

PREACH

the Word

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Preaching as *Habitus Practicus*

One of the main emphases in *theological prolegomena* is the insistence that systematic theology is first and foremost a *habitus practicus*. In Middler dogmatics classes we customarily spent an entire period and more discussing that point. On the cover of my notebook I had written a quote to remind me that there is more to dogmatics than just getting our doctrine right. It read, "It is easier to attain a beautiful system of theology than to become a beautiful saint."

That dogmatics is a *habitus practicus* means that theology is as much a way of life as it is a theological system. Our dogmatics notes say, "Theology . . . is an aptitude rooted in the new life of faith." Faith in turn is always a lived reality. Though your people are not likely to be familiar with the Latin term, they will have come to appreciate that our faith is a lived reality—especially when we are preaching.

That truth will be the single focus in this issue of *Preach the Word*.

Habitus Practicus—In the Pulpit

Preach The Gospel, the homiletics textbook, does not treat this subject as such. It makes only passing references to it. In chapter 9, The Delivery of the Sermon, the section on "Free Delivery" begins with this observation: "Pulpit communication must always be heart to heart communication. What the preacher says should come from the heart if it is to reach the heart" (p. 112). The same chapter encourages you to "be yourself" in the pulpit. "The Christian preacher is a person who willingly loses his life for Christ's sake in order that he might find it. . . . Then he's in a position to preach, not himself, but Christ crucified. . . . Thus the exhortation to be yourself actually calls on you to lose yourself in what you say about your Savior. . . . Let the meaning of your message grab you so that it can grab others" (p. 126).

Jeremiah once said, "When your words came, I ate them. They were my joy and my heart's delight." Ezekiel had a similar experience. The Lord told him, "Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it." Ezekiel responded, "So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth." The apostle John had a similar experience (Revelation 10:10).

The collect for the Word in *The Lutheran Hymnal* read, "May we so read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" the Holy Scriptures. With those words we

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The Sermon—Marching to a Different Drum

As an example of preaching as *habitus practicus*, we offer excerpts of a sermon by Steven Stern, Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries chaplain. The sermon was preached at St. John, Wauwatosa, Wis., on Pentecost 6 during the vacancy following my retirement.

Including a sermon as an example of *habitus practicus* may strike you as a contradiction. If *habitus practicus* is a lived reality, then a preacher has to be heard and seen for his sermon to qualify as a good example. In spite of that, we think Steve's sermon qualifies even as hard copy. We hope you think so too.

Gospel: Luke 9:51-62

Old Testament: 1 Kings 19:14-21.

Epistle: Galatians 5:1, 13-25

You've all seen a group of boys playing sandlot basketball. They play with intensity—yelling, shouting, and pushing as though it's the NBA finals. They go all out, giving it everything they have. While they play, a boom box is blaring loud and obnoxious music. They love the sport and the camaraderie. It's one of the things that bonds them together.

Away from the noise and the action, another boy sits by himself under a tree. He's reading a book on electronics and computers. It's obvious that he's not one of the gang. The other boys look at him and call him a geek or a nerd. Others look at him and say, "He's marching to a different drum." He's not into sports or male bonding. Instead of the drumbeat of sports competition and camaraderie, he hears the beat



*Since we live by **the Spirit**,
let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

of things that challenge the mind. He doesn't worry about what other people are thinking or doing. . . .

Jesus is telling us today that there is a time when being out of step, being odd, marching to a different drumbeat, is the right thing. The drumbeat we hear in the Gospel lesson is not the drumbeat of the world. And in the Epistle lesson, Paul speaks about two drumbeats that call for our attention—the drumbeat of the flesh and the drumbeat of the Spirit. What I want to point out today is that the drumbeat of the Spirit is much harder to hear than the drumbeat of the flesh. As we look at Jesus' words then, let us see that the drumbeat of the gospel is calling us to look at four things that will determine where and how we march. First of all we are told to look at our attitude of heart,

secondly at our expectations, thirdly at our attachments, and fourthly at our goal.

1. Last Friday as I sat at the lakefront waiting to view the fireworks, a group of young men were playing volleyball nearby. They were friends, and yet the names they called each other, the profanity that spewed from their mouths, the way they incited each other when a point was scored, made it clear that there was a lot of rage in these men—even though they were friends. I saw that rage, and I wondered what they'd do if someone crossed them who wasn't a friend. We see a lot of rage in our society—road rage, gang rage, people shooting each other because they don't like the way someone looked at them.

What's frightening about all this is how easily anger in others sparks anger in me. We see an example of that in the actions of James and John in response to something they experienced. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and he wanted to stop in a Samaritan village. But the people there told him to keep on going. We don't know what it was that made these people put Jesus off—racial prejudice, indifference, suspicion, hostility—but they didn't want him. And the response of James and John was one of anger. They didn't send these people a nasty letter. They didn't yell at them or make faces at them and call them names. They wanted to see a repeat of Sodom and Gomorrah. They wanted to call down fire from heaven and obliterate them. "Let's show them that you can't spurn Jesus and get away with it."

Jesus rebukes them for their attitude. He says he didn't come to match the world's anger with his own. Fits of rage are a work of the flesh, not a fruit of the Spirit. Jesus had to reiterate that he had come to seek and to save those who are lost. He was on his way to Jerusalem to give his life for the angry and the hostile. No one would be saved if he repaid anger with anger. The problem called for love, not rage.

Have you ever picked up the paper and felt your blood pressure rise as you read article after article about violence in our city, the crime, the out of control teenagers, the lack of respect for authority that you see on every hand? Do you sometimes find yourself filling with rage?

