

PREACH

the Word

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THE SERMON AS OUTREACH: PREACHING THE GOSPEL

By Daniel Leyrer

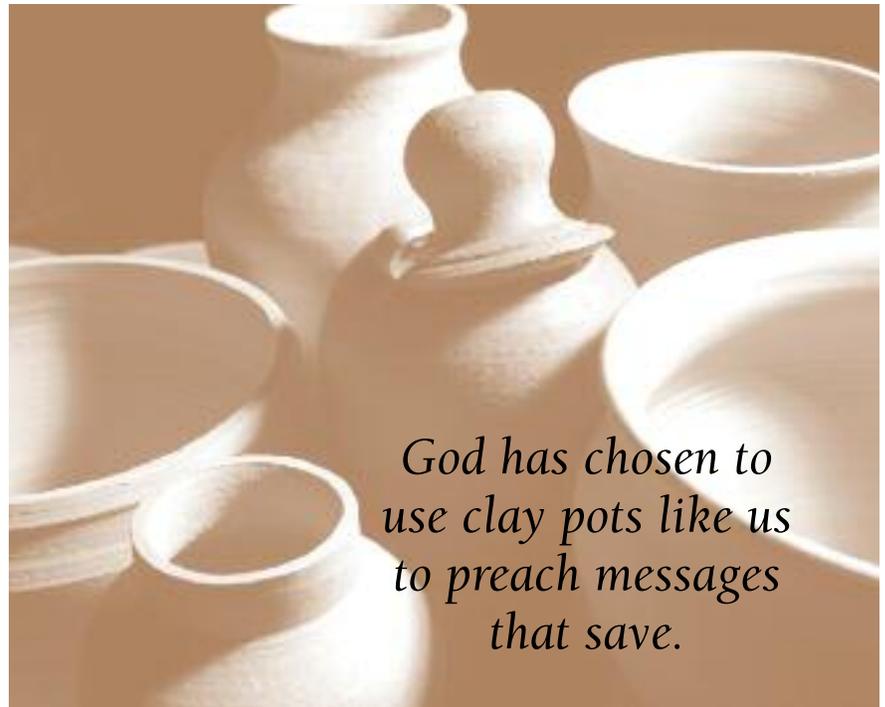
Step into my nightmare. My wife was too ill to accompany my teenage daughter to the mall. Dad would have to do it. What's the big deal, you may ask. Just "man up" and do it, right? Well, here's the big deal. This was the day that had been set aside for her to pick out and purchase a prom dress. Let's just say that she was not exactly brimming with confidence when she learned that Dad, not Mom, would be lending aid and counsel for what amounts to the Super Bowl of high school girl fashion. Nonetheless, I mustered the courage to walk into the dress store with her. I saw all the mothers and daughters. I heard the excited chatter. I saw the dizzying array of dresses. I noticed girls taking three and four dresses to the dressing room at one time. I saw no men. And I said to myself, "What in the world am I doing *here*?"

I hope you never have that feeling in the pulpit.

Preaching Has Purpose

A sense of duty drives us preachers into our pulpits and there's nothing wrong with that. To be a faithful pastor is to meet one's commitments to the congregation, and there is no bigger commitment to be met than to study, write, and preach a sermon in corporate worship. Could that every-Sunday sense of duty ever be a bad thing? Only if we let it obscure the purpose of our preaching. No preacher's heart will be in his work for long if he lets the "what" of his sermon blot out the "why" of his sermon. "Why am I here?" may be an appropriate question for a bewildered dad who doesn't really know what to do in the mall dress store, but woe to the preacher who is asking it as he mounts the pulpit.

Why do we preach? "God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). Rescue from the fires of hell. Deliverance from the devil's dungeon. That's why we preach. In a miracle of his grace that confounds human imagination, God has chosen to use clay pots



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like us to preach messages that save. You study and analyze the text, you outline and write the sermon, you practice it, you preach it – *all* of it is for one reason: to place the gospel on people's hearts. "Faith comes from hearing the message ... through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Preaching can be many things but it is nothing without Christ's gospel word. To be his mouthpiece with that gospel word is the primary purpose of the preacher. By the preaching of the gospel God gets people saved by bringing them to faith. It's why we preachers do what we do.

