

Preach the Word

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Preaching with the Millennials

By Mark Birkholz

I am not part of the millennial generation. All four of my children are. I don't presently serve as a parish pastor. So I more frequently "exegize" a community or congregation as opposed to the sacred text. Likely I wouldn't be described as even an average homiletician these days. Nearly a decade away from a parish has negative implications for sermon preparation and delivery. Yet I was asked to contribute to this series with its focus on Millennials. Perhaps that's owing to numerous interviews with Millennials during analysis of roughly 50 congregations from 2008-12. There's also the nine year back story of working closely with mission-based pastors and congregational leaders, many of whom are Millennials.

Let Grace Predominate

So how does the pastor reach out to a generation whose cardinal virtue is rebelling against the status quo and cardinal sin is inactivity? Perhaps we could rephrase the question: How do we share a world-changing message with a generation that wants to change the world? The gospel, too, is a cause, but a far greater one compared to any earthly cause the world has to offer. The practice of the Colorado Conference's northern pastor circuit during the early 90's was to size up one another's preaching at the monthly study club. The routine closely paralleled that of seminary homiletics classes. Some brothers opted to show a video of the previous Sunday's sermon. Others chose to preach "live" to our audience of ten or eleven. A reactor led discussion that might include compliments, encouragement, questions, and even gentle criticism. My turn in the rotation came around. The text was the very familiar section of Ephesians 2. I opted for more emphasis of verse 10 than what might normally be expected. In the ensuing discussion brothers wondered why a man in a mission setting

would pass on an opportunity to expound grace repeatedly and extensively. Appropriate criticism. Lesson learned and still fresh in my memory.

Dr. Siegert Becker perhaps had this type of questionable homiletical practice in mind:

Preaching which does not keep Christ and his atoning work in the center of the message is not the prophetic work that God has given his church.... Only when Christ is held before the audience as Savior and Redeemer are the hearers being invited to the wedding dinner of the Lamb. Only then are they offered the fine linen, bright and clean, that will serve as their wedding garment and qualify them to remain at that celebration.¹

This issue's focus is "the sermon after the sermon," a topic very much on the minds of millennial believers both in terms of congregational corporate practice as well as the individual Christian's apparent sanctification between Sundays. In the account above, from roughly twenty-five years ago, I was preaching to "boomers", Gen Xer's, and young Millennials. I did them a disservice by choosing to emphasize human reaction at the expense of divinely initiated saving activity. You, brothers, are now addressing those same generations at later stages of their respective pilgrimages on earth. A reminder is appropriate, no matter the season or the Sunday. Accord grace its rightful position as predominant.

Articles in this series are also available at blogs.wels.net/worship and we welcome your comments or questions.

Guidance Sought

The aforementioned interviews from 2008-12 were standard approach in analyzing congregations before feeling competent to offer counsel regarding ministry plans and initiatives. In making the transition from parish pastor to mission counselor, I'd begun to read multiple sources in the areas of outreach, congregational polity, and cultural trends. But the Rainers' *The Millennials* and J.E. White's *The Rise of the Nones* weren't yet part of a book list that I'd read and could feel comfortable in recommending to others. Now they are. My research and experience in counseling congregations isn't nearly as extensive as that of those well-known authors. But what they found to be true about younger generations' attitudes, both inside and outside the visible Christian church, I also heard from WELS members in the same general age grouping. Some were entirely new to Lutheranism. Others had allowed Lutheran membership to lapse for years before returning to a better spiritual path. Scribbled notes from those interviews often featured themes such as:

- little use for rigid structure, polity, and some of our traditional activities
- very turned off by the internal bickering that's gone on here
- wondered aloud if she was out of line in voting for a Democratic candidate
- would like to find more discussion and guidance in Christian living apart from Sunday
- left church due to what he perceived as hypocrisy and still struggles with that
- grateful for the way she was welcomed and asked to help even before joining
- here because a friend or co-worker's behavior made a huge impression

Set aside any initial concerns you may have that I found commonality with two Baptist authors. Our discussion isn't concerned with matters of conversion, sacraments, or eschatology. The issue is living as knowledgeable recipients of grace. You'll also want to ignore bullet points that portray "typical" millennial disdain for strict polity, bickering, judgmental attitudes, and hypocrisy; views that are readily apparent in the age 16 to 36 WELS demographic. Focus instead on the positive aspects of some bullet points above. Many in this much-discussed generation are grateful for the positive influence of a spiritual mentor. They desire to be used by the Lord in bringing spirituality to the forefront in their relationships outside the church. They are looking for guidance and encouragement toward that end. Millennial believers might well agree with Bonhoeffer in describing as "cheap" any grace that

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justifies sin along with the sinner; grace that preaches forgiveness without requiring repentance; and grace that comes with no expectations of discipleship or cross.

