

When the Honeymoon Is Over

By Tom Westra

Ever hear the beginning of a new pastorate described as the honeymoon? Remember what that was like...when you first arrived at your congregation?

The idea, as you know, is that both pastor and congregation at the start are somewhat clueless as to the other's faults. The congregation, which quite frankly had grown a little weary of the last guy, believes that they finally have called the "perfect pastor." (Of course, everyone in the congregation has a little different idea of what the perfect pastor is, but they all agree that the last guy was not it.) The new pastor, basking in the warm welcome he and his family have received, thinks, "This is the perfect place. These people are so amazing—so excited to be in worship each and every Sunday, so eager to work with me." Every new face is a new possibility. There's no ill history to overcome or to forgive. It's wonderful, exhilarating even.

Early idealism thinks: "This pastor is going to have such a charming, outgoing personality and is going to preach such amazing sermons. Visitors will flock to us. Our teens will *want* to come to church. Membership will increase, the budget will balance, and we will all live happily ever after!" But idealism gives way to the realization: "I guess God gave us just another clay jar." And it probably doesn't take long before the pastor, too, realizes that he has not been called to serve the church triumphant. In this place, too, the saints are sinners. All too quickly, the pastor and the congregation get to know one another, warts and all. And some of the warts are pretty ugly.

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As the years go by—just like in a marriage—pastor and congregation can take one another for granted. Ask yourself, "Do I have the same enthusiasm for shepherding this congregation today as I had in the days and weeks after my installation?" Or has the fire cooled?

Maybe we thought that by now the congregation would be more sanctified. We assumed that after years of preaching and teaching, there would be more evident fruits of faith. We expected our sowing of the Word to produce a crop that is a hundred fold, and it looks to be well shy of even 30.

Luther himself struggled with such disappointment. Professor Richard Gurgel, in his class, "Preaching Sanctification in Ways that Honor Gospel Predominance," shared the following:

In 1529, Luther's sermons carried stronger and stronger warnings. In one sermon he said:

The time will come when you who now have an abundance of preaching will long for a single sermon. But your impudence is so great ... that you have no appreciation for preaching.... I am unwilling to preach to you anymore.... I would rather preach to raving dogs because there's no use doing it with you, and it's offensive to me (*Luther the Preacher*, Fred Meuser, p. 30).

Sounds like the honeymoon was over between Luther and the good people of Wittenberg. In another sermon:

I am sorry that I ever freed you from the tyrants and papists. You ungrateful beasts, you are not worthy of the gospel. If you don't improve, I will stop preaching rather than cast pearls before swine" (Meuser, 29).

Have you heard a few sermons in the WELS like that? Maybe not containing the words "you ungrateful beasts," but sermons with that tone?

Has some frustration found its way into our preaching? Have our sermons, at times, taken on the air of a cowboy "driving beef to the butcher" rather than that of a shepherd gently leading his flock? (Gurgel, class notes, "Preaching Sanctification...")

I am not suggesting that we do not preach the law. If anything, I suspect that the law needs to be preached more specifically and more severely than we (at least I) typically do. Inspid preaching of the law is not the way to let the gospel predominate. It is the way to make the gospel appear bland and boring.

What I am suggesting is that we remember we are preaching to the bride of Christ. I am suggesting that we remember that Christ did not call us to scold her into submission but rather to win her heart with his words of his love and devotion.

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Can you imagine the best man leaning over to the groom as the bride makes her way down the aisle and saying of her, "I have never seen a woman so ugly"? Or whispering in his ear, "I don't know what you see in that wench!" I can't imagine that either.

Do you remember how John the Baptist explained why he was not jealous that the crowds were going over to Jesus? "The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine..." (John 3:29 NIV '84).

Did you catch it? The Church is the bride. For all her flaws, for all her sins, for all her stubborn rebellion, she is the bride. And Jesus is the bridegroom. He is the groom whose heart is filled with joy at the thought of his bride standing at his side for all eternity. He was willing to endure the cross to make it happen. And you and I, like John, are the best man.

