

Preach the Word

Vol. 19, No. 6

July/August 2016



Don Patterson is a 1992 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. He is one of three pastors at Holy Word Lutheran Church, Austin, Texas. He has helped 18 vicars hone their preaching skills. He is passionate about preaching to the heart and not just the head. While this article is part of a series on preaching to Millennials, the insights apply to all preaching.

Storytelling in Our Preaching

By Don Patterson

We all want to be better preachers, so we all want to be better story tellers. Storytelling, whether in personal testimonies or in parabolic tales, is a powerful way to garner the involuntary attention of your people. We've all drifted when listening to a sermon and then felt ourselves drawn back when we could tell the preacher was beginning a story. We just can't help but listen. Stories are memorable too.

The Jesus Metanarrative

God is the greatest story teller of all. His book is one giant metanarrative about Christ and his salvation. It's communicated through hundreds of smaller stories all chained together from beginning to end. It's the greatest story ever told. His metanarrative isn't even rivaled by Tolkien's trilogy. As evangelical preachers we will want to keep telling God's metanarrative in some fashion every time we preach. If we aren't constantly telling the story of Christ and his salvation as the source from which all true spirituality flows, we are just orators, entertainers, philosophers, gurus, or pundits.

One giant metanarrative about Christ and his salvation.

It's easier to forget than we think. It still seems like yesterday, but it happened several years ago. I had worked with a vicar all week

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

on his sermon, and when the day came for him to preach, I sat in the pew embarrassed. Jesus Christ was nowhere in the entire sermon. It was an Old Testament story with a powerful example of certain aspects of faith. But even after our two Lutheran heads spent all week on it, neither of us had linked it to Christ in any way. Wow! I was flabbergasted. Christ has to be included in every evangelical sermon. By "included" I don't mean forced in. I mean that Christ and his work are the metanarrative from which every sermon text is taken. We simply must find a way to include that for our people.

Want an example? Let's say you are preaching from 1 Samuel 17 about David's battle with Goliath. What a great story! Insights about living the bold Christian life are oozing out of it. But Jesus isn't mentioned. However, Jesus is David's strength. His grace made David bold. Here's one way to include God's metanarrative when preaching this story:

David had Goliath, the giant, fuming threats and sarcasm at him from his gargantuan frame. But David knew that the God who had already saved him from the bear and the lion would save him from Goliath too. And if God didn't save him from death in that moment, David still knew he was saved for heaven, because he lived in God's grace. He even wrote

psalms about it. So, David stepped into Goliath's shadow. His confidence in God dwarfed his fears. We can step into the shadow of our giant problems too with confidence in Christ that dwarfs our fears. We can all think of times that God has delivered us from our "lions" and "bears". His past deliverance assures us of his saving presence today. Also, we live in God's grace just as David did. We live in the shadow of the cross, and that shadow is bigger than the shadow of the giant problems threatening us.

Do you see? The Jesus found in the whole Bible (metanarrative) made David brave by his grace, and that same Jesus by his grace makes us brave too. When we preach the great stories of faith, Jesus is always behind the hero and us. Don't forget to include the Jesus metanarrative.

Your Own Stories

But also, don't be afraid to tell your own stories to drive the main points in God's Word home. Stories make God's Word sticky in the heart. To make sure that our storytelling really does make God's Word sticky, we must have more than a logical connection between the story and the Word of God. We need to get at the pathos of the text with our story. Here is an example:

Stories make God's Word sticky in the heart.

Imagine preaching from Acts 20:24. Paul says to the Ephesian elders, "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace." In your introduction, you tell the story of how William B. Travis drew the line in the sand at the Alamo in 1836 and asked his men if they were willing to defend the Alamo to their deaths. If they were willing, he urged them to step across the line. And then you say, "Folks, in this passage from Acts 20:24, Paul is saying that he crossed over the line."

We need to get at the pathos of the text with our story.

If that is how you told the story and connected it to Paul, do you see how it is only a logical connection? The logic is: Travis crossed the line and so did Paul. But the pathos of the story is still down there in the sand. It never made it to the heart. Here is the same illustration told in order to touch the heart.

It has been said that if you don't have anything you would die for, then you don't really have anything to live for either. This became clear in February of 1836 when William B.

Travis, a 26-year-old lawyer, had a ragtag group of 189 volunteers holed up in the Alamo while Santa Anna, the Mexican general, surrounded the little mission with 2000 men and demanded surrender. Travis knew his own men might surrender at any moment, so he showed them how to really live by taking out his sword and drawing a line in the sand. He stepped over it and passionately told his men why he was willing to fight to the death for Texas independence. "We are going to die," he began. "Our business is not to make a fruitless effort to save our lives, but to choose the manner of our death. If we surrender, they will execute us. If we rush out and fight them, we will be slaughtered. But if we stay in this fort and defend it, we will take many Mexicans with us and help free our country. Who will stay and defend this mission with me?" One by one the men found something in their hearts large enough to live for by being willing to die for it too. 187 of them stepped over the line. Jim Bowie had to be carried over on a cot. And only one man, a French mercenary who was a hired gun, refused. He snuck out in the dark of that night and lived to tell the story. All 188 men that stayed died, but they died having something to live for too. They took down 600 Mexican men with them. More importantly, their valor made many more Texans join the fight for independence which they won two months later.