Here's the heartfelt confession of a Boomer who was too young to attend Woodstock but not young enough to avoid being exposed to much of what the Woodstock mindset "freed us from and freed us for." I'm often embarrassed to recall that in my 20's and early 30's (where most Millennials find themselves now) I wasn't seeking the guidance in appropriate decision-making that these younger brothers and sisters are seeking. For much of that stage of life I was a professional missionary, but not nearly as in tune with portraying a visual sermon as are many of the believers in my children's generation. When I do have opportunity to preach I count it as a privilege to serve as the Lord's mouthpiece in providing some answers to the questions that Millennials typically pose. If part of your typical Sunday audience includes those born between 1980 and 2000, think of them as perhaps pleading as did the Psalmist, "Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul. Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground" (Psalm 143:8b, 10).

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Authenticity Cherished

You're reading the May/June edition of *Preach the Word*. The February flare up between Pope Francis and Donald Trump is a distant memory. In a sense their brief but very public spat was

inane and had no lasting ramifications. The pope depicted Trump's plan to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border as un-Christian. Specifically he stated, "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the Gospel." Trump retaliated by suggesting that during the pope's recent trip to Mexico, government officials there had been able to influence his thinking for political purposes. "They obviously got to the pope," Trump said. "He doesn't know me. The pope only heard one side of the story. I am a Christian and am proud of it."

I'd heard of the minor quarrel and gave it little thought... until the daily stop at our neighborhood Starbucks where the baristas (mostly Millennials) not only know my name but also my profession. Business for this store was unusually slow. Longer than normal conversation ensued. Two employees were curious as to what I thought of the "religious" argument between the pope and Trump. My initial answer, hastily composed because I was caught off guard but didn't want to come across as culturally aloof, isn't worth summarizing here. What I do recall is that both baristas (one an actively professing Christian, the other an occasional Catholic) were curious as to how either Francis or Trump could claim to be Christian. The one proposing construction of a wall seemed to be hypocritical in also claiming that he wanted to generate jobs for people who needed them. The one opposing wall construction came across as hypocritical after an aerial photo of Vatican City's protective wall had gone viral. In their own way two "20 something" coffee shop employees were looking for two "Christian celebrities" to back up their verbal profession of faith with appropriately moral action. They weren't asking WWJD with regard to building or not building a wall to deal with a perceived political problem. They were simply asking for two men who claimed moral high ground to provide evidence of a much-cherished characteristic in the millennial world-view: authenticity.



J.E. White is on record, repeatedly, as opposing the over-analysis and over-generalization of a demographic group whose oldest members are in their mid-30's. I lean in that same direction. Millennials are often characterized as not much interested in the answers offered by others, preferring instead self-discovery or even no discovery at all. In the spiritual realm, that indifferent attitude appears when a portion of Millennials,

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along with members of other age groups, are perfectly content to be known as "The Nones." Estimates vary. This percentage of the U.S. population who claim no interest in affiliating with any religious group has been pegged as low as 10% and as high as 18%. I'm not indifferent about the spiritual indifference of others. I am suggesting that a large portion of the population, including roughly 50-60 million Millennials, has not found what they consider to be an authentic spiritual voice or at the very least would be willing to listen in hopes of finding one. I'm reminded of the people who'd gathered around Jesus in the Capernaum synagogue. One would have to suppose that many in the region had given up after four centuries without the presence of an authoritative prophetic voice. First century Nones? Others apparently held out hope. And that hope was rewarded. "The people were amazed at his teachings, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law" (Mark 1:22).

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I can't say with certainty what lies at the heart of the supposed collective yearning among Millennials for authenticity. Perhaps 21st century life is more complex and full of deception than what my generation experienced. It's certainly fair to say that the pace of change in daily life has accelerated. There has been a backing away from the generally accepted Judeo/Christian ethic which supposedly peaked in the mid 1950's. Expectations of the two genders are more varied. The list goes on. The only certainties I can offer are these: Isaiah 55:11 rings as true as ever; you who read this publication are privileged to provide an authentic voice; Millennials in almost every congregation I work with are grateful for authenticity amid a world they perceive to be otherwise hypocritical.

