

Preaching with Outsiders in Mind

Insights from Being Open to Feedback

By Joel Russow

Editor's note: This issue concludes our series on preaching with those outside our church membership in mind. Since 2011 Pastor Caleb Kurbis has served at Living Savior Lutheran Church in Asheville and Hendersonville, NC. Living Savior has two locations as one church in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina. In this mission setting there is never a shortage of opportunities to interact with numerous Sunday visitors and other outsiders. Living Savior's ministry context includes a majority of members who have never been Lutheran in a region that is less and less Christian with hardly any Lutheran presence.

Introductory thoughts from Pastor Caleb Kurbis

"Pastor, did you know that A.I. could write your sermons for you?"

I had to smile and nod a bit even if my poker face hid the fact that it sounded stupid. Then again, should we be surprised when technology starts to do things that we thought were off the table? I guess I should be thankful that this kind 20-something didn't tell me this on a Sunday morning. I could have inferred more: "Hey Pastor, maybe you *should* have artificial intelligence write your sermons." (Or maybe he was saying that? Shoot!)

If you want a rabbit hole, search "A.I. and sermon writing." You'll find everything from interesting to entertaining to absurd. We could enter some key words, the proper for the day, and some sources. Then we could read through to double check for heresy. Voila! And all that time saved could go toward more ministry and reaching more people. Right? Ha! Of course not. We would miss the benefits of wrestling with the Word. Worse yet, A.I. can't process the people we're thinking about and the souls sitting in God's house. And what about the conversations we've had with

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projects, considerations for reaching the searching, and wrestling with nuances for those who aren't only new to our church but even new to the faith?

This series is about preaching with outreach and outsiders in mind. It probably goes without saying, but these articles on reaching the unchurched have some basic assumptions.

- We want to preach to outsiders and the unchurched.
- We are doing what we can to reach the unchurched to bring them closer to the Word.
- We recognize that worship, although maybe trending less today than with previous generations, is a great avenue to bring people closer to the Word and to God's people.
- We want to make sure that they get "every good and perfect gift from above" as we ask God to help us communicate his truths clearly.

That last point is the basis for much struggle for me personally. Over the last couple of years, I have grown to feel dumber and dumber as I wrestle with this question: "Am I sure that these people, especially new people, are hearing what I want them to hear?" That's not intended to sow self-doubt in every corner. It's intended to encourage double-checking the sermon preparation and communication process. The more I think, the more I wrestle. And the more I wrestle, the more it makes me want to talk with people and work on the "stuff" that makes a sermon.

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Four ideas to help connect what we say with what they hear

1. Speaking of “stuff,” there was a young couple with two little kids who wanted to talk about “church stuff” as they just started attending Living Savior. He was Catholic before he became “close to nothing.” She described herself as having an “eclectic denominational path.” It was the season of Easter. They kindly emailed a question ahead of time. “We heard you say that we have this ‘life’ right now and not just eventually in heaven. That doesn’t make sense. And this world? Ugh! We may have missed something. Can you please explain?”

Thank the Lord for people who ask. (And imagine the many who don’t!) I looked back at my sermon on Revelation 21. I was trying to make the point that this vision of heaven is not only for the future; the life found in and through the Lamb belongs to us right now. But what questions would newbies ask? My sermon draft might say “life” after hours of work. But **do I think deeply enough about the questions they (might) have?** The more we ask about what specific people might think, the better we become at speaking clearly. And whether we know or think that we know or don’t know at all, it’s always helpful to ask. If we ask what someone thinks about a challenging subject in our sermon, would they refuse to answer? Who says they have to be members of our church? I was once encouraged by a wiser, older pastor to ask for feedback from outsiders in order to make my sermons better for outsiders. That starts with me seeking them out.



Whether they become prospects is irrelevant for my feedback goal. Then again, we may be given the blessing of new people who will ask us on their own. “Can you please explain?”

2. I’m kind of a fast talker. I’ve slowed down over the years, but I need more work. Especially when I talk with soooooome of myyyy ollder suuuthrrn’ fooolks. Okay, not that bad. (Or fake!) But I remember many years ago when a very intelligent and emotionally sharp woman in my church told me, “You’ve been thinking about this a lot! Can you give us a little more time to think about it too?”

