

Preach the Word

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Welcome a new writer: Nathan Nass has served at St. Paul / San Pablo Lutheran Church in Green Bay, WI since 2018. After graduating from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 2013, he served at St. Peter Lutheran Church in St. Peter, MN from 2013-2018. In this new series of Preach the Word, he will encourage us to preach simply and clearly for the benefit of all our hearers.

Simple Preaching

By Nathan Nass

“Preach to the milkmaids, and the doctors will be edified.” When I first heard that comment by Martin Luther, it instantly became one of my favorites. Let’s preach the Word so simply and clearly that even the humblest of our hearers understands, and the most intelligent will benefit too. “Preach to the milkmaids, and the doctors will be edified.” I was happy when I was asked to write for a new series of *Preach the Word* with a focus on the idea of Luther’s axiom: Simple preaching.

Then I tried to find where Luther said it. I don’t think he did! That quote is nowhere in the American Edition of *Luther’s Works*. It’s nowhere online either. I googled the phrase, and the only occurrence is in the July-August 2013 edition of... *Preach the Word!* Sorry folks, but it doesn’t sound like Martin Luther ever said, “Preach to the milkmaids, and the doctors will be edified.”

“He’s the best preacher who can teach in a plain, childlike, popular, and simple way.”

But here’s what Luther did say: “He’s the best preacher who can teach in a plain, childlike, popular, and simple way” (AE 54:384). It should come as no surprise to hear those words from the man whose love for God’s Word and love for God’s people led him to translate the Bible into his people’s language and to write a simple catechism for every family to use in their homes. Despite the fact that Martin Luther is credited with an IQ of 170 and is often included on lists of the most intelligent people in world history, he valued simple preaching that everyone could understand. Here was his philosophy:

“We preach publicly for the sake of plain people. Christ could have taught in a profound way but he wished to deliver his message with the utmost simplicity in order that the common people might understand. Good God, there are sixteen-year-old girls, women, old men, and farmers in church, and they don’t understand lofty matters! ... Accordingly he’s the best preacher who can teach in a plain, childlike, popular, and simple way” (AE 54:383-384).

Luther encouraged simple preaching.

In fact, Luther had strong words for those who aimed their preaching at theologians and neglected the common people:

“Cursed be every preacher who aims at lofty topics in the church, looking for his own glory and selfishly desiring to please one individual or another. When I preach here [Wittenberg] I adapt myself to the circumstances of the common people. I don’t look at the doctors and masters, of whom scarcely forty are present, but at the hundred or the thousand young people and children. It’s to them that I preach, to them that I devote myself, for they, too, need to understand. If the others don’t want to listen they can leave. Therefore, my dear Bernard, take pains to be simple and direct; don’t consider those who claim to be learned but be a preacher to unschooled youth and sucklings.” (AE 54:235-236).

Of course, simple preaching isn’t a matter of dumbing things down. It’s not about avoiding difficult subjects. It’s striving to teach deep scriptural truths in simple ways. It’s unpacking difficult subjects so that everyone from sixteen-year-old girls

to old men, from first-time visitors to life-long members can understand them. Far from being easier or less time consuming, simple preaching is hard! That's why Luther said, "He's the best preacher who can teach in a plain, childlike, popular, and simple way."

So that everyone from sixteen-year-old girls to old men, from first-time visitors to life-long members can understand.

In my congregation, we offer English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to everyone who is interested. On the first day of each new session, we have a full house of students with all different levels of English—from beginners who don't speak a word of English to advanced students who speak English as well as I do. Here's our struggle: We can't possibly tailor the classes to every individual's need, so for whom do we plan the bulk of the material—advanced students or beginner students?

Here's what we've found: If we plan materials for advanced students, they love it, but beginner students are completely lost and never come back to our classes. We lose them after the very first night. But if we plan materials for beginner students, even the advanced students gain valuable practice, and everyone benefits. The truth is, it's way easier for our teachers to prepare materials for advanced students. But despite the extra effort required, it's way more beneficial to everyone involved to have simple materials that everyone can benefit from.

