheral to the main thrust of the text), and build a sermon around that, thereby becoming guilty of “majoring in minors.” There may be areas in the sermon construction task where I can take shortcuts, but not here. I have no business standing in a pulpit announcing: “This is what the Lord says!” unless I am absolutely sure I know what the Lord actually said in the text I just read...” (PTW 1:1, 3).

There is the temptation for me, after years of preaching, to say, “I’ve studied this text before. I can skip that and get right to looking for clever illustrations”, but that results in preaching that well may be clever or entertaining, but does not feed Christ’s sheep and lambs. If I have not filled myself up with the text, I am not ready to preach it to anyone else.

Having immersed ourselves in the text, we may think we are ready for a theme. But there is a second question that must be asked:

For further study on text analysis, one may want to read the entire first issue of *Preach the Word*, chapters 2 and 3 of *Preach the Gospel* (Balge and Gerlach, NPH), or chapters 2 and 3 of *Christ-Centered Preaching* (op. cit.).

Why is this point important?

I have quoted Thomas Franzmann in his excellent essay, “Where are you going preacher?” several times. Permit me to do so once more:

“The Word of God is the tool—the means to our goal in all our sermons—not the goal itself. Here we can easily go astray.... We take a text and apply to it careful exegesis and painstaking hermeneutics. We wrestle with (it) until we pin it to the mat. Finally the stubborn truth gives itself up; we breathe a sigh of relief and imagine that we are now ready to preach God’s Word to His people. We think the goal is won. It is not! We have only understood the means to the goal. That understanding is a necessary preparation for valid Christian preaching, but it does not make the preaching.... The second step is study the people. He has to meet them where they hurt, where they work, where they play. The minister who knows the books on his shelves better than the human volumes in his parish will not for long preach with authority.” (Franzmann, 4, 5)

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If you have served in one place for very long, you know the people the Lord has entrusted to your care. You know their burdens, their joys, their heartaches, yes, even the sins with which they struggle. One Sunday I stood at the pulpit. I had just finished my silent pre-sermon prayer and was waiting for the end of the final hymn stanza. I looked out at the congregation and saw the young lady who was living with her boyfriend, the middle aged woman whose husband we had just buried a week before, the young husband and father who had just lost his job, the couple who had been in my office for heavy marriage counseling, the woman who just found out the cancer had come back—one face after another carrying some burden and there that morning to see if God had something to say to them. I felt overwhelmed. Tears actually welled up in my eyes. I felt a little bit like Moses in the wilderness, “Lord, did I give birth to all these people?” (Numbers 11:12)

Then the Lord reminds me. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. He will renew their strength so that they will soar on wings like eagles, run and not grow weary, walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:29, 31) He lifts them up. And the Word that he has put in my mouth is one of the primary ways that he does so. I must bring that Word to where they live.

I have answered the question, what is this text talking about? I have answered the question, so what? What relevance does this have for the lives of my listeners? Now I have *almost* arrived at a theme. One more question:

How do I get this point across?

How do I structure my thoughts so that all these great things I have learned from the text can now be understood by my hearers? If they were reading a book, and something was not clear to them, they could reread a sentence or a paragraph. If they were watching a video, they could rewind and watch it again. Not so with a sermon. They have to get it the first time. That requires careful organization of the preacher’s thoughts.

“Listeners more readily grasp ideas that have been formed and pulled together. It is easier to catch a baseball than a handful of sand even if the two weigh about the same amount.” (Chapell, 45)

“Preachers must not become Bible butchers, chopping out great chunks of scriptural meat and throwing it raw and bloody to their congregations as if they were feeding tigers. There is nothing wrong with the meat. There is nothing wrong with the butchering process. But the preachers must also learn to become cooks...” (Jay Adams, *Pulpit Speech*, quoted by Franzmann, 8).

By the time I have studied the text and considered how it relates to my listeners, I have a pretty good idea of my theme. My sermon will include exposition, practical examples, illustrations to clarify, stories, anecdotes, appropriation, application, and exhortation. But all of these flow from and to my theme. My sermon will follow a path that allows listeners to follow so that they’re not left wandering a theological landscape in mental exhaustion. Rather, they track right along with me, almost asking the questions before I answer them. A well-constructed outline serves as a logical path, a road map if you will. It helps my memorization and free delivery. It serves my listeners so they can say “I understand; I see where you’re going, pastor” rather than “Interesting story, but this sermon has lost me.”

As preachers of the Word, you know that all of this is hard work. That it takes time. You also know that not every sermon is going to be a literary masterpiece. Some weeks there just isn’t the time to do all the prep you wanted. On those occasions, study your text, stand up confidently on Sunday morning, and take that text and make a beeline to the cross. You know that Jesus will bless it. Any veteran preacher will tell you of times when they had to stand in the pulpit not nearly as prepared as they wanted to be, when they prayed “Jesus, you deserve better than this, your people deserve better than this, but please use this message to comfort and strengthen your people.” And then that preacher received more comments than usual: “Thanks, pastor. That sermon really helped.”

“Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2).

Pastor David Kolander has shared his worship plan for the year. Check this plan for the Sundays of Advent at <https://connect.wels.net/worship> under Planning for Worship.