

Preaching with Outsiders in Mind

Insights from Multiple Ministry Settings

By Joel Russow

Editor's note: This issue continues our series on preaching with those outside our church membership in mind. This issue provides insights from Pastor Tom Engelbrecht, who has served in multiple ministry settings: six years at a mission restart called Amazing Grace in South Beloit, IL, then six years as assimilation pastor at Christ in Pewaukee, WI, a large congregation, where he also was involved in starting a second site. He currently serves at Christ Our Redeemer, Aurora, CO, which is a small to medium sized congregation with a Lutheran Elementary School. Pastor Engelbrecht is married to Jackie and together they have four children.

I wanted to be as simple and clear as possible. To this day, I'm not entirely sure if the pastor's observation was positive or negative, but it sticks in my mind as a caution to remain clearly biblical (Lutheran) in my attempts to reach outsiders where they are at.

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Ideas from Pastor Tom Engelbrecht

Four examples or thoughts on how outsiders have impacted your preaching preparation:

- *A caution to remain clearly biblical.* I've always wondered, as have most pastors, I think: What would happen if you interviewed the members in my congregation on basic points of doctrine? How would that go? I try to keep that in mind when preparing sermons—perhaps many of the “insiders” are kind of “outsiders.” Because of that, my first example of an “outsider” impacting my preaching isn't an outsider at all. I was at a large congregation and asked a retired pastor to offer feedback on a particular sermon that I knew I had tried to gear toward outsiders. He said something to the effect of “It didn't sound very Lutheran.” I remember I had intentionally tried to avoid jargon and technical words.

What would happen if you interviewed the members in my congregation on basic points of doctrine?

- *Specific law fully, yet wisely.* I was preaching at the brand-new second site of our large church. We were trying to reach out to the families who sent their kids to the public school in which we were worshipping. There were about thirty people in attendance, and a couple of the families were from the school. I remember making a law application that had to do with online pornography. Following the service, one of the women, who was there with her 11-year-old son, said that she didn't expect that her son would be exposed to talk about pornography at church. They didn't return. I don't think I would have preached the sermon any differently if given a second chance, but I think about that interaction as I seek to preach specific law fully, yet wisely, for the sake of the listeners.
- *Good news for the anxious.* Have you seen the first-time guests that come in with the “deer in the headlights” look? We recently had a woman visit us for the first time with that look on her face. It made me wonder what was going through her mind. It also made me wonder if anything was getting through at all because of the stress of her unfamiliar surroundings. It impressed upon me the importance of the

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clear proclamation of law and gospel so that even those who may be anxious or distracted will hear the good news that their sins are forgiven in Jesus.

- *Share...no matter how people react.* I was preaching for a funeral of a young girl. I didn't dwell too much on the life of the girl, but rather on the hope that Jesus gives—especially through Baptism. I was a little surprised to see a woman frowning at me and shaking her head during the sermon. I didn't have the chance to talk to the woman after the service and find out what was bothering her, but it sticks in my mind as an example of those who don't appreciate the hope we have in Jesus. Funerals seem to be where I have the chance to address more outsiders than any other service. What a privilege we have to share the foolishness of the hope of the resurrection, no matter how people react! And what an opportunity for outsiders to confront death and hear about True Life.

Three encouragements to preachers for keeping outsiders in mind in sermon preparation:

- Smile. Yes, smile. And give people reason to smile. A mission counselor taught me that when he critiqued one of my services. One of the only critiques he gave was, "You should smile while you're giving the Benediction." It's very simple but not always easy to do when we're focused on leading a service. Smiling and giving people a reason to smile sets people at ease and draws them in to listen.
- Call, talk to, and spend time with your members and your prospects. I've had the privilege of serving at a mission restart, a very large congregation, and a smallish congregation with a school. I've always been able to find reasons to stay in my office. That's when sermon writing has felt stale and out of touch. Spend time with people. Their joys, burdens,



blessings, and challenges are the same things that outsiders are experiencing. If we listen, people will let us know what's going on. We've got the message that addresses what's going on.

- The law and the gospel are the two main messages in the Bible. Through the law God crushes the self-righteous and through the gospel God heals the broken. We all know this, but not everyone knows this. A law/gospel sermon isn't necessarily going to be simplistic. It might be exactly what that outsider needs. They almost certainly will not have heard a clear law/gospel message before. You get to be the one to share it with them.

"You should smile while you're giving the Benediction."