Purposefully Preaching to Prospects

Of all the aspects of preaching that impress upon the preacher that his sermon has an outreach flavor to it, the preaching of the gospel would have to be at the top of the list. What a privilege that the prospect you have befriended and visited has actually accepted

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your invitation to attend worship. Here's the greater privilege: you get to preach the gospel to him! Only by the gospel will God move him from the ranks of unbelief into the family of faith. So, to predominate with the gospel in our sermons is to be a pulpit missionary, calling out to our prospect hearers: "Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20)! The setting is different and the message may be crafted differently, but the goal of Sunday morning's sermon is really no different from Thursday night's evangelism call: to place the gospel on the prospect's heart. None of us writes "minister of the law" on the occupation line of our 1040, do we? We are ministers of the *gospel*. It's why we do what we do.

As If They've Never Heard It Before

How would I preach the gospel of Jesus Christ if I knew most of my listeners had never really heard it before? It's a question the street evangelist must ask himself. Perhaps parish pastors should too. Writing a sermon for first-time gospel-hearers keeps the preacher focused on all the qualities that make the Good News so wonderful.

Preach the gospel as if they've never heard it before and you will take care never to condition the gospel by demanding a certain response.

Preach the gospel as if they've never heard it before and you will preach it personally. Your preaching of the law has exposed specific sins. Preaching the gospel should forgive specific sins. The prospect certainly can hear forgiveness for *that one sin* that has been plaguing his conscience in an "us" statement. But wouldn't it be more personal if he heard "you" in that gospel. A preacher who writes his sermon with the prospect in mind will be taking his hearer personally to the cross to see *that one sin* on Jesus. His gospel-powered journey away from the cross and into his own life will be just as personal, as the preacher takes care not to overuse stock sanctification phrases like "godly life" and "showing our love." Instead the prospect will be moved by forgiveness into more specific areas like a respectful attitude toward elected officials and loving communication within a marriage.

Preach the gospel as if they've never heard it before and you will take care never to condition the gospel by demanding a certain response. It may be a bit much to say that a gospel preacher never says "must" or "should" or "ought to" in his sermon. Yet, we undermine the objective nature of justification if we give our hearers the impression that a certain response is necessary in order for justification to be true. Walther was fond of reminding his students not to draw a picture of a Christian in their sermons until they could actually recognize themselves in that picture. His point was that it is not theologically sound, or honest, for us to lead prospects to believe that Christians are always happy, always patient, never afraid. We do not look like that picture. Conditioning the gospel upon the hearer's personal victories is no comfort, and it is no gospel. Preaching Christ's victory for each one of us and in the place of each one of us – there is comfort.

As If I'll Never Get to Preach It Again

How would I preach the gospel if I knew this was going to be my last Sunday in the pulpit, my last chance to preach at all? This is not meant to be a morbid question, but a legitimate question for preachers to ask themselves as they write sermons with prospects in mind. Street evangelists assume they will only get one shot at placing the gospel on a listener's heart. Perhaps parish pastors could assume the same thing as a way to further focus their gospel preaching.

Preach the gospel as if you'll never be able to preach it again and you will never worry about being perceived as a "softie." Another bit of advice that Walther passed along to his students: God grant that someday the biggest knock on your preaching is that you preach too "sweetly," that is, too much gospel. To let the gospel predominate in your sermon is not to be a "softie." It is to understand that the ultimate aim of preaching the law is to preach the gospel, and all preaching of hell is ultimately to preach people into heaven. I doubt any of us will be lying on our deathbeds saying, "I wish I had preached less gospel."

Preach the gospel as if you'll never be able to preach it again and you will preach it joyfully. Joy attends the gospel. "I bring you good news of great joy," said that nighttime angelic preacher in Bethlehem. An Ethiopian statesman heard the gospel in word and sacrament and "went on his way rejoicing." A Philippian jailer experienced the gospel in word and sacrament along with his family and "was filled with joy." A forgiven prodigal and his forgiving father *joyfully* celebrated that forgiveness. If they threw a party over the lost being found, why shouldn't we joyfully proclaim the message that turns the lost into the found? The gospel is a divine gift, a divine promise, a divine kindness. It produces joy within us. We take care to speak it with a demeanor that matches that internal joy. I would imagine that demeanor is a little different for each one of us – different facial expressions, different volume levels. Nor should gospel joy be forced to equate with bubbly happiness. It does need to be said, however, that our hearers will have a hard time sensing any gospel joy on our part when our facial expressions never change and our volume never modulates. Paul considered the joy of the Corinthians an important by-product of his gospel preaching among them (2 Corinthians 1:24). Gospel preaching produces joy.

