

# PREACH

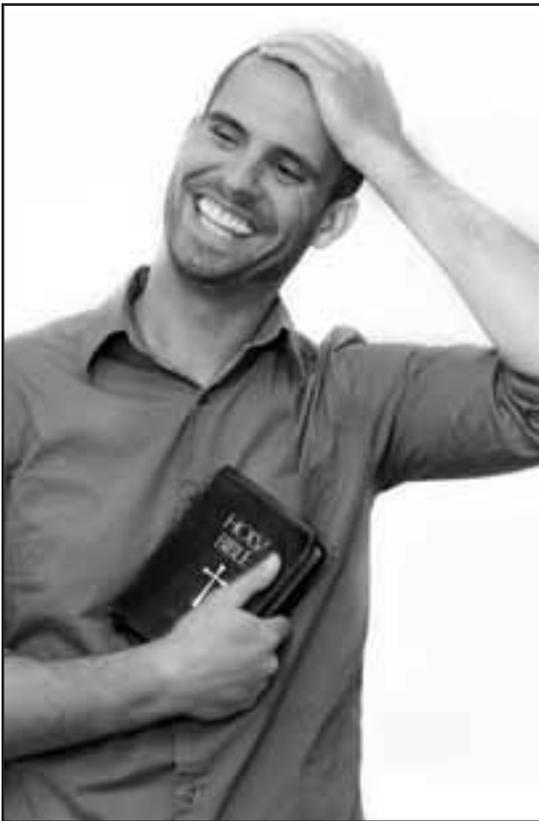
*the Word*

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## A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO CHURCH: THE USE OF HUMOR IN THE PULPIT

The Holy Spirit inspired wise Solomon to write, “There is a time for everything... a time to weep and a time to laugh.” When it comes to preaching God’s Word, there certainly are times when weeping is appropriate. I don’t recall many Good Fridays that I’ve walked out of the pulpit with dry eyes. Weeping is obviously not unusual during funeral sermons (although one of my homiletics professors impressed on us that the mark of a good funeral sermon isn’t how many tears it can produce, but how many tears it can dry). But is the sermon one of those times to which Ecclesiastes refers?



Based on some letters, comments, and feedback I’ve received recently, it would seem that one can expect different answers to that question among WELS preachers. Many feel that humor has a place in Christian sermons. Others would caution that humor can easily distract or even detract from the law and gospel that is (or ought to be) the heart and core of every Lutheran sermon.

How one views the use of humor in the pulpit is rather subjective. Lutheran preachers, regardless of their opinions, would certainly agree that this falls under the category of adiaphora. There are no doubt legitimate reasons for deliberately inserting humor into our sermons. On the other hand, there are definitely some caveats the preacher needs to keep in mind.

Haddon Robinson, preaching professor and author of several books on homiletics, says, “Since preaching deals with life, it has to have some element of humor in it.”<sup>1</sup> I don’t know that Lutheran preachers would agree with the “has to have” part of that statement. However, if we find humor to be part of our everyday communication and conversations (and most of us do), then it would stand to reason that humor would find its way into our sermons, at least from time to time.

It can be argued that in our time and place, the use of humor in communication, even in formal settings, has come to be expected, at least among younger pew sitters. This has not always been the case. I asked my father, who has been listening to WELS preachers for over eight decades, if he has noticed a difference in the use of humor in sermons over the years. He responded that sermons preached by WELS pastors have certainly evolved, and that Lutheran sermons prior to World War II were more oratorical than the conversational style that WELS preachers use today.

A couple of quotes from *Preach the Gospel*, the textbook that has served homiletics classes at our seminary for more than a quarter of a century, would seem to bear this out:

“Today, the way in which news is communicated on radio and television suggests that the good news ought to be preached in a style that is closer to conversation than to grand oratory.”<sup>2</sup>

*Continued on next page*

“With all that has been said above about instruction, inspiration and persuasion we have tried to remember that the sermon is to be preached to people. The ancient inspired words of the Bible must be made intelligible and practical for the people of our time and place.”<sup>3</sup>

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That was true in 1982. It would seem to be even more the case today. Thus it seems to be a mistake for preachers to go out of their way to avoid all use of humor in their sermons.

There are other reasons for justifying the use of humor in sermons besides the fact that humor is so commonly used in communication today. In fact, it could be argued that sometimes sermon humor can be in keeping with the scriptural text. The Bible is certainly no joke book. Yet there are definitely some lighter moments in Scripture, such as Peter jumping into the water immediately when he recognized the risen Jesus by the shore of Galilee, rather than rowing ashore with the other disciples (John 21:7). Or how about Paul’s sarcastic comment about wishing the circumcision-advocating Judaizers would “go the whole way and emasculate themselves” (Ephesians 5:12)? There was undeniable humor in Elijah’s suggestions to the prophets of Baal as to why their god wasn’t answering their prayers (1 Kings 18:27). My personal favorite example of humor in the Bible is the remark of Achish, king of Gath, when David pretended to be insane while hiding from Saul in his country: “Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here?” (1 Samuel 21:15).