I had just preached on Luke 15 in the middle of Lent. Does it get any better? The challenge isn’t finding meat in that text. Rather, the challenge is to select and prepare small, choice cuts in a way that’s easy for God’s people to savor and digest. It seems that my sermon came across more as force-feeding. Yikes! She was right. Add that to the reasons that we pray with Luther, “... if you had left it all to me, I would have ruined it long ago” (Luther’s Sacristy Prayer). It gets better (read *worse*).

There was already an appointment on my calendar that week to grab coffee with a prospect that I had been working on for a long time. The conversation eventually got to the sermon the Sunday before. He said, “I need to go back and listen again.” The translation in my head sounded like this: *That is a really nice way of validating what that lady said. You’ve got some work to do.*

It reminds me of what a good pastor friend once said. “We slave over our sermon all week. Every sentence, logical structure, and sound. But the people? They have one second to get a thought, or they don’t.” Add to that listeners who don’t know context or terminology or Bible history or inside jokes or Lutheran-ese, etc.

Think about how new listeners process deep content, logical leaps, and a speedy pace. When we slave over what to say, we need to remember that how we say it happens quickly to the ear. That doesn’t just mean that we need to slow down. That leads to other questions. If I heard this for the first time, would I get it? If I summarized my last several paragraphs with one sentence each, is the logic simple and clear? What would I change if I had to explain this to a child?

3. A young man in his early 30s had been an atheist. Now he’s more of an agnostic. He said that he relates to the Stoics quite a bit. He doesn’t want to come to church quite yet because he doesn’t know much. He doesn’t want to sit there and have things sail over his head even though he is intelligent. I assume that you, like me, start thinking about how simple and clear the gospel is *and* how hard we work (and we must) to keep it simple.

Our professors encouraged a serious and robust devotional life. One professor at the Seminary said, "If you don't have a personal devotion first thing on Sunday morning, what are you doing? Truly, what are you doing?" True, wise, instructive, and beneficial. But one Sunday hit me upside the head.

The sermon was done. First things first, a devotion from *Our Worth to Him* by Mark Paustian.¹ The one on Easter. He notes that maybe on Easter we could avoid getting into all the apologetical tidbits of the resurrection and simply focus on the true blessings and eternal benefits of Easter for God's people. In short, it's okay and maybe even often preferred to say the simple truths. It hit me because I read these words on the Third Sunday in Easter, and I had erred in the other direction.

Of course, Prof. Paustian isn't suggesting an either/or scenario all the time. Anyone who has heard him speak or read his writing has witnessed the benefit of weaving together both clear biblical truth and apologetics. It is an art worth aspiring to. Rather, when it comes to the truths that matter most, we need not shy away or be distracted from saying the simple things.

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It shouldn't go without saying that simplifying our preaching is not just for newbies but also for those who have been in church almost every Sunday for their entire lives. (On this point Nathan Nass's *Preach the Word* series is worth rereading.²)

We need to say the simple thing as clearly as possible. Of course, we want to give our people meat. We also want them to have milk. But nothing says we can't communicate steak-like truths in a milky way. Truths that are out of this world can be shared on a rudimentary level. Sharing the simple truths leads to deeper applications. In other words, think not either/or but both/and. It will benefit regular members and certainly also outsiders.

Some further questions pertain to resources. What devotional resources do you use? How do you view yourself as a listener to the author/speaker? What resonates with you? Maybe you prefer deeper devotionals like *The Daily Exercise of Piety* by Johann Gerhard. Or maybe you like what fellow brothers write in NPH's *Meditations*. Or you've found treasure in Paustian's *Our Worth to Him*. **What is there in the simplicity of our devotional resources and lives that can easily translate into our sermon preparation and even our preaching?**



4. I recently got back into officiating high school basketball. No, I don't like getting yelled at and called names for fun, although there is something to be said for testing the thickness of our pastoral skin in some ways. But this outlet and pathway for connecting in my community can get serious. The supervisor provides critique. And it's really interesting seeing how people receive it, or not. The supervisor confided in me about pushback from someone by saying, "Reffing is very subjective. Subjectivity is personal. So, people either take it personally or they improve." Would you agree that preaching is highly subjective? Do we welcome constructive criticism to improve? Or do we take it personally or avoid it altogether?