Does that hold true for our sermons as well? I'm convinced that it does. I once went with a group of WELS men to a men's conference. I particularly enjoyed one thought-provoking presentation. Afterward, I asked the men in our group what they thought of that presentation. Three of the men said, "It was awesome! I loved hearing that man speak." Six of the

men said, "I didn't get it. I couldn't follow him from the very start." Do you think that presenter's goal was to have one-third of his hearers walk away blessed? Or to have all of his hearers walk away blessed? Whoever made up that quote, "Preach to the milkmaids, and the doctors will be edified," had a point. If you preach to pastors, the pastors and a few others will benefit greatly. If you preach to the simplest people in the pew, everyone can grow in God's Word.

How often do people walk away from our worship services—and especially our sermons—with the same feeling those six men had at that conference? Excitement over God's Word is quickly replaced by, "I couldn't follow what he was saying." Or, "I get more out of the children's sermon than the actual sermon." There are so many reasons people neglect God's Word. I don't like the thought, but is it sometimes because my or your preaching goes over their heads? When I don't put the time or thought into making my preaching of God's Word clear and simple for all, the sad result is that people walk away without understanding as they might. Should I be surprised (granting also other factors) when guests don't return? When people don't invite? When teens don't come?

Am I a simple preacher? Are you? I don't know how you preach. But I do know me, and I could benefit from thinking more about preaching simply and clearly for all of God's people. I have to admit that on the same evening when I read Luther's quote above about sixteen-year-old girls understanding his sermons, I had just preached a sermon with two sixteen-year-old girls in the front pew. My sermon that night wasn't written for them—at all! It was written for the mature adults behind them. It's one thing for our listeners to walk out of church and say, "I didn't like it." Like or dislike is often beyond my control. It's a whole different thing for our hearers to walk out of church and say, "I didn't get it." That's crushing. God's Word is meant to be understood. I just want you to ask yourself: Do I preach God's Word simply and clearly so that everyone can understand, or are my sermons geared for the mature Christians I expect to see in my pews?

Luther took great pains to preach simply, but simple preaching wasn't Luther's idea. He picked it up from Jesus. "Christ could have taught in a profound way but he wished to deliver his message with the utmost simplicity in order that the common people might understand" (AE 54:383). "In my preaching I take pains to treat a verse, to stick to it, and so to instruct the people that they can say, 'That's what the sermon was about.' When Christ preached he proceeded quickly to a parable and spoke about sheep, shepherds, wolves, vineyards, fig trees, seeds, fields, plowing. The poor lay people were able to comprehend these things" (AE 54:160). Luther saw in Jesus a purposefully simple preaching so that the commonest people could understand.

The gospels are filled with the simple preaching of Jesus. Think of the short, clear illustrations that peppered Jesus' teaching:



"You are salt" (Matthew 5:13). *"You are light"* (Matthew 5:14). *"Look at the birds..."* (Matthew 6:26). *"See the flowers..."* (Matthew 6:28). Even visual aids! Jesus' "I am" statements in John are perfect examples. *"I am the bread of life"* (6:35). *"I am the light of the world"* (8:12). *"I am the gate for the sheep"* (10:7). *"I am the good shepherd"* (10:11). *"I am the resurrection and the life"* (11:25). *"I am the way, the truth, and the life"* (14:6). *"I am the true vine"* (15:1). Simple, clear truths for God's people.

Jesus certainly didn't ignore difficult topics, and he certainly didn't dumb down God's message, but he most certainly explained difficult concepts in simple, clear language. Jesus never delivered a doctrinal treatise on grace. Instead, he told the parable of the lost son. Jesus didn't give us any essays on justification. Instead, he told a simple story about a Pharisee and a tax collector. As incomprehensible as the doctrine of the Trinity is, Jesus found the simplest ways to talk about his relationship with the Father, *"Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him"* (John 5:23). Whole books are written on the topic of neighboring. Jesus? The parable of the good Samaritan. Sanctification? Big topic! *"If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). Simple explanation.