I've read that in ancient times brides were sometimes stolen. The job of the best man was to watch over her, to keep her safe until the groom arrived. Imagine then what it must have been like when the groom arrived, looked into the eyes of his friend, whom he trusted with his bride, and said, "Thank you, friend." Imagine the joy of that friend.

That, my fellow preachers of the Word, is the awesome privilege that is ours. We speak to the bride of her promised husband, of the great things he has done for her, how he "loved (her) and gave himself up for her to make her holy ... to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:25f).

Again, I am not suggesting that we do not preach the law to convict the sinner, but what an awesome task—when the law has done its work—to remind the bride of Christ's love for her, especially (dare I mix the metaphors?) when we realize that we, too, are the bride. Our flaws, our sins, our dirty stains and ugly blemishes have been removed, and we too have been given fine linen, bright and clean, to wear (Revelation 19:8).

When you get discouraged in your task, when the fruits of faith in your congregation seem woefully lacking, when you feel the weight of your own guilt, turn again to that beautiful picture of the bride, of what Christ has declared us to be, of what we will be when he

returns and brings all things to fulfillment. Let that truth reignite your passion to serve his people.

Couples who have been married for a while know that the honeymoon feeling doesn't last forever. But that doesn't mean the love has grown cold. If anything it grows deeper and stronger with time. So too, that feeling when you first got into the ministry and everything seemed possible. It doesn't last. But love for the LORD and his word and his people: that—as the Spirit works in your heart through the gospel—that will grow deeper and stronger as the years go by.

May we say of the people we are privileged to serve:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart, for... all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:3-8 NIV '84)



How can I improve my preaching?

Every other year, you and I are asked to rate our preaching on a scale of 1-5. That always seems odd to me. What am I supposed to say? "I am a 5 (because my mom says I am a good preacher)." "I am a 1 (because my congregation—including my wife—seems to prefer it when my associate preaches)."

"With better introductions."

One of the most common criticisms I hear of preaching is, "I couldn't follow the sermon." Or "I didn't know where the preacher was going."

Preaching sermons that people can follow starts, I think, with *us* knowing where we are going—distilling the text to one main proposition, answering the "so what" question, and knowing how we are going to get this point across in the sermon.

Here's where the introduction is critical. It is not enough for an introduction just to grab the listener's attention, although it must do that, too. It must lead people to the main proposition. It puts a map

in their hands and says, "This is where we are going this morning. Follow me."

But it must do even more. It must also tell why the sermon matters. The congregation wants to know the "so what?" of the sermon. They want to know whether this message is relevant to their life. And they are probably—if we believe the researchers—only going to give you about 30 seconds to convince them that it is. Bryan Chapell writes, "The assumption that one's listeners automatically share one's interest in the sermon is a mark of an inexperienced preacher"

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(*Christ Centered Preaching*, p. 238). The introduction must capture the hearer's attention, and most often the best way to do that is to establish very early why the sermon matters to their life.

For further study, you may want to read Chapell's chapter on "Introductions, Conclusions, and Transitions" in *Christ-Centered Preaching*, as well as Joel Gerlach's and Richard Balge's chapter, "Introduction and Conclusion" in *Preach the Gospel*, p. 79f.

"Only the conclusion rivals the introduction for determining whether listeners will digest the sermon food offered them. No matter how good the meat inside, if these surrounding 'slices of bread' are moldy, we should not expect anyone to take a bite" (Chapell, p. 239).

Sermon introductions come in many forms and it is probably good to have variety from week to week.

A simple statement at the beginning can arrest attention. A sermon on Jesus stilling the storm in Matthew 14 might begin: *To spend a night in a small, open boat, on a large body of water, during a raging storm, is to find out how small and weak you really are.*

That introduction continued: *Of course, storms come in a variety of shapes and sizes, don't they?* And then there was a listing with a



very brief description of some of the “storms” that we face (marital struggles and even divorce, rebellious children, abusive parents; loss of health, of a job, of loved ones, etc.) The introduction concluded with: *It is in those adversities of life that we find out how small and weak we really are. And, as we learn in our text today, it is in those storms that Jesus meets us, and takes away our fear.*

Stories about the preacher, if not overdone, can help the congregation to realize, “the pastor does not live in an ivory tower, but in my world, so his sermon will relate to my life.”