Preaching and Walking Together

Somewhere back in the early 90's I latched on to a variation of the "dialogical preaching" approach. Book? Magazine article? Workshop? I don't recall the source. I don't even recall the author's basic premise or guidelines. I know only that those who attended our midweek Bible study liked the dialogical principle of "doing life together by doing sermons together." Initially that took the form of our first ten minutes on Wednesdays being dedicated to reflection on last Sunday's sermon, followed by ten minutes of offering questions about or reactions to the text for the upcoming Sunday. This arrangement eventually morphed into an entirely separate Monday gathering of one hour in which a handful of trusted members with diverse backgrounds offered the same reflection on the past sermon and the perceived key truths that needed to be expounded clearly in next Sunday's text. As with many good initiatives and congregational practices, our Monday study sessions eventually fell apart due to changing schedules. But for a season, I thought, we achieved the desired outcome: better focus and application in "our" sermons.

If and when the Lord leads in the direction of returning to a parish setting, I might very well seek willing lay partners—especially members who are Millennials, possibly even prospects—who would participate in similar roundtable discussions. The goal would again be piecing together sermons that serve all of us well. The possibilities within the framework of such an intergenerational dialogue seem fascinating. It's my opportunity to ascertain if generalizations about millennial preferences have any legitimacy. It's their opportunity to ascertain if a guy from the original "Me Generation" actually has the capacity to listen as opposed to just talking.

Suppose the focus for an upcoming Sunday was the parable of the lost son from Luke 15. I'm part of a generation that was encouraged to look inward when seeking truth—because the world didn't need to be fixed; I did. In our sermon "research group" I interacted with sharp minds who'd discerned hypocrisy in that approach to life and preferred to look outward, emphasizing relationship and restored community. Together we discovered that we'd all overlooked the primary need to look upward. There we find authentic answers to how existence came about in the first place. There we discover that our Creator's expectations are both right and fair. The father in the parable had no obligation, culturally, to take back a defiant son. But he welcomed his son with open arms. The Father in the real world was obligated to justly condemn but exercised unfathomable mercy. Amid so much cultural discussion of expectations, fairness, justice, and hypocrisy, we're all forced to set aside our divergent opinions on societal "fixes" and simply ponder the Father's grace-filled pardon.

In the lost son we are to see each of us. It was good for me as a pastor simply to listen to participants describe life that excluded God from discussion of life's meaning, life lived apart from the support system of the visible church because it reeked of bickering and hypocrisy. In turn, it was good for millennial participants to hear the truth about the supposed hypocrites whose names made up the church roster. No names mentioned, unless one of the group's Boomers or Lucky Few openly recounted how far one can wander from his Father in making choices during a Vietnam fire fight or as a troubled couple mulling the outcome of an unexpected pregnancy. Tim Keller is right in sizing up most of those perceived church hypocrites as "the people whose lives have been harder and who are lower on the character scale; who are more likely to recognize their need for God. We should expect that many Christians' lives would not compare well to those of the nonreligious (just as the health of people in the hospital is comparatively worse than people visiting museums)."²

Finally, in the older son we see Jesus vividly portraying the mindset of the audience with whom this parable was originally shared. With good reason the term "Pharisee" is interchangeable with "hypocrite." Jesus made that initial connection in expounding Isaiah's words concerning "people who honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me" (Mark 7:6). Though we don't hear from the parable's older brother words similar to those of the younger brother, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you," we'd be wise collectively and individually to ponder where pharisaical judgment has crept into our own lives.

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In summary, if we're willing to point out the flaws of an entire generation's world view, we should also be willing listeners when they espouse noble goals such as authenticity, truth, and mercy. Those aren't simply cultural values; they find their origin and clearest fulfillment in the texts preachers expound weekly. Through listening to Millennials while together grappling with Divine Truth, we'll better serve not just one age group but the entire flock of lambs and sheep that the Spirit gathers before us weekly.



¹ Siegbert Becker, *Revelation: The Distant Triumph Song*. NPH, 1985, p. 287.

² Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. Dutton, 2008, p. 54.