None of these examples are rolling-on-the-floor howlers. Not by a long shot. Preachers would do well to note and imitate that in their sermons. A clever turn of a phrase or a light-hearted personal anecdote used as an illustration will be far more effective and appropriate than an actual joke or a “canned” bit of humor gleaned from the pages of that homiletical treasure-trove, *The Reader’s Digest*.

Be careful of the intoxicating effect of hearing your congregation members laugh out loud during a sermon. I remember vividly the first time that happened to me. Perhaps a year or less after graduating from the seminary, I used as an illustration an actual humorous conversation I had recently overheard in a department store. I realized it would likely make some of the listeners smile. But I was unprepared for the spontaneous laughter I heard echoing throughout the nave. And I liked it! Instant feedback! That’s something Lutheran preachers don’t get very often. In retrospect, I believe that humorous story was appropriate and served the purpose of illustrating a scriptural truth. But receiving gratifying feedback like that is a very poor reason for using humor. Beware of letting humor lead to the mindset of the actress who famously

remarked after winning an Academy Award, “You like me! You really like me!”

Here’s a rather subjective list of sermon humor do’s and don’ts. Many of these items would seem to be obvious. Yet based on some of the correspondence I’ve received, that may not be the case.

- **DO** be sensitive to your hearers when deciding whether or not to include humor in your sermon. Ask for specific feedback from members or your spouse when you do to help you use it in the future. The old adage applies: When in doubt, leave it out.
- **DON’T** use humor simply as a way to engage your listeners or to demonstrate to them that you’re just a regular guy. Instead, engage and connect with them by using a conversational tone.
- **DO** be self-deprecating in your humor, rather than making others the object of your wit. If there’s even a possibility that someone might be offended at a humorous remark, it should have no place in your sermon.
- **DON’T** fall into a predictable pattern with your humor. Have the members of your church come to expect to chuckle during the introduction of every sermon? Then you’re over-using humor.
- **DO** use original, personal experiences or current events for sources of humor, rather than old jokes or the internet. If you found a bit of humor in your e-mail inbox, then chances are, so have your hearers.
- **DON’T** make light of something that God takes seriously. There’s a saying that goes, “While the audience laughed, the angels cried.” One test of appropriate humor would be to ask, “Will the angels laugh, too?”

1 Quoted in “Why Serious Preachers Use Humor (Part 1),” [www.preachingtodaysermons.com](http://www.preachingtodaysermons.com)

2 Gerlach, Joel, and Balge, Richard, Preach the Gospel. NPH, 1982. p.103.

3 Op. cit., p.107.





## PEW VIEW

Former WELS preacher Freddy Krieger shares some more preaching insights with us from his current view from the pew.

Many WELS preachers have lapsed into a vast overuse of first person plural pronouns and the subjunctive in their sermons. Everything is expressed in terms of “we...”, “...us,” “our...,” and “let us...”

How about you? Whom do you address in your sermons?

Pronouns of the first person plural are effective when addressing the body before you as a collective whole. That has a place, especially considering the doctrine of the communion of saints. But so does direct address to the individual in the pew.

What an opportunity you have each Sunday...an occasion to personally counsel each individual sitting before you, to speak to each heart and soul individually!

Speak directly to the individual! He who has ears to hear will listen. That means lots of “you...” and “your...” Abandon the predominant “let us...”; don’t be afraid to issue the gospel imperative instead! Personal appropriation of the truths of God, whether preaching law or gospel, will surely result.

This isn’t so much a matter of doctrine, it’s a matter of good communication from the pulpit. I know the Holy Spirit is responsible for getting your message into the individual’s heart. But it would be great if you’d speak to that person with the tools the Holy Spirit uses, not just to the collective whole.

As a pew-sitter, I crave being individually addressed and challenged – challenged to accept the reality of the law in its first use, to trust the gospel of Christ, to apply the third use of the law.

Somehow, the strength of what God has to say to me is diminished when always communicated in the first person plural. I need and want to hear what God says to me. Don’t hesitate to speak to me directly!

Of course, you’ll want to throw in the occasional “you and I...” and “you and me, too” and “your and my...” You don’t want to come off as haughty or preaching down to God’s people.

Abandon the predominant “we...us...our.” Use “you” and “your,” and leave the “let us...” to the general prayer.

