

PREACH

Vol. 4 No. 6 *the Word* July/August 2001

Application by Contrast

If you're like me, you are always looking for effective ways to apply a text. What I am discussing here certainly is not something new, but don't forget about application by contrast. Obviously, it doesn't work all the time. It does, however, present an option.

I thought about this again when working on the gospel reading for the Second Sunday after Pentecost a couple of weeks ago. The pericope was Luke's account of Jesus' healing the centurion's servant. This text provides several opportunities for application by contrast.

First, the centurion sent Jewish elders to plead his case before Jesus. All they could do was point to the man's good works and claim that he was worthy of Jesus' attention. The centurion himself admitted that he was worthy of nothing from Jesus. What a contrast compared to our situation. We don't have to send our friends to plead our case based on our worthiness. We have our Savior before the Father's throne. He pleads for the Father to hear our petitions based on his worthiness. Such an application allows the preacher both to direct his people to Christ and to preach the specific gospel in a unique way.

Second, Luke tells us that the centurion turned in faith to Jesus because he had heard about him. How he heard about Jesus and how



much he knew of him, we are not told. I think it is fair to assume, however, that no matter how much he knew, we know more. We have far greater evidence of Jesus' saving power and love. When the Holy Spirit points us to Jesus' words and holds up the centurion's faith to us for admiration and imitation, we have much more to place our confidence in. Here is another opportunity to proclaim the gospel in a different way.

But, there is a warning that should be sounded. Application by contrast can have the effect of ignoring what the text says. It might even be used purposely to get around a difficult thought. I am thinking for example of Jeremiah 11:18-20. These verses are the Old Testament reading for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost in Series B. There the prophet prays, "Let me see your vengeance upon [my enemies], for to you I have committed my cause." It is not the only place that we have an

imprecatory prayer of Jeremiah recorded. An application by contrast suggests itself. Whereas Jeremiah prayed for vengeance, our Savior prayed for forgiveness as his enemies crucified him. If he had not paid for sin and earned our forgiveness, Jeremiah's prayer would be the only one possible in the light of sin. Here is another place for the specific gospel proclaimed in an unusual, and therefore interesting, way. But such an application might be used by the preacher to avoid discussing imprecatory prayer. To ignore the question whether a Christian ever can or ought to pray the way Jeremiah did would be to ignore a major thought in the text.

Don't forget about application by contrast when suitable. Be careful, however, not to abuse it either.

James Westendorf

Some Concerns About Our Use of Law and Gospel

There are two unacceptable uses of the truth, one concerning the Law, the other concerning the Gospel, that I have noticed in any number of student sermons or in sermons I have listened to from the pulpit. They are widespread enough that it probably is worth the time and space to discuss them here. Just to give them names I will call the one “Law-to-Law”, the other “Gospel-beating.”

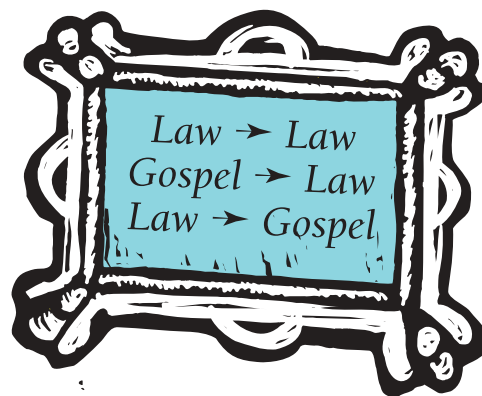
Even the slightest wrong impression that we might give, no matter how inadvertent, can twist God’s Word and misrepresent him to our people. It may also put a heavy load on some sensitive conscience.

In “Law-to-Law” the line of thought goes something like this. The preacher begins by condemning me for my poor showing in sanctification. That’s fine, because I certainly deserve to hear that condemnation from God’s law. The problem is that from there he goes directly to the third use of the law and invites me to start doing a better job for Jesus’ sake. No matter what the preacher’s good intentions might be, this law-to-law approach leaves me looking at myself and implies that I should start doing better (for Jesus’ sake, of course).

Condemning my shoddy Christian living is the first use of the law, and its purpose should never be to get me to do better. If I get that impression from what is said, something is wrong.

The first use of the law in preaching should have only one purpose, and that is to convict me of sin, to lead me to despair of myself, and to convince me that trying to sustain my relationship with God by the way I live as a Christian is a dead-end. There is only one place to go once I am shown that I am falling short, and that is the cross. The preacher should immediately lead me there. The fact that my Savior has been obedient in my place and has removed the guilt of my sin is my only hope. All preaching of the law in its first use must be followed by the proclamation of forgiveness in Christ and a call to repent and believe the Gospel.

The second abuse, that of “Gospel-beating” begins in a similar way as “Law-to-Law.” The preacher again condemns the unsatisfactory way that I live my life for Christ. But then, he tries to get me to remedy the situation by saying that Christ deserves better. He tells me of all the great things that Christ has done for me. He says that not one sin remains because the Savior’s blood has washed them all away. He assures me that God’s anger has been satisfied. He reminds me that Christ has showered his love upon me in so many ways and in such great amounts. I could go on and on, but you get the point. This is all wonderful Gospel news. The only problem is that he is telling me this, not primarily to assure me of God’s forgiveness in Christ, but to shame me into doing better for Christ. This is beating me over the head with the Gospel, and it is not gospel at all. Actually, the Gospel becomes a club, the heavy hand of the Law. Perhaps the preacher thinks that he has preached the Gospel, but he leaves me once again looking at myself in despair.



Sometimes, these misuses are very subtle, especially that of “Gospel-beating.” The preacher may give the impression described above simply by the way he has worded a sentence, or by the place that sentence or paragraph has in the sermon. Sometimes the impression is conveyed just by the tone of voice he uses.