When you see young people flaunting authority, do you ever wish you could use the stick on them that your parents used on you? Do you find yourself saying, "Let's build more supermax prisons? Then let's throw away the key and let them rot in jail. Good riddance." Then I have to tell you that the pulse beat in your heads, the drumbeat that is egging us on, is rage. We are marching to the drumbeat of the flesh.

Rage is a loud drumbeat. I have to struggle with my rage and with the call that Jesus gives me to reach out to the lost. When I do, it helps me to have to go into jails and sit there with young men who have come to their time of remorse and have discovered that the way of anger and revenge is not the path to walk. Then I can encourage them to find hope and new life in forgiveness and in learning to love one another.

So I struggle within myself to distinguish between the rage that comes from my flesh and the Spirit of Christ who calls me to love others as he loves me. I say to all of you who are here—this attitude of the heart is crucial to what we are all about as the church. If we march to our rage, we will make the church a fortress where we will go to be safe with people who are like us, and where we can keep out the undesirables. Let them go where they want and do what they will. And then we will be doing exactly what the Pharisees did in Jesus' day.

I believe that mentality is prevalent in our world today. It's fear that drives that model. Jesus calls us to go out into our neighborhoods and

to show love for those who are angry, to overcome it with the power of the gospel.

(Part 2 expounds vv 57, 58 and directs us to examine the expectations we have in following Jesus.)

3. From expectations Jesus moves on to our attachments. Jesus asks a man to follow him, and the man says, "I will, but first I have to bury my father, and then I will come." Jesus says flatly, "Let the dead bury the dead."

This particular word of Jesus has really made me wrestle to understand him. He seems to be so callous here. He doesn't seem to show any compassion. It seems so out of character from the way he usually talks and deals with people. Recall Paul's words in the Epistle lesson, and then keep in mind that what Jesus is pointing to is the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit.

Think about what happens to us when we lose a loved one and go through the grieving process. We find ourselves not able to think straight, not caring if we eat or sleep or get our work done. We can't focus on anything. It's as though life has lost its meaning. . . .

What Jesus is telling us is that as we go through our grieving, we have to come to the point where we face reality. This person is dead. Now we have to detach ourselves. This person was a gift of God to me. This person brought much love and joy into my life, but is gone now, and I have to find new

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people and new places to direct my love and my energies. . . .

So we do take time to bury our dead. I left my parish responsibilities to bury my father. I left my institutional work to bury my mother. Jesus was patient with me. He allowed me to take all the time I needed to mourn my parents until I could look at the truth that I made them more than what they were. They were wonderful Christian people. They gave me more than I could ever repay. But they weren't God. They only pointed me to God. They never pretended to be God. I was the one who put them on that pedestal, and I was the one that had to take them down so I could give my love and attention to other people who needed me and to whom Jesus was calling me to minister.

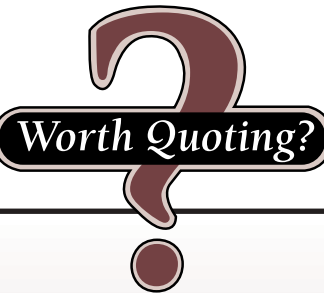
4. Attachments lead to Jesus' final word where he talks about our goal. As you think about what we have mentioned to this point—the anger, the expectations, the attachments—you begin to see a picture of a person who is marching along, and all these voices are calling to him to listen to them. It's distracting. It diverts our attention. We start looking this way and that way and wonder which way we should march. We zig, and we zag. We can end up going in circles.

If you want to go in a straight line, Jesus tells you that you have to set your hand to the plow and not look back. That strikes a chord in my heart because my dad was a farmer. I remember so well when he plowed the first furrow in the field. He looked to the end of the field, picked out a tree and sighted the front of the tractor on that tree. When he got to the other end, the

furrow was straight because he did not look back. He kept his eye on the goal. He didn't want any neighbors saying, "George doesn't know how to plow." But when I tried it as a rookie, I kept looking back to see if my furrow was straight, and naturally, I veered off course. And the neighbors would say, "Steve must have plowed that."

The focus that our Lord wants us to have is to keep looking ahead. Other things—rage, grieving, attachments—they all cause us to look inward and backward. They paralyze us and keep us from going on. Keeping our course as God's people is not easy. When voices call to us and say, "Give it up, this is too hard. Live in the past. The nest is empty; so spend your time going to rummage sales. Don't ever let yourself love another person again. Don't bother trying to do things for other people." When we start listening to these things, we are forgetting who we are. In the course of our lives, we will fill many roles. As we age and grow less active, we will have to give some of them up. But we will always be children of God with a heart that can love and reach out. . . .

Have you got your hand on the plow? Are you looking ahead to what God has in store for you? The voices of grief and anger and earthly glory are strong. The voice of the Spirit is quiet by comparison, but its power is greater. Bring peace and love to wherever you are, not hate. Remember those who have loved you well and then nourish the hearts of those you see who are hungry for love. Set your eyes on Jesus, and follow him always. Amen.



"Self preoccupation is a curse of preaching. As the purpose of preaching is to call people out of self-centeredness into self-surrender and self-giving, so also the call of the Lord invites us to let go of ourselves and to preach with the abandon of self-forgetfulness."

Lowell Erdahl,
Preaching for the People, p. 93

"If the preacher purposely or ignorantly depends on the verbal primarily or exclusively to bear the burden for carrying the Word of Life, he is his own worst enemy."

Paul Harms,
Power from the Pulpit, p. 37

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are asking God to enable us to experience what Jeremiah, Ezekiel and John did. When we inwardly digest the Word, it becomes an integral part of our being. And that has a way of becoming apparent to people when we are in the pulpit. Our words will reveal how God's Word has touched our hearts and lives. They will communicate what Paul meant when he said, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." Before I seek to apply a text to others, I must apply it to myself. The message and the messenger always need to be synchronous.