Two sermon excerpts of preaching with outsiders in mind:

Here is an excerpt from Pastor Engelbrecht's sermon on Romans 7:14-25, where he focuses the listener on our internal struggle against sin and then points hearts to the One who rescues sinners from themselves.

Why do you do what you do? How many times a day do you ask yourself that same question? You tell yourself you are going to be more positive today, but the first chance you get, you complain. Why do you do that? You want to keep your cool with your kids, but you fly off the handle. Why do you do that? You aren't going to get online and visit those illicit websites tonight, but you grab your phone or computer and sink right back into the filth. Why do you do that? You are going to show love to your wife or respect to your husband, but you snap at them the first chance you get. Why do you do that? You are going to stop participating in gossip, but the moment you hear that juicy morsel you can't help but pass it along. Why do you do that?

That's exactly what Paul is talking about. Paul confessed that he didn't do what he wanted to do. He did the very things he hated... Paul puts a name to "myself," the part of me that will not do what I want. He calls it the sinful nature. Every one of us is born with a sinful nature that we're stuck with until we die. The old man in our lives is always catching up to us and crashing into us to ruin the things we want to do. The other night in Bible study someone gave a great example of the old man ruining the things we want to do. He said that he works downtown and occasionally he'll see people begging for money on the street corner, so he'll often give them whatever change he has. He said he does that simply out of faith in Jesus. But he said that almost every time he does it, there's a part of him that hopes someone else saw him do what he did so that they think he's a great guy. What was a selfless act turned into a selfish act. I appreciated his honesty and completely agree that when we want to do good, evil is right there with me! Myself is always against me....

I've always been able to find reasons to stay in my office. That's when sermon writing has felt stale and out of touch.

The struggle between “me” and “myself” finally brings us to the “I.” I am wretched. I need to be rescued from myself. If you're anything like me, my dear friends, that's often where you stop. I am wretched. I don't understand what I do. But we can't stop there. Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! Jesus always wanted what God, his Father, wanted. He always knew what his Father wanted. He always did what his Father wanted. That doesn't mean that Jesus didn't struggle. He was tempted in every way, just as we are, but he was without sin. That means he was righteous. This is why Paul brings up Jesus Christ into the midst of the battle of me, myself, and I. We don't know what we do, but Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. He knew exactly who he was doing it for. He did it in exactly the way it needed to be done to rescue us from us.

Here is an excerpt from Pastor Engelbrecht's sermon on John 20:1-8, where he highlights the main character in our lives to explain the impact of the resurrection on insiders and outsiders alike.

When it comes to the account of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, I've always operated under the assumption that Jesus is the main character of the resurrection. What you'll notice is something that surprised me.... We might go so far as to say that John makes the main character of Easter morning the empty tomb. We should begin by asking the question, “Why would John make the tomb the main character of the resurrection morning?”

Probably the best answer for why John makes the tomb the main character of resurrection morning is because everybody else made the tomb the main character that morning.... When (Mary) saw the tomb was opened, what did she assume? She didn't assume that Jesus must be risen from the dead just like he said. Instead, knowing that he wasn't in the tomb, she came to the conclusion that his body must have been moved to another tomb.... She ran and told this to Peter and (John). When they heard her story, they took off running. You have to admire their urgency, but where did they run. They ran to the tomb! Why did they run to the tomb? As far as they were concerned, Jesus was dead.... Their thoughts and lives were governed by death. So of course, they went to the tomb.

What is the main character in your life? Mary, Peter, and John probably thought their main character was still Jesus, but their thoughts were consumed by the stuff of death. Their footsteps that morning led to the place of death. You might think I'm overstating things, but when our thoughts are consumed



Mary, Peter, and John at the tomb.

by any other main character in our lives than Jesus, our footsteps are leading to a place of death.

Think about what types of things become the main characters in our lives. We get consumed by success at work or our children's happiness or a healthy body or more material things in our lives. What is the inevitable destination if our footsteps lead down the path in pursuit of those things and other things like them? The destination is death. We don't always think about it that way because those are good things in our lives. But they can't be the main character in our lives because they end in death....

Jesus' empty tomb is the promise and the proof of all our empty tombs.

(Mary, Peter, and John) saw the stuff of death in the tomb. What didn't they see? They didn't see Jesus. Why didn't they see him? Because he was alive.... The tomb is no longer the main character, because the tomb is changed as well. Now the tomb is the empty tomb. It's not Jesus' tomb anymore. It's the empty tomb. Which means it's never going to be the main character again. Jesus' empty tomb is the promise and the proof of all our empty tombs. Jesus' empty tomb is the promise of life for all those who have Jesus as the main character in our lives through faith. With Jesus as the main character in our lives, everything changes.

