

# Preach the Word

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## Preaching with Outsiders in Mind

# *Insights from Unique Ministry Settings*

By Joel Russow

## Series Introduction

"I'm clearly not a part of their target audience." After a busy day, I flipped through a few television channels one night. I settled on an old movie and soon the plot suspended for a brief commercial break. Over the next ninety seconds, advertisers tried to sell me adult diapers, fiber supplements, and a lifeline medical alert system. The commercials presumed a demographic audience other than a thirty-something pastor who was watching that night. I snickered to my wife, "I'm clearly not a part of their target audience."

Would listeners snicker similar thoughts about our sermons? Dr. John Brug writes in *The Ministry of the Word*, "The church has not two ministries but one—to preach the gospel. This one gospel has two audiences—members of the church and nonmembers" (p. 61). Does our sermon preparation keep both audiences in mind? Or would the often easy-to-overlook nonmember audience snicker, "I'm clearly not a part of this preacher's target audience?"

Reflecting on my own preaching, I tried to be mindful in preparation for major festival sermons of the visitors who would be listening to Lutheran preaching for perhaps the first time. But shouldn't a Lutheran preacher keep that audience in mind in all his sermons? Different worship visitors informed me that before they ever came in person, they had been listening online "for months." Pandemic preaching had its challenges, but it also opened up opportunities. Many preachers found themselves proclaiming to a wider audience through livestreamed services, recorded sermons, and printed messages. It forced this preacher to wrestle more zealously with important questions like: what can a preacher do

*"This one gospel has two audiences—members of the church and nonmembers."*

in sermon preparation to communicate the one gospel to the two audiences? What encouragements would other preachers offer to proclaim the gospel with those outside the church?

This series of *Preach the Word* articles will wrestle with preaching with those outside of our church membership in mind. Through interviews, sermon excerpts, and timeless reminders, we will aim to grow in being wise toward outsiders and seek to make the most of every preaching opportunity to them. I pray our conversations will be full of grace and seasoned with salt so that member and nonmember alike will recognize, "I'm clearly a part of this preacher's audience!"

## Ideas from Pastor Thomas Spiegelberg II

*Editor's note: Spiegelberg served as a preacher and an exploratory missionary in Boise, ID for five years. He then served as a preacher and missionary in a cross-cultural setting on the island of St. Lucia for sixteen years. He has been serving as a preacher in his current mission field of Mobile, AL for the past four years. He draws on his wide variety of ministry experience and sermon audiences to share the following thoughts. While the specific examples of his efforts to connect with those outside the church may not apply to your situation, I hope that you find his passion to do so inspiring.*

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

1. In door-to-door canvassing, I met and kept conversing with an atheist in Boise. We came to a mutual agreement. I would read a book he suggested. In exchange, he would come to our Easter worship. The book he suggested was *Why Christianity Must Change and Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*, by John Shelby Spong. It was one of the most painful books I ever had to read. (And no, I would not recommend it). But I understood what the man was looking for—he wanted me to look at Christianity from a perspective which he found noteworthy. He also followed through on his end of the agreement and attended Easter worship. I seized the opportunity that Sunday to preach on the credibility of the resurrection and its basis for our faith. The man didn't come back, but he heard Christ crucified and risen.

### My own council once tenderly criticized my sermons.

2. My barber in St. Lucia never went to church. No way! He explained that he didn't even want to know or trust in Jesus. "That is white man's religion," he said. (St. Lucia is an island of predominantly African descent). But even with his aversion to Jesus, my barber wanted me to know that he prayed. Curious, I asked, "What do you say? Why do you pray? To whom do you pray?" Our conversation prompted a sermon on prayer and some reading up on books to address his understanding of prayer. My barber never came to church, but he did listen to what I had to say every time I got my hair cut.
3. My own council once tenderly criticized my sermons. After a huge upswing in violent crime in the area, they asked why I never addressed or mentioned crime in my sermons. Interesting. In my mind I thought, "Because the pericope doesn't line up with current social struggles. I will get to it, but not until after Pentecost." As a result of our conversation, I did



### *The sermons got so much attention, we actually were interviewed by the local news station.*

two things. I began reading the local newspaper and tried to incorporate one thing happening in either the application or introduction of the sermon.