(Pause) Did you hear what Travis said? He said, "We are all going to die. Our business is not to make a fruitless effort to save our lives, but to choose the manner of our death." Doesn't that sound like something Paul would say? Paul knew his life on earth was short. He embraced death as an inevitable end. But by faith he was choosing to die by serving Christ with his whole being instead of sporadically and partially serving himself. Jesus is a whole lot larger than Texas independence, isn't he? He is not just something to live for. He is the big someone to live for, because he lived and died



for us! When we keep that in mind every day, we will have a reason to live boldly, and we will have a reason to die proudly at any moment. Jesus once said, "Whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Right here folks, we have found the reason to live! Here's the line. Will you step over it!

Maybe you can see how the pathos of the illustration is in harmony with the pathos of the text. They meet in the heart and not just the head of the listener. That's when the sermon point becomes much stickier.

Let's talk about a preacher using personal stories in sermons. We ought to bring some personal stories into our preaching for several reasons. First of all, they make you real to people. They know you are real, but they aren't so sure that you are comfortable being real. If they believe you are real, then your message is real to them too. Secondly, stories show that you live in

Personal stories ... make you real to people.

the same house you build for them. It makes your preaching easier to believe if you believe it with all your heart and show it in your life. We are talking about removing obstacles here. Thirdly, stories make it almost completely impossible for them to tune you out. That way you can really drive a point home with a personal story. I once heard a saying about preachers and stories that I cannot get out of my head. It goes like this, "A sermon prepared in the head reaches a head. A sermon prepared in the heart reaches a heart. And a sermon prepared in the life reaches a life." If in your own life God has taught you the truth found in your sermon text, then find a way to tell how he did that. It's powerful. Stories about what God taught someone you know or what he taught you through those people are helpful too. Here is an example:

This story is an introduction to 1 John 2:15-17.

Recently I attended a visitation at a funeral home, and I arrived a little early, even before the family got there. The lady that worked the front door was a 75-year-old woman who had moved to town to live in a small, modestly furnished house behind her son's home. She had been a woman of means before. She and her deceased husband had accumulated a lot of possessions from their travels. They once owned a large spacious home in Abilene, Texas on a hill overlooking their acreage. She said to me, "You know, it hit me one day that I didn't really get anything from all this stuff all around me. Without my husband there it meant very little to me. So, I just sold it all. Everything! I sold the land, the house, and everything in it. Then I told my son, "I just want a little house with one of everything.'"



Then she got real serious and looked at me and said, "Do you know what the funny thing is? As each possession sold, I felt a little bit closer to God. It turns out that all those things were between him and me and I never knew it." As she said those words it hit me, "That's why the stuff in my garage and everywhere else in my house is getting me down. It is getting between God and me." But right now it hits me again. That woman was learning what John is telling us here, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:15-17). I want the same cleansing that woman received. Don't you want it too?

The story this woman told me drove home the didactic truth John is teaching in his letter. Her story made it stickier. It seems like the letters in the New Testament lend themselves more readily to stories that will stick them to our hearts.

Story Telling Mistakes

Of course there are ways you could really blow telling a personal story. If you have a tendency to tell stories where you are the hero and not just a deeply flawed but deeply loved child of God, then you are misusing personal story telling. Your people may have a hard time tuning you out when you tell your story, but they won't tune in to your point from God's Word if they are thinking you are an insecure braggart.

Another mistake is telling a story that really doesn't illustrate the truth of the text but you tell it anyway. So, like Cinderella's stepsisters who crammed their foot into the glass slipper, you

force the story into your sermon. I'd save yourself and your hearers and not tell it.

They won't tune in to your point from God's Word if they are thinking you are an insecure braggart.

Here's another mistake: sometimes the climax of the story is not really about the point the preacher wants to make with the story. Some other part of the story illustrates the point but not the climax. So, the climax and the sermon point are in dissonance with one another. That spells disaster for the audience's retention of your point. Even with a properly told story the people are going to remember the story and its climax more than they will ever remember the point you make with it. So, you want the climax and the point to be inseparable. That way you are attaching emotions to your point in order to make it stick in the heart. You want to be able to say the sermon point right after the climax. The listener will be pleased that you helped them remember the point and its great value. They might even thank you later for going to the trouble.

You want the climax and the point to be inseparable.



Perhaps the worst way to blow telling a personal story is to tell it about someone you know without permission to do so, or to tell a story that is embarrassing for the person in the story as well as those listening to it. Telling stories is like playing with electricity. It is very powerful, and when handled poorly, it does terrible damage.

We also, need to know when *not* to tell a story. I would suggest that when preaching narratives and parables we should be very reluctant to tell many, if any, stories. God's stories are far better, far more important, and far more powerful than any of our own stories.

You can tell too many stories in a sermon. It's best to have only one or two. One really big story at the beginning that is revisited a couple times as you expound the text does wonders to make the message stick. Using the example from the sermon introduction above that introduced 1 John 2:14-15, you could repeat a key thought multiple times in your sermon: "If it's getting between you and God, then take it out to the garage sale and declutter your soul!" That way you will tap into the opening story with that one phrase and reawaken their emotional connection to the text.

There is so much more to say about storytelling in our preaching, but we've run out of room and time. Just remember, Jesus told common stories to common folks in order to save and grow their souls. You and I can tell stories too, as long as we do it well. God bless your preaching and your storytelling.

"A sermon prepared in the head reaches a head. A sermon prepared in the heart reaches a heart. And a sermon prepared in the life reaches a life."