As I nervously paced the floor of the sacristy, my father addressed me, the Sem student, before I preached for the first time in my home congregation. Something Jesus said about prophets and home towns was running through my head when Dad said, "Dan, you've done your work. Now let God do his." We preachers work to prepare sermons that communicate Christ's sweet gospel with urgency and joy to member and prospect alike. It is good work. It is rewarding work. Rest assured, minister of the gospel, that the most glorious work is when God works through you. This he does when you preach the gospel.

PREACHING FROM THE SUPPLEMENTAL LECTIONARY

In four previous articles on preaching from the *Christian Worship: Supplement* lectionary we noted challenges in the current *Christian Worship* lectionary, and how the CWS lectionary tries to solve them.

This article and our final one will offer solutions to two possible preaching problems the CWS lectionary did not aim to fix.

The Five John 6 Gospels in Pentecost B

Homiletical problems? Let's not go overboard. God's Word is never a problem, *per se*. Your privilege of preaching any of it is grace upon grace.

Still, even for experienced new-testament ministers in our midst, some parts of the lectionary seem more challenging to preach than others. One of the toughest, with its potential for overlap, may be the CW/CWS Gospels in year B for Pentecost 10–14:

Pentecost 10: John 6:1-15

Pentecost 11: John 6:24-35

Pentecost 12: John 6:41-51

Pentecost 13: John 6:51-58

Pentecost 14: John 6:60-69

These readings last appeared August 9 to September 6, 2009. They will come up again, if our Lord tarries, in 2012 on the Sundays of August and the first Sunday of September, and the five Sundays of August in 2015.

The LSB Solution: Three John 6 Gospels in Pentecost B

The revised lectionary in *Lutheran Service Book*, the Missouri Synod's 2006 hymnal, does not appoint these five Gospels. Instead, LSB changes the Gospel for Pentecost 9 (Proper 11, in their system) from Mark 6:30-34 (the prelude to the feeding of five thousand – our Shepherd's compassion) to Mark 6:30-44 (both prelude and miracle). Then LSB appoints:

Proper 12: Mark 6:45-56

Proper 13: John 6:22-35

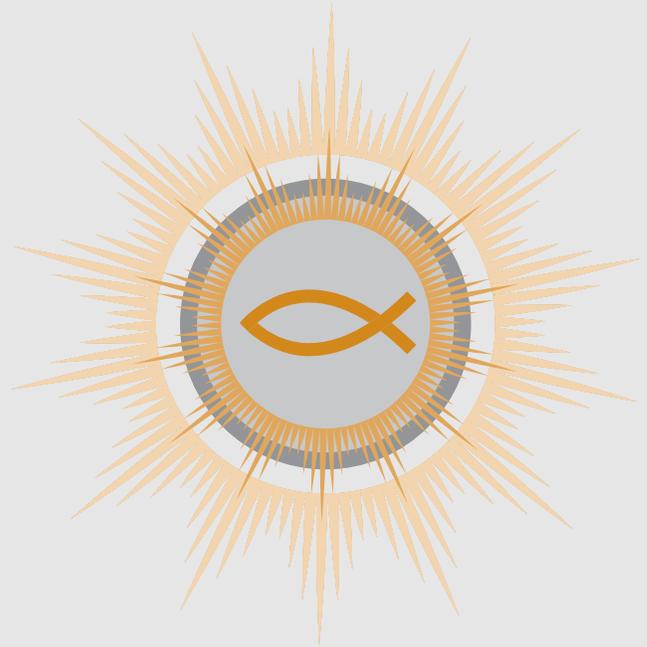
Proper 14: John 6:35-51

Proper 15: John 6:51-69

Proper 16: Mark 7:1-13

The series of five readings in Series B from John 6 was reduced to three. Why change? Five Sundays of consecutive readings from John 6 were a frequent complaint about the 1982 *Lutheran Worship* lectionary.¹

Have you wondered, too? Shied away?² If you are preaching on the Gospels for consecutive Sundays during this part of Year B, how do you say in a fresh way four Sundays in a row that Jesus is the Bread of Life?³



Holy Communion in John 6?

The first Roman Catholic formulators of the three-year lectionary probably felt differently than we may about many “Bread of Life” Sundays in a row, in view of the connections Catholics draw to the Lord's Supper from John 6.

For instance, *The Catholic Study Bible* has this note on John 6:35-59: “Up to verse 50, ‘bread of life’ is a figure for God's revelation in Jesus; in verses 51-58, the eucharistic theme comes to the fore.”⁴ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is more direct, calling John 6 “the first announcement of the Eucharist” (paragraph 1336).⁵

This is wrong – especially since Jesus says, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). Scripture nowhere else teaches that without receiving Holy Communion, we will be lost forever.