4. A reporter came to church, and I interviewed him. I asked him to make me a list of the top ten things on which his news station reports. He did and it was great! Sermon fodder flowed out of that list. One series was called, "Get a Job, Uh." (*Uh* is a St. Lucian expression that they add to the end of a sentence to emphasize it). It was a series<sup>1</sup> on work and Christian vocation addressed from a law/gospel perspective. It got so much attention, we actually were interviewed by the local news station on how we as a church were trying to help the unemployment and poverty problem in the country. We also had people show up in the following months thinking we were giving out jobs.

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

1. Talk to those outside the church and read with them. This is really hard and can be extremely painful, but it will give you a better understanding of where people are.
2. Address the struggles people are going through and apply the Word of God to those struggles. Maybe the struggles addressed won't resonate with everyone, but in the process, you are helping your congregation in how to dialogue with the unchurched. This can be extremely valuable especially if most of your church members' lives are lived in the context of the church.
3. Think of sermon preparation like writing your sermon for your homiletics professor first, but then rewriting it for your unchurched "Alabama fan neighbor." The same points will be drawn out, but hopefully with a different delivery.

### Two sermon excerpts of preaching with outsiders in mind:

Here is an excerpt from Pastor Spiegelberg's sermon on Easter Sunday with the atheist in attendance. He acknowledges some of the "nonsense" that might be stirring around in his listeners' minds and takes the listener back to the impact of the empty tomb and the sure and certain word of God:

... When we got to my grandfather's funeral, I was never able to bring myself to look inside the casket as if looking at him would prove that he was really gone. There is just something so final about death that it is hard to accept. And if I didn't look at him, maybe it wouldn't be over. And then they closed the lid. Irreversible. Final. It's a story that I bet every one of you can tell. The loss of a loved one. The quietness in the house the following weeks that they are gone. The rest of the

world goes on with what they are doing, and yet the finality takes a long time to sink in.

Sometimes we celebrate Easter with such repetition and familiarity that I wonder if we fail to imagine what life would be like if it wasn't true. We have grown up believing that there is a heaven and there is a resurrection for those who believe. It is the central belief in Christianity. Paul sums it up when he says in Corinthians, *"If Christ is not arisen then you are still dead in your sins. Your faith is worthless."* If Christ is not risen, then it is all nonsense....

It is not difficult to understand why no one believed the women. At that time, women's testimony was not even allowed in court, but a more obvious reason was the nature of death. Irreversible. Final. Who argues with those basic facts of life? It made no sense. People don't come back from the dead.... So why do I believe? I know death. I've seen it before. It's always the same. Why should I believe that Jesus conquered it?

... I have gotten to know God and how he works. Not because I have any deep insights into the divine, but because God wrote a book about himself and that tells me a lot of who he is. And from what I can see, that's how God works. This is his style. He always works through the slow and difficult. He doesn't just zap the evil away, but he allows the evil to exist, and then twists it for our good. He doesn't remove evil, he transforms it. God allowed his Son to die that we might live!... I have gotten to know God in his autobiography, I know he is more than a powerful God but a God of love. I believe that he created me and genuinely wants me to be with him. I believe he created my loved ones too and he wants them in heaven with him too!

... There are two ways to see human history. One as a long list of violence and pain, difficulty and unpleasantness that we experience with Easter being a once-a-year fairy-tale exception—something with a happy ending. Just another Sunday in which we celebrate hopeful thinking that there is a heaven and one day we might be there.

But the other is this. Seeing Easter as the starting point in our lives. If God could conquer death which is irreversible, then just maybe he can take care of me in my life. Just maybe I will shake the hand of Rev. Ed Weiss, my grandfather, once again. Then maybe God can and does do everything he says he does. That's what the empty grave is all about. Look into it and believe that God can and he does. I believe.

Here is an excerpt from Pastor Spiegelberg's sermon on Luke 10:25-37 (the Gospel for Proper 10, July 10 this year). He implores his listeners to love the neighbors God placed into their lives:

We are planted with people in our neighborhoods, workplaces, families, schools and the question we have to ask ourselves is, so how do we show God's love? Here is why neighborly is maybe a bigger question in our world today



than ever before. The average American moves more than eleven times in their life. On average, 40 million of us move in any given year. Some of those moves are large. Some are small within cities, but that's a lot of movement.

Bringing it closer to home, let's talk about Alabama.... Baldwin County is one of the fastest growing counties in the state at a growth rate of 16% annually.... People move, and with every move, relationships are uprooted. If you are in the military, you know that full well. It takes work to develop new relationships. One of the sad side effects is that the cohesiveness and responsibility we feel toward our neighbors and our communities become fractured....