The solution is not very difficult to prescribe. It does, however, take some effort to carry it out. Read and reread your written sermons. Try to put yourself in your listeners’ shoes to see what impression your statements are making. Do they leave your people looking at themselves, or at Christ? Ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish with the Law or Gospel in any particular section of the sermon. Does what you say actually carry out that purpose?

The stakes are high. Even the slightest wrong impression that we might give, no matter how inadvertent, can twist God’s Word and misrepresent him to our people. It may also put a heavy load on some sensitive conscience. May the Lord forgive us in Christ when we do, and may he give us the zeal and insight to see to it that we don’t.

J. Westendorf

“Can You Use This?”

“We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

You live on a side street in a large city, about a half block from a busy thoroughfare. On that busy road are the grocery store, the school, the bus stop, and many other important places. You often walk the half block to this road. At the intersection of your street and the road lives a man who is trying to keep a small patch of grass alive on the corner. He has placed a sign on the grass, saying, “Please, stay off the grass.” But nobody cares what the man wants. Neither do you. Whenever you arrive at the corner, you ignore the sign and use the well-worn path across the man’s grass just like everybody else.

One day you come to the road with your young son. As you round the corner, a small puppy runs out into the road. Before you know it, your son pulls away from your grasp and chases after the puppy. A large truck is approaching fast. The driver slams on his brakes, but he isn’t going to be able to stop in time. Your son and the puppy are doomed. Suddenly a man who has been standing at the curb steps out and grabs your son (yes, and the puppy). He yanks them out of the road just as the truck goes roaring by.

You are stunned! It all happened so fast! With heart pounding you run up to the man and take your son, unharmed, from his arms. You thank him profusely, and ask if there is any way you can show him your gratitude. He smiles at you kindly and says, “No.” There is nothing that he needs from you. As you turn to leave, he says, “Well, there is one thing. I live there on the corner. It would really please me if the next time you walk around the corner, you would stay off the grass.”



I’m not a betting man, but I would put up my last dollar that the next time you came to that corner you would stay off the grass. There really is no mystery to it: Thankfulness and loving gratitude produce obedience.

Thankfulness and loving gratitude produce obedience.

Paperless Preaching

In his book, *Visualizing The Sermon, A Guide to Preaching Without Notes*, the author, Hugh Litchfield, professor of Homiletics at North American Baptist Seminary, Sioux Falls, SD, claims that only seven percent of a sermon’s impact is content; the remaining 93% is delivery. Yet preachers tend to spend very little time with the 93%. Since many WELS preachers spend a lot of time in the pulpit with their eyes on their notes or manuscripts, the help this book gives should be of interest.

Litchfield’s advocates what he calls his “SPIA System.” It can be summed up in four words: Simplicity, Picturing, Imaging, and Absorption.

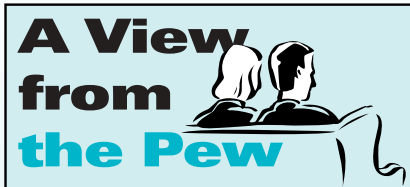
Simplify. Focus your sermon on a single idea. If you don’t know where you are going in a sermon, you won’t be able to remember it. Your congregation won’t remember it either.

Picture It. Wrestle with the scripture until you can see it in your mind. Then tell your congregation what you see.

Use Images. Get to the meaning behind words and ideas with metaphors and similes.

Absorb. Once the sermon is written, practice it. Preach it out loud at least five times. Litchfield says that he practices, not to memorize, but to absorb and internalize the sermon. Once he is done that sermon is no longer just on paper. It is a part of him. He describes it as “a caged lion in my heart that has to come out.” He assures preachers that if they will approach sermon preparation in this way, they “will remember the basic stuff. His advice if you do forget a part of what you had planned to say: “Put the material you omitted into one of your next 51 sermons that year.”

J. Westendorf



(This letter is a little broader than the usual focus of this column, but if listening to the sermon is improved, it will have served its purpose. – Ed.)

Dear Pastor,

I want to take this opportunity to thank you for all the news and information you put in our service folder every Sunday. We can't help but be reminded by the Postoffice Lutheran that there are so many different ways for us to practice Christian fellowship here at St. Peter's.

One thing does puzzle me, though. Last Sunday our guest preacher, Pastor Himmelfarb from the Lutheran High School, mentioned in his sermon that it really bugs you to see people reading the news in the service folder when they should be singing or listening to the sermon. And I've heard you say the same thing once at a council meeting.

I thought about that on the way home last Sunday. Not including the inserts concerning Bible camp and the district meeting of the Women's Missionary Society, our folder contained 11 pages and a front cover. Here are some of the good things that did not help me PREPARE to worship or to actually PARTICIPATE in the worship: need for more blood drive donors next Sunday; WELS night at the hockey game Friday; Senior Citizens trip to the state park next week Tuesday; cards for sale in the Mothers' Room after service; an ad for NPH books. And a lot more like this.

On the positive side: I like the information that enables me to follow the order of service. I like the box that contains information to help kids understand and participate in the liturgy; those notes help ME, too. I particularly like the fact that the words of the senior choir's anthem are printed, because I rarely understand the words without the printed text. I like the notes that tell us who needs our prayers.

But, pastor, those things take up only two of the 11 pages. In fairness, I should include the back cover, where the three lessons are printed, as one of the very valuable features.

My question is simple: Why not limit the service folder to the lessons and the two pages that help me worship? Wouldn't it serve your objectives better if all the other material was printed in a "news and notes" handout, to be given to the worshippers as they leave?

Keep up the good things in the present service folder. Let us digest the rest of the material after the service.

Your grateful parishioner

Please, no "news" before the Good News.

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the Word

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