It's not that doctrinal discourses are bad. We have them in the Bible, especially in the Epistles. When Jesus preached to people, however, he preached to them on their level. He preached clearly. He gave illustrations. He told helpful stories. He used visual aids. He took great pains to preach the deep truths of God's Word in simple ways, because he wanted all people to be saved. Now let's be clear: Not everybody loved Jesus. Not everybody got it. Some still walked away without understanding his teaching, including his parables. It took a special out-pouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost for even his own disciples to really catch on. His simple preaching style wasn't a magic bullet. But Jesus went out of his way to make the message of salvation so clear and simple that even the smallest child can grasp it by faith. Simple preaching.

I can't help but add how the apostle Paul talks about his preaching in his letters. Note these statements:

"For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:2-5 NIV).

"Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. ² Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend



ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Corinthians 4:1-2 NIV).

"I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹ But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Corinthians 14:18-19 NIV).

A Christian preacher's goal is to set forth the truth plainly, using understandable words, so that every hearer's heart can be pointed straight to Jesus Christ and him crucified.

I hope you're willing to grow with me in simple preaching. Let's start with this: Whom do we have in mind when we write our sermons? Think about that. It really matters! Here's whom Luther had in mind: "I will not consider Drs. Pomeranus, Jonas, and Philipp while I am preaching; for they know what I am presenting better than I do. Nor do I preach to them, but to my little Hans and Elizabeth.... Therefore see to it that you preach purely and simply and have regard for the unlearned people, and do not address only one or the other" (*What Luther Says*, § 3610; see also Lockwood's CPH commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:19). I have to admit that sometimes I have only mature Christians in mind when I write sermons. Is it any surprise when it's mostly mature Christians who attend? One neighboring pastor told me he often thinks of a 19-year-old, fresh out of high school. Another pastor thinks of his soccer teammates who have no connection to a church.

Here's another evaluation tool: Did you know that Microsoft Word will tell you what reading level you've written for? It's a rather impersonal but helpful gauge of how simple your sermon might be. In Word, go to "File," then "Options," then "Proofing," then make sure the box "Show Readability Statistics" is checked. Then exit the file menu and run a spelling and grammar check of your document. Ignore all the suggestions,



and a little box will show up at the end with your readability score. My last four sermons have averaged a 3.5 on the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level scale. What about yours? In comparison, this *Preach the Word* article registers a 7.0 on that same scale. I hope it makes sense to use bigger words and longer sentences when writing to pastors than when preaching to a congregation.

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Finally, practice simple speaking and writing, and then ask for feedback from others. Over the past six months, I've been

writing short devotions three or four times a week. Writing simple, clear devotional thoughts on God's Word has helped me write simple, clear thoughts in my sermons. I've also begun posting my sermons and devotions on a blog—upsidedown-savior.home.blog. Feel free to check it out and share your feedback with me. Then find a way to get feedback on your own writing and preaching. Whom can you trust to tell you the truth about your sermons?

Whom can you trust to tell you the truth about your sermons?

This advice about preaching has always stuck in my head: Know God's Word. Know God's people. Know how to get God's Word to God's people. Simple—but so hard! When people hear God's Word in our churches, I hope they go home and say, "That was written for me." Because it was! God's Word—every part of it—wasn't written just for doctors and theologians, it was written for milkmaids—and for you and me. Jesus took great pains to communicate God's life-saving Word simply and clearly to us. May God use our simple preaching of his Word to point people—all people!—to Jesus and his cross. Because that cross was meant for every one of us.

Here's a preview of what's coming in this series: We'll consider the curse—and blessing—of knowledge. We'll tackle the challenge of biblical illiteracy in our society and how it affects our preaching. We'll look at some practical sermon-writing suggestions like having a strong central theme and a clear outline. Please share your comments and suggestions on simple preaching with me at nass.nathan@gmail.com.

May Jesus bless you as you set forth his truth plainly!