I was cleaning out an old trunk in the basement the other day. (Ok, I'll be honest; my wife was cleaning out the trunk.) In it was a bunch of stuff from high school: a wrestling medal, an award I had won, a bunch of certificates. “Why do you keep this stuff?” she asked.

Why do we? Why do we hang on to the hardware, the certificates, the awards, sometimes for years? Is it because they symbolize our accomplishments, and maybe even the approval we sought from parents and teachers and coaches?

As adults we still crave that approval, don't we? From our boss and our peers, from our parents and our spouse? But our most important relationship, and the approval we seek the most, is from our Heavenly Father. (Possible introduction for a sermon on Mark 1:4-11, under the theme: “The Father's Approval”)

An introduction taken from current events or from a recent movie or book helps to assure the listener that the sermon touches their world.

Kevin Tunnel was 17 years old when he left a New Year's Eve party. His friends were concerned about him driving after he had quite a bit to drink. He said he would be fine. On his way home, his car slammed into another vehicle, driven by 18-year-old Susan Herzog. She was pronounced dead at the scene.

Kevin was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and given three years' probation. But the girl's parents also brought a civil suit. They settled for \$936. But here's the interesting part. It was to be paid \$1 at a time. He was to send a check—made out to the victim—for \$1 every Friday (the accident happened on a Friday) for 18 years (that's how old Susan Herzog was when she died).

At times, he failed to make the payment, even though it meant 30 days in jail. He said it hurt too much to write the check. He offered to pay more than \$936, if he could just pay it all at once. But her parents said, “No, we want him to remember.”

Can you blame them? He took their daughter. How do you handle that? But you have to wonder: when they received the last check, was it enough?

If it were your daughter killed, how many payments would you require? Better stated, how many do you require? For no one makes it through life without being hurt. Every one of us is the victim at one time or another. Sometimes the hurts are small. Sometimes the hurts are big (examples can

be given, abuse, marital unfaithfulness, etc.) When the hurts come, how do you handle that? (Sermon on Genesis 50:15-21, “How do you handle the hurts?” News source: People magazine, April, 1990)

Another possible introduction for that same sermon might be a retelling of that classic scene from “Forrest Gump” where Jenny, as an adult, throws rocks at the house where she was abused as a little girl. The scene ends with Forrest holding her while she sobs in the driveway, and the voice over has Gump saying, “I guess sometimes there just isn't enough rocks.” What do you do when there aren't enough rocks to take away the pain others have caused you?

The following introduction was used to point the congregation to the propositional statement that God is not fair. He is gracious. It creates interest by raising a tension in the listeners mind.

How much do you tip a waiter? That's a question that's been in the news lately. About a month ago, pro football player LeSean McCoy made headlines when he left a 20 cent tip on a \$60 bill. McCoy, who makes about \$10 million a year, said he was making a statement about the lousy service.

A week or so later, a young couple in Iowa also made headlines when they left a \$100 tip, again, on a \$60 bill. When asked why, they said they had received terrible service. But both of them had waited tables in their lifetime and... (From a sermon on Jonah 4:5-11)

“Early in the sermon... your listeners should realize that you are talking to them about themselves. You should raise a question, probe a problem, identify a need, open up a vital issue to which the passage speaks.” (Hadden Robinson, in *Biblical Preaching*, p. 171, as quoted by Chapell)

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Arouse their curiosity, stir their emotions, raise a problem, make it personal. This is the stuff of effective introductions—introductions that help your listener to know where you are going and why they should go along.

God bless your preaching.

Pastor David Kolander has shared his worship plan for the year. This plan provides overarching themes both for the Sundays in Lent and for midweek worship: connect.wels.net/worship under Planning for Worship.

Sundays: More than Conquerors (Victory in the Midst of Sadness and Death)

Wednesdays: Are You the Christ? (Mark 14:61, CWS 750)