Notice, the lawyer asked who his neighbor was, and Jesus did not define it as what side of abortion you are on, your political orientation, or your color of skin. He doesn't say it is people who look like you, who act like you, who talk like you. He doesn't give us the option to be selective on the who. It is anyone we are planted around and who needs us....

There is no way that he or any of us can walk away saying, "Yeah, Jesus. I nailed that one." Instead, what he wanted the lawyer to realize, what he wants us to realize is, "Lord, I need a perfect neighbor like that." See, what Jesus was saying is that we are the man in the ditch that needs someone who recognizes our need. We need someone who is willing to give all for our good. We need to be healed. We need a perfect neighbor. And Christ is the one!...

### *"Can you name all your neighbors?"*

I have just two applications for you this morning as we go from God's house.... Take your bulletin insert this week and draw your street. Include a little box for all your neighbors. Can you name them all? Maybe you can. If you can't, commit yourself this summer to figuring out who they are. Go introduce yourself. Bring them some cookies. Mow their lawn. Say hi to them when you drive by. Even the grumpy ones. And get to know your neighbor.

*“Learn a lesson from the profound simplicity of Jesus’ sermons.”*

The next step. Give. Be the kind of neighbor you wish you had always had. Put yourselves in their shoes. There are more dispossessed people around us than we realize. God has planted us here at this time to be life where we live. Let’s share the love of Christ. If you want to know what to say, sit in on our Bible class over the next couple of weeks as we explore what to say. But as we live, love locally. Start with the State Farm mentality: Like a good neighbor, be there.

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

*They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, by Frank Thomas, United Church Press, 1997. When I got to St Lucia, one of my members always gave me a run down on whether my sermon was lively enough for St Lucians. It got me thinking that preaching to fit a cultural setting does make a difference. So, I started reading a couple of books on African-American preaching. Obviously, there are some theological discrepancies with this book, but in a celebratory preaching style, you are drawing a listener to the joy of salvation. You are leaving the listener with something to be joyful about. For a Lutheran pastor, that is an easy goal.

## Timeless Reminders

*Editor’s note: Each issue of this series will conclude with timeless reminders from the Preach the Word archives. This issue’s reminder comes from Rev. Herbert H. Prah, who joined the saints triumphant earlier this year. You can read Prah’s article, “From God’s Word...Through Your Heart...To Their Lives,” in its entirety in Preach the Word 3:5.*

Sermon preparation is our top priority. We are entrusted with the task of proclaiming God’s holy Word, not ourselves. God’s people expect and deserve, our best and nothing less....

Don’t put yourself above your hearers or talk down to them. Talk at their level. Don’t get too technical. Learn a lesson from the profound simplicity of Jesus’ sermons. Love your hearers as Jesus loved them. Put your pastoral heart into your message to them....

Good application is probably the number one request of members when it comes to sermons. It might not quite be the way you as the exegete or homiletician view the text, but unless you “connect” with your hearers, they easily tune you out. Their plea is: “Show that you understand us, that you have us on your heart, and that you understand our day-to-day lives when you study the text and write your sermon.” One pastor has taped the words “So What?” in his pulpit, visible to his eyes above his Bible each time

he preaches. He uses it as a reminder to keep the law and gospel relevant to his congregation.

<sup>1</sup> An occasional topical series apart from the lectionary can be useful. But it is also possible to craft a series *from* the lectionary. Examples are in The Foundation ([welscongregationalservices.net](http://welscongregationalservices.net)) and in *Commentary on the Propers, Year C* on which The Foundation is based. See the sidebar.

<sup>2</sup> Bauer, Jonathan. *Christian Worship: Commentary on the Propers, Year C*, 213. NPH 2021. The thematic groups from this book differ slightly from those in The Foundation.

## Thematic groups in the season after Pentecost

“[Jesus’] words establish our faith, transform our hearts and minds, and guide our lives in him. During the Sundays after Pentecost, we gather to let the Holy Spirit do the work Jesus promised he would do in the way Jesus promised he would do it.

“Because the season after Pentecost is quite long, it may be helpful to break these Sundays into thematic groups. The groups and individual themes suggested below seek to pick up on the cues given by the gospel writer Luke.”<sup>2</sup>

June 12-19. Jesus’ words possess Jesus’ power. (Due to the late date of Easter this year, Propers 3-6 are omitted.)

June 26-August 14. Jesus’ words focus Jesus’ followers.

August 21-October 2. Jesus’ words confront us with challenging truths.

October 9-23. Jesus’ words produce the faith he seeks at his return.