We could elaborate. In short, heed brother Luther, characteristically blunt: “The sixth chapter of John does not refer to the sacrament in a single syllable.”⁶ Explaining a bit about this in your sermon on 6:51-58, without belaboring it, is one way to keep one of your messages on John 6 unique as the series progresses.

More Help from Luther

A rich source to prevent unwarranted overlap and see key points of application for a series of sermons on John 6 may also be Luther's own sermons, available in volume 23 of the American Edition. (Borrow a copy from the WLS library or a brother in ministry, if you don't own it.)

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Could we copy Luther? Hardly. In days different from ours, Saturday after Saturday he preached through John 6:26-71 in *twenty-one sermons*⁷ to the people of Wittenberg (November 1530 to May 1531, during Bugenhagen's absence). His John 6 sermons take up 193 pages in our standard English edition.

Still, we can learn from Luther

- not to fear a series of similar texts,
- to keep repeating crucial law and gospel truths,
- and to conclude, "If Luther could deliver 21 sermons on Jesus, the Bread of Life, while preaching through the Sermon on the Mount each Wednesday, and often feeling sick during Christmastime, Lent, and Easter...with God's help I can manage *four* consecutive, practical sermons on Jesus as the Bread of Life."

We can also relearn from Luther to be simple and colorful. He says, for example, on 6:53: "If I were to say: 'Wittenberg beer quenches the thirst, but Annaberg beer does so too,' I would not be excluding any other beer from doing the same thing. But matters change if I say: 'If you do not drink Wittenberg beer, you will find no other beer to slake your thirst.' Thus Christ does not confine Himself here to an affirmative statement, but He excludes everything else as He says: 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.'"⁸

Two Last Tips

- 1) Maintain different maladies for each of your Bread of Life sermons. Note the people in the texts:
 - a) 6:24-35, people who want Jesus to feed them again, and who want another miraculous sign.
 - b) 6:41-51, people grumbling about who Jesus is.
 - c) 6:51-58, people arguing about whether Jesus can do what he claims.
 - d) 6:60-69, not those hostile Jews, but would-be disciples who walk away.
- 2) Consider the distinctive, vital doctrinal questions to which the texts direct us.
 - a) 6:24-35: Why can't good works save us? (Is faith the one good work that saves? No!) What do we need besides Christ?
 - b) 6:41-51: Why can't we come to Christ on our own? When does eternal life start?
 - c) 6:51-58: What is faith?
 - d) 6:60-69: Why are some saved, and not others?¹⁰

Daniel Witte

¹ "The Three Year Lectionary," <http://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=863>.

² Your author has; thus this article.

³ Is the easiest solution to go on vacation for part of August?

⁴ *The Catholic Study Bible*, 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. p. 1415.

⁵ www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/euch1.html

⁶ More fully, Luther writes: "The sixth chapter of John must be entirely excluded from this discussion, since it does not refer to the sacrament in a single syllable. Not only because the sacrament was not yet instituted, but even more because the passage itself and the sentences following plainly show, as I have already stated, that Christ is speaking of faith in the incarnate Word. For he says: 'My words are spirit and life' [John 6:63], which shows that he was speaking of a spiritual eating, by which he who eats has life; whereas the Jews understood him to mean a bodily eating and therefore disputed with him. But no eating can give life except that which is by faith, for that is truly a spiritual and living eating.... The sacramental eating does not give life, since many eat unworthily. Hence Christ cannot be understood in this passage to be speaking about the sacrament.... If in this passage Christ were enjoining a sacramental eating, when he says: 'Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you' [John 6:53], he would be condemning all infants, all the sick, and all those absent or in any way hindered from the sacramental eating, however strong their faith might be" (*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520, AE 36:19).

⁷ Footnote 138, AE 23:197.

⁸ AE 23:137.

⁹ Note the lexa carefully on *ελκουση* (often translated "draws") in verse 44. The basic idea is "pull" or "drag." Jesus' point here seems to be pulling people against their natural will, rather than attracting people based on natural knowledge of God, or – false doctrine – supposed natural interest in being saved.

¹⁰ For this suggestion, I owe Ernst Wendland, editor. *Sermon Studies on the Gospels: ILCW Series B*. NPH, 1987. p. 303.



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

Bryan Gerlach, managing editor; Bryan.Gerlach@sab.wels.net