

Preach the Word

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Treasures Old and New *Lectionary Teaching*

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This article is also available at wels.net/blogs/worship-blogs. We welcome your comments or questions.

A common lament among pastors is the phrase, "I wish that I could get more members in Bible Information Class." Shepherds know first-hand the value of "refresher" classes to keep sharp on language skills, doctrinal insights, and practical approaches. Similar "refresher" classes are of equal value to members looking to do some catechetical review, explore situation-oriented discussions, and finding renewed confidence for faith-based conversations. Not unexpectedly, a common lament among members who take a refresher Bible Information Class (BIC) is the phrase, "I wish we could get more members in Bible Information Class."

As we continue our look to the lectionary for opportunities to bring out "treasures old and new," it is important to consider the role of teaching while preaching. Arguments could be made that biblical preaching and teaching share most of the same characteristics. Preaching and teaching then are neither mutually exclusive nor are they merely different without a distinction.

Allow some distinctions: Biblical preaching is summarizing a section of Scripture to its Christocentric message and proclaiming that message to the eternal healing and spiritual edifying of God's people.¹ Biblical teaching is the broadening of knowledge to the growth in understanding of God's people. The first is meeting our temporal and eternal spiritual needs through God's Word. The second is carrying out God's desire for the continued spiritual growth of his people through God's Word. As new creations in



Christ, we want to grow in our knowledge and understanding of God's Word. From this perspective, simply put, preaching meets needs, teaching addresses wants (both God's wants for us and our Spirit-wrought wants for ourselves).

Preaching meets needs, teaching addresses wants.... Wants tend to be preferred.

Sadly, like many needs and wants, wants tend to be preferred. Years ago, this author preached on Ephesians 5:21-33 under the simple theme: *Submit*. The PowerPoint presentation slides began with the picture of an elephant rising on the screen as the sentence was stated, "There's an elephant in the room, and his name is Submit." This began what amounted to a Bible Information Class lesson on the roles for men and women. It included diagrams, bullet points, and illustrative pictures. While time was spent connecting the biblical roles for men and women to the beautiful picture of Christ and his bride, the Church, the "presentation" was far more teaching than preaching. Afterward, several similar comments were made. "I liked what you did with the sermon today. I learned a lot. You should preach like that all the time." Perhaps you have experienced similar glowing comments after a sermon that was more of a taught Bible class than a preached sermon.

Just where such comments come from is difficult to identify definitively. Certainly, they are expressions of appreciation from hearts and minds eager to learn. But does didactic preaching as a primary, even exclusive, approach to the sermon offer more of what eager hearts and minds *want*, rather than what they *need*? Good preaching confronts and challenges the hardened or apathetic heart. Good preaching seeks to correct the wayward or

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inattentive heart. Good preaching offers comfort to the aching heart, forgiveness to the guilt-laden heart, and confidence to the questioning heart. All are intimate connections established between God's Word and God's people through preaching. They cannot be taught. Teaching is clinical, objective, general in nature. Good preaching is so personal that it leaves the sinner nowhere to run from the law, and it leaves the repentant nothing to doubt in the gospel.

Even so, teaching has its place in the pulpit. In contrast to the compliments mentioned above, this author has also received constructive feedback on sermons regarding the need for further explanation. "Pastor, you mention words like justification and atonement in your sermons a lot. But I don't always know what those words mean." For us who work with such "big words" on a regular basis, we don't realize that our average listener doesn't possess the same working vocabulary. For example, a preacher might quote the Apostle Paul from his letter to the Romans, *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* (5:11) These familiar and reassuring words mean everything to us, but many listeners may never get past the word *justified*. Consider teaching while preaching:

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus Christ went to war and died as a *real* substitute, paying for the sins of the world, for your sins, for mine, so that because of his shed blood every person on earth can be justified—declared not guilty, forgiven—in other words, you have peace.

Taking a moment to teach, explain, and broaden the individual listener's understanding, deepens the reassurance of peace through Jesus.

Another role that teaching has in the pulpit is to broaden understanding of biblical settings, cultural differences, and regional observations. An example is the parable of the Weeds and the Wheat from Matthew chapter 13. It is difficult to fully grasp the impact of the weeds sown by the enemy. Consider teaching while preaching:

The weeds most likely sown were a plant called darnel, a Eurasian ryegrass. It looks like wheat until it is more matured and the developing fruit finally identifies it as a noxious weed. What a vivid picture of how we often see little difference between the children of light and the children of darkness. There is both warning here and assurance from Jesus: *By their fruit you will recognize them.* (Matthew 7:20)

Taking the time to broaden the listener's understanding of a regional weed deepens the connection between God's Word and God's people.

The danger comes when teaching is included to the exclusion of good preaching.

For many, this inclusion of teaching while preaching may seem obvious, second-nature even.

It is not just a necessity. Teaching while preaching is a true blessing from God to his people. The danger comes when teaching is included to the exclusion of good preaching. Gone would be the personal connections between God's Word and God's people. Sermons would spend more time addressing what people want to learn, and less time addressing what people need to hear. Preaching must be primary and teaching must be secondary. Yet teaching resonates with listeners, instructs the uneducated, and explains mysteries. Teaching broadens knowledge. It has its place.

Early church fathers were known to include liturgical and catechetical instruction in their preaching. One genre of preaching was known as "mystagogical catchesis." These were delivered by bishops during the week after Easter to instruct the newly baptized about the meaning of the sacramental rites in which they had just participated.² These were not Sunday morning, general gathering sermons, however. They were sermons designed specifically for a targeted gathering of catechumens. And yet, they offer further examples of how teaching can be both integral to and prominent in preaching.