A member in my church works in an economic realm of our world that is way beyond me. He works with elite people who exhibit the highest levels of professionalism. But you wouldn't know if you met him because he's a very gracious man. Years ago, he asked me who I'm trying to reach with my sermons. I said they're for everyone. I waited, knowing he had more to share. He asked, "Pastor, do you pursue constructive criticism on your sermons?" I told him that I have a couple of guys whose feedback I seek. And sometimes I'll hand members an anonymous feedback form. Notice he asked if I pursued it, and not just received it. Why? We're always improving.

I don't know of any line of work or any craft where someone can improve significantly *without* some form of criticism. That's true for this man's line of work with upper-crust business folks. That's true for some bumpkin preacher in the mountains of Western North Carolina. And that's true for you. Of course, the fact that you're still reading this is one clear indication that you know this. Even so, when it comes to preaching with outreach and outsiders in mind, isn't it worth *pursuing* feedback from fellow preachers and others whom we trust?

*Don't be afraid of criticism and feedback ...
be concerned if you resist it.*

I wonder what it would be like if we started asking each other some of the following questions. If you brought your unchurched neighbor to my church, what is there about my recent sermons that I should keep doing? What would need improvement? Can you read/listen to/watch a couple of my latest sermons through the perspective of first-time guest and let me know what was clear, confusing, churchy, and/or comforting?

Don't be afraid of criticism and feedback for the goal of improvement. In fact, be concerned if you resist it.

Applying the Word to people who are veterans and to those who are new or outsiders is worth our best efforts. We deeply desire for their hearts to gain clear insights from the Word. That's not something A.I. can produce, much less bless. But that is certainly the area code where God works blessings and will produce growth for our good and for our people. He has and he will!

Timeless Reminders

Editor's note: This issue's timeless reminder comes Rev. Tom Jeske's introductory article in Preach the Word: 8:1.

I like the advice of a classmate who endured a rough chapter of ministry. When I asked him how it was going, he said "Nothing I can't handle with a good night's sleep... and some devotion time in the morning."

Lutheran Preacher, start your day by reading the Scripture! Set your alarm. Get by yourself. Graze like a sheep in the pasture of the Word. You can't preach to anyone else if you are gasping for air. I try to read four chapters a day. I don't always make it. (Especially for you younger pastors: Did you know that if you discipline yourself to read four chapters a day, you read through the whole Bible every year?) Isn't that a worthy and reachable goal? No one has to be a great scholar or have outstanding gifts to do this. You put yourself before the living words of the Holy One of Israel. How can something not happen to you?

After I finish reading, then I pray. We all know that prayer is not a Means of Grace. First the preacher listens, then the preacher speaks. I made a little pattern to help me. Of course it's not original with me—just ask Peter the Barber. And yes, I can actually pray without it. But I'm a person who easily loses his concentration. This little outline helps me in a way that I suppose is akin to



how journaling helps some people think. I list four matters on my conscience and confess them. I list four specific gifts for which to thank God. I make myself write down ten names or initials. The last section is a hodgepodge of hopes, dreams, needs, and half-baked ideas. Brother, you do it your way and improve on my idea. But hear Luther:

"Whenever I happen to be prevented by the press of duties from observing my hour of [Word and] prayer, the entire day is bad for me. Prayer helps very much and gives us a cheerful heart, not on account of any merit in the work, but because we have spoken with God and found everything to be in order."

You know that by "prayer" he meant "Word and prayer." Preacher, your morning Word and prayer will serve you well as you present devotions in meetings of every type, hospital visits, confirmation Bible classes, unexpected phone counseling, difficult face-to-face conversations, and finding the love to make outreach a part of your week.

The best part of a morning devotion is the sweet experience of a clear conscience. "Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love," (Ps 143). Battered and fearful hearts know no finer way to spend time. Perhaps the second-greatest benefit of a morning devotion is its cumulative value for your preaching. Your preparation, your product, and your confidence to step before God's people to preach are going to grow steadily.

¹ online.nph.net/our-worth-to-him-devotions-for-christian-worship.html

² Vol. 23 at worship.welsrc.net