One preaching resource (besides the Bible and Confessions) in your library and why you have found it valuable:

Early on in my ministry I very much appreciated Franzmann's *Bible History Commentary*. It was valuable for helping me make sure that I didn't go off track about a narrative text. Most recently, I was thankful for Michael Horton's *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Reckless World*. It was a helpful reminder that God continues to use the ordinary means that he's always used to reach and strengthen people: the gospel in Word and Sacrament. As we do our best to use God's ordinary means, he will bless it as he sees fit.

Timeless Reminders

Editor's note: This issue's timeless reminder comes Rev. John Vieth's article, "The Value of the Four Divisions of Theology for Our Preaching." You can read Pastor Vieth's article its entirety in Preach the Word: 5:6.

Pastoral theology classes occupy an important place in our own seminary training. They do not, however, comprise the entire curriculum. Our well-balanced training in the disciplines of Biblical Theology, Historical Theology, Systematic Theology—as well as Practical Theology—prepares us for not only the general demands of pastoral life, but also for our pulpit work in particular...

Biblical Theology

We can't share what we ourselves don't have. If our purpose in preaching is to share with our congregations the words and promises of God, a thorough acquaintance with those words and promises on the part of the preacher is paramount. God did not call us to preach and then ask us to create interesting, comforting, or motivational messages of our own. He has called us to preach the interesting, comforting, and motivating message of his Holy Scriptures...

Historical Theology

While we do well to heed Harold Senkbeil's warning, "...it's always dangerous to run a church by archeology" (*Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness*, p. 78), our study and review of the controversies and heresies that troubled the Church in the past can prevent us from saying things we don't want to say when we stand up to preach...

Systematic Theology

Since systematic studies equip us with a ready grasp of the great truths of the Bible and how they fit together, our training in dogmatics can help prevent us from developing novel interpretations of Bible texts that are contradictory to the rest of God's word. Preachers with defective or deficient doctrine can unwittingly fall prey to pitting one text against the rest of God's revelation.

A second advantage of thorough instruction in systematic theology is that it can alert us to preaching values in texts which serve as the *sedes* for certain Christian doctrines. When the Church has historically identified certain passages as key proofs of particular Christian teachings, those teachings deserve consideration in sermons based on those texts.

This is not an exhaustive listing of the value our theological training has for our preaching. Hopefully it reminds us to take up and dust off some parts of our training that we have let lie on the shelf for a while. Listen again to the encouragements of August Pieper:

In the parsonage, in the pastor's study, in his little den are the sources of the church's strength. If this little den becomes cold and empty, or if it is dedicated to the Old Adam and the spirit

of this world, the church's strength will evaporate, and the spirit of the world will overwhelm it. If, on the other hand, the Spirit's fire burns in the pastor's praying and studying, new streams of the Spirit will flow out daily to God's people (WLQ, Vol. 84, No. 4, p. 276).

Prof. Russow at the National Conference on Lutheran Leadership

Preachers can enrich their preaching with non-members in mind by attending his session in January at the Chicago Hilton. Here's the description of his session, but note that it's not only for preachers!

St. Paul ask the believers in the church at Corinth to think about what they do if they are gathered for worship and "an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in..." (1 Corinthians 14:24). So, Paul tells those believers to expect that "non-members" will show up and to think through what happens in worship because of that fact.

In our WELS congregations, we hope to increasingly have "unbelievers and inquirers" visiting our worship at the invitation of a Christian friend. Over half of unchurched people say they would seriously consider accepting an invitation from a trusted friend to visit church. So, imagine WELS members take this all to heart and begin regularly inviting unchurched neighbors and family members to worship. Some of them actually show up! Now what?

What would you want the preacher to keep in mind as he preaches to these guests for the first time? Preachers, how should the presence of visitors impact your sermon preparation and proclamation? How deep can (or should?) a sermon go with listeners who know little about the Bible?

The reality is that our sermons will strive to keep two audiences in mind—church members and non-members. This presentation will especially wrestle with keeping the non-member audience in mind, but the encouragement shared will also edify the members too. Church members and preachers alike can benefit in this presentation as they seek to grow wise toward outsiders and make the most of every preaching opportunity.

Learn more at lutheranleadership.com.