Consider once again the lament mentioned above, "I wish that more members were in Bible Information Class." Is there opportunity to bring BIC elements into our preaching? Look no further than the lectionary to find opportunity for such treasures old and new. A BIC is a systematic approach to broaden understanding of biblical doctrine. But stepping into the pulpit on Maundy Thursday to teach a BIC lesson on Holy Communion as a Means of Grace would not only miss the point of the service, it would also fail to connect the loving example of Jesus to the people who need to hear it. There needs to be a blend of teaching and preaching to broaden the mind and touch the heart.

Working within the liturgical context of the lectionary, there are myriad opportunities to review biblical doctrine within the framework of the Church Year and the appointed lessons. Not only does this provide the "refresher" and broadened doctrinal understanding that many need, it also deepens the connection between God's Word and his people.

Working within the liturgical context of the lectionary, there are myriad opportunities to review biblical doctrine.

Consider the Gospel Reading appointed for Epiphany 5B, Mark 1:29-39 (February 4, 2018). Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and then is inundated by crowds of people. He slips off by himself in the early hours of the morning leaving the disciples to search for him. When they find him, they exclaim, "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus' response is an opportunity to talk about how God responds to prayer, especially when it seems as if he's wandered off and not listening.

There is no trick, no secret, to reach the live person of Jesus Christ. We are assured *In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence*. So, bring your every request to the Lord. Be generic. Be specific. Be bold and confident, knowing that *the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer* (1 Peter 3:12). But don't get discouraged if you don't get your way in your time and according to your plan. Rather ask...and then...wait for it...wait for *him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine*. He will come with exactly that—*immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine—according to his power that is at work within us* (Ephesians 3:20).

While not a didactic approach to prayer, the paragraph connects the gospel account to the prayer lives of God's people through the *sedes doctrinae* found in any BIC lesson on the subject.

The Season of Epiphany provides many more opportunities for lectionary "teaching" as Jesus is "revealed" throughout the Sundays. The following are some ideas for teaching Christological doctrine while preaching on the gospel readings from St. Mark.

Epiphany 1

Mark 1:4-11

The Baptism of Our Lord – Jesus is anointed and identified as the Son of God.

Epiphany 2

John 1:43-51

Jesus calls the first disciples – Jesus is identified as the Son of Man.

Epiphany 3

Mark 1:14-20

Jesus calls Peter and Andrew – Jesus is identified as the fulfillment of prophecy.

Epiphany 4

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus teaches with authority – Jesus is identified by his teaching.

Epiphany 5

Mark 1:29-39

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law – Jesus is identified by his healing.

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

Mark 9:2-9

The transfiguration of our Lord – Jesus is identified by his mission.

¹ Consider early apostolic sermons in Acts 2, 4, and 13. The common pattern is connecting the fulfillment of messianic prophecy in Christ to the lives of listeners.

² Senn, Frank. *Christian Liturgy*, p. 112

Treasures from the Archive

With twenty years of archives to hand, there is a storeroom of treasure to behold in past issues. The following abbreviated article speaks to the broadening of the listener's understanding of context.

Location, Location, Location

The impromptu homiletics lesson was memorable. "What is the key to giving your sermons a certain sense of depth?" a vicar once asked a veteran pastor who was well-known as a "good preacher." The pastor hesitated briefly, then replied with a smile: "Location, location, location." He knew that the vicar was not expecting his answer, nor did the vicar immediately understand what he meant. What did a real estate adage have to do with sermonizing? "I'm trying to emphasize the value of context," explained the pastor. "Real estate agents know that where a property is situated is often more important than the amenities a home might offer. The setting is more significant than some of the specific details. I've found that exploring the context of a text—the immediate setting, the wider issues of 'to whom' and 'for what,' even considering what a text has meant to the church—supplies me with lots of ideas that give the sermon some dimension."

The veteran pastor went on to explain that from his perspective one of the weaknesses of novice preachers was that they often equated text study with word study. The resulting sermon tended to expound on key words and phrases and attempted to apply the concepts to today's world. The sermons were rather "generic" in terms of explanation and application. "They're thin," he asserted. "Too many trees. Not enough forest. The meaning is not developed with enough sense of connection to time and place and usage. I mean, I once heard a sermon on 'The Rich Man and Lazarus' that was all about the temptations of wealth. The whole sermon took its structure from the word 'rich.' It wasn't false doctrine, but the sermon didn't really preach the text. I've heard preachers do that with words like 'mercy' or 'grace' or 'peace.' They explain the meaning of the word, then attempt to apply it. Those kinds of sermons turn out to be a bit vague and general."

He continued to discourse. Note authorship, when possible, for Psalm texts. If it is David, or Moses, you have the accounts of "life history" to give the prayers or pleading or praise a real-life setting. Many Old Testament texts are so rich with context that the specific law and gospel

are almost always indicated by the setting. He said that he had preached recently on Psalm 118. The text study produced connections that supplied structure and depth. The central verse—"The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation"—is a direct quotation from the Song of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15. The psalm was also used after the return from exile as part of the Passover liturgy—and it may have been the "hymn" Jesus sang with his disciples before they left for Gethsemane on Thursday of Holy Week. Psalm 118 was also a favorite of Martin Luther and supplied what some call his motto verse: "I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done." The three levels of "context" provided compelling elements of application. The psalm begins and ends with "give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever," but "this text was about much more than a table prayer." "The epistle letters were written for specific reasons," he added, changing the focus a bit. "I know that seems too obvious, but it's a reminder not to remove the instruction too far from its intended meaning."

Don't some preachers spend too much time on historical setting and background? "Fair enough—there needs to be some balance. But don't forget the verse from Ecclesiastes: 'What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.' Ancient texts—and ancient contexts—are always relevant."

Professor Paul Koelpin - Volume 17, No. 5