## WISDOM FROM WALTHER

*What poses the greatest threat to faithful Lutheran preachers? False doctrine abounds and grows, always tempting us with its false promises. Pastors also are exposed to temptations of the flesh, as opportunities to sin against the Sixth and Seventh commandments sometimes present themselves to us in unique and enticing ways. However, laziness in our ministries might well be the most alluring and dangerous temptation we face.*

*Walther addressed this sin and the subsequent damage it can inflict on our congregations in his 29th evening lecture. In these lazy, warm days of summer, may we remain ever vigilant to the temptation to become spiritually lukewarm. The answer, of course, is to re-arm ourselves with the Sword of the Spirit as we remain in the Word.*

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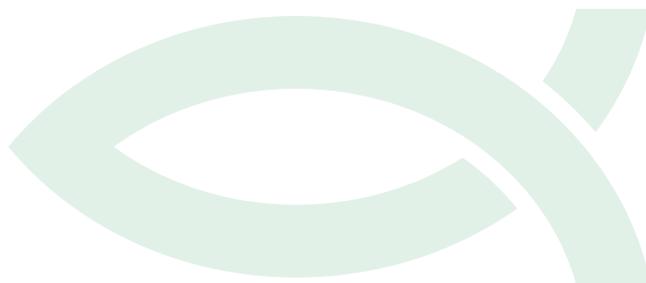
In these lazy, warm days of summer,  
may we remain ever vigilant to the temptation  
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“Without question, the words which, in Rev. 2:15,16, Christ addressed to the bishop of the church at Laodicea are of a memorable and awful import. He said, ‘I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot. I would thou wert cold or hot. So, then, because thou art neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.’ We see from these words that in the infallible judgment of God it is worse to be a lukewarm than a cold minister; it is worse to be a lazy and indifferent minister, who serves in his office because it is the profession in which he is making his living, than to be manifestly ungodly. For when a minister, though not teaching or living in a plainly unchristian manner, is so sleepy, so void of all earnestness and zeal for the kingdom of God and the salvation of souls, the inevitable effect is that the poor souls of his parishioners become infected by him, and finally the entire congregation is lulled into spiritual sleep.

“It is an undeniable fact, then, my friends, that a minister, in particular, a really zealous minister, *has* to take his *ministry* seriously, or he commits a grievous sin.” (pp. 307, 308; emphasis original)

(Walther, C.F.W. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO 1986).



## LOOKING AHEAD

So that we don't end up stepping all over ourselves and the subsequent Sundays' lessons, preachers do well to choose their sermon texts and think through their themes and focuses well ahead of time. If you are still in the process of planning your services and sermons for July and August, here are several things to note.

The Gospels in July begin with two familiar miracle accounts: Jesus calming the storm and raising the daughter of Jairus from the dead. Both of these miracles obviously identify Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. The remaining Gospels in July clearly demonstrate the two ways all people react to this truth: Either they reject it, as the citizens of Jesus' hometown did, or they believe it and eagerly share this good news, as the Twelve did when Jesus sent them out in groups of twos.



The Gospels in August present the preacher with some interesting opportunities as well as special challenges. We begin with Jesus inviting the disciples to spend some quiet time with him as they report to him about their recent mission trip, only to have that quiet time interrupted by a spiritually and physically hungry crowd. The preacher will need to take special care with the Gospels for remaining four Sundays of August. All come from John, and all deal with what happened in the next 24 hours or so.

First, John describes how Jesus miraculously fed the 5,000. The Gospels for the following three Sundays present Jesus' Bread of Life discourse as well as the crowd's reaction, as Jesus points the people from the bread that filled their stomachs temporarily to the Bread that could satisfy their souls forever. Since the Gospels for the final three Sundays of August all deal with this same subject, those who are preaching on these texts will need to think through very carefully the progression and different emphases of these lessons, or one could easily end up stealing his own thunder in the first sermon.

### "FINALLY, BROTHERS, GOOD-BY"

*"Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you."* St. Paul concluded his second letter to the Corinthians with those words. I do the same, as I conclude the final issue of *Preach the Word* Volume 12, and the final issue in which I serve as editor. It has been both a privilege and a challenge for me to serve in this capacity this past year. I pray that you found some encouragement in these past six issues. St. Paul urged his readers to aim for perfection. We've all fallen short of that goal, haven't we? I know that I have in these issues of *Preach the Word*. We all have in our sermons. But what an amazing God we have, who forgives our failures and desires our continued service!

I thank the following men who assisted me by providing content: David Clark, Kurt Ebert, Rich Gurgel, Freddy Krieger, Earle Treptow, and Rolfe Westendorf.

May God continue to bless you in your ministry, as together we proclaim his living Word to our dying world.



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2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398 414/256-3265

Pastor Brent Merten, editor; [mtvalley@vail.net](mailto:mtvalley@vail.net), 970/328-6718  
Bryan Gerlach, managing editor; [Bryan.Gerlach@sab.wels.net](mailto:Bryan.Gerlach@sab.wels.net)  
Back issues are at [www.wels.net/ptw](http://www.wels.net/ptw)