

Preaching with Outsiders in Mind *Insights from a Rural Setting*

By Joel Russow

Editor's note: This issue continues our series on preaching with those outside our church membership in mind. The next two issues provide insights from pastors in differing settings—a pastor serving in a rural town and a pastor serving in a big city.

Pastor Frederic Berger shares insights from his ministry at St. Paul's in Plymouth, NE and from preaching at Christ Lutheran in Beatrice, NE. Pastor Berger previously served at St. Paul's in Livingston, MT and currently serves as the chairman of the Nebraska District Mission Board.

Ideas from Pastor Frederic Berger

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

I come at this from the rural ministry perspective of a longtime established congregation. We live in a town of 400 people (Plymouth, NE). That means that on a typical Sunday we don't have a lot of "outsiders" randomly coming for worship. But that also means that it becomes easier to key in on the types of services that we absolutely know there are going to be outsiders. Here are a few examples:

1. **Funerals** – When I arrived in Plymouth, one of our elders commented, "Pastor, funerals are one of our best forms of outreach." He wasn't wrong. Everyone here knows everyone. People take time off to attend funerals. They bring food in abundance to share at the luncheon. They stay after for fellowship. They pay attention to the service, the build-

"Funerals are one of our best forms of outreach."

ing upkeep, the small details, and the sermon. Unlike other churches in our area, they have noticed in the sermon that the pastors have a close relationship with those who are now in heaven and with the family. The sermon is all about Jesus, but it's always wonderful to share in the sermon how our church has connected the person who is now in heaven to the message of Jesus in immense proportions through Word and Sacrament over his/her life, while they were able to come to church, while a shut-in at home, and even in the last moments in the hospital. People are longing for these types of relationships, and they are in short supply among pastors in our country. Using relationships to connect people with the means of grace is our bread and butter in the WELS, and outsiders notice this.

People are longing for these types of relationships, and they are in short supply among pastors in our country.

2. **Weddings** – At least in our area, and this is probably a widespread phenomenon, weddings even in churches have turned into a quasi-service, with officiants becoming ordained online for twenty bucks or acting like it. We have had several people take the Bible Information Class (BIC) who first came in contact with us as a guest at a wedding. And so even though I have found wedding sermons to be some of the most difficult to write, it gives an excellent opportunity to share law and gospel with many "outsiders."
3. **Confirmations, Baptisms, Big Anniversaries, and Birthdays** – Again, due to the strong family ties (often multi-generation families that stay in the area), when there is a family event, all the uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, etc. who

Good preaching for “outsiders” is probably also good preaching for “insiders.”

are churched and unchurched attend the worship service. It might be for a special prayer or bouquet of flowers in the front for mom’s 80th, and 40 “outsiders” will be in attendance. I try to keep this in mind during sermon preparation. How can I take the truths of God’s Word and convey them in a simple, straightforward way? An introduction to catch their attention. A comment about Bible Information Class. A time in the sermon for them to actually ponder (and share with people sitting next to them) what this means for them. At this year’s confirmation service, one of the younger church council members commented to me, “That sermon was perfect for all the guests who were here today.”

4. **Christmas and Easter** – These are Sundays for “outsiders” in all settings. I always think it is interesting to tailor your illustrations to your audience, which is quite easy when you are speaking to a congregation that understands farming and agriculture, because God often uses these illustrations.

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

1. A good sermon is a good sermon. Good preaching for “outsiders” is probably also good preaching for “insiders.” As you spend time crafting a clear message, using pertinent illustrations, making applications to everyday life from God’s Word, sharing law and gospel, reviewing biblical accounts for the biblically illiterate and for the long time Bible reader who needs a refresher, defining terms such as justification, sanctification, repentance, redemption, etc., working on delivery, memorizing, it’s going to be a faithful sermon for all. Study the text. Write it. Memorize. Go and preach it like you mean it.



2. Try to put yourself in their shoes. It is scary coming into a church for the first time, especially to an established one in a rural setting. People are going to notice you. So, from start (greeting) to finish (greeting) and everywhere in between (liturgy and sermon), do everything you can to make the service easy to follow and make them feel comfortable and welcome.
3. In our setting, strong relationships and rapport already exist between members and non-members, which allows our members to easily invite non-members to worship, and, even better, to BIC. Take advantage of that. Sometimes our established rural congregations can be greatly benefited by using some of the same ideas that our new mission churches are using. Borrowing an idea from a mission church in our area, we offered a BIC at a brewery. This non-traditional idea especially sparks a lot of interest in a setting where only the traditional is expected. We had 125 various insiders and outsiders join us over the 18 weeks. In a rural setting, our members have an already established strong network for friendship evangelism.

We offered a BIC at a brewery.

Two sermon excerpts of preaching with outsiders in mind:

Here is an excerpt from Pastor Berger’s confirmation sermon. Times of celebration prove to be wonderful opportunities for outreach at St. Paul’s. Pastor Berger notes that his small rural congregation had 388 in attendance for this confirmation sermon on 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

I’m going to start by asking you a fairly ridiculous question, but I want an honest answer: If God told you to chew a piece of Trident original flavored gum every day, would you do it? It’s an interesting question, isn’t it? It takes us out of the hot topic of religious discussions and simply gets to the heart and core of this matter: If God tells you to do something, do you do it? Looking at a ridiculous question helps you to understand your attitude towards listening to God or not listening to God.

Which is so different than everything else in life, isn’t it? If you do not listen to someone’s good financial advice, you might not have as much money as you could have. If you do not listen to someone’s fashion advice, you might not look as stylish as you could have. If you do not listen to someone’s lawn advice, your grass might end up looking like mine—half dead. But if you do not listen to God, those stakes are so much higher. It finally ends up being heaven or hell for all eternity.

My guess is that you’re here today because you recognize that. My guess is that you do care what God has to say. Do you do it perfectly? No, none of us do. That’s why we confessed our sins at the beginning of the service. That’s why we need and why we have a Savior named Jesus. But my guess is that you’re here today because you care about what God says in his Word, and you’re here today because you want to encourage these confirmands to do the same.

The truth is, God doesn't tell you to chew a piece of Trident original flavored gum everyday.... But God's Word does tell you to do something.... God's encouragement for each of us: CONTINUE IN WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED...

(Continuing in what you have learned involves having) a devotional plan. If you need one, talk to me or Pastor Dauck. We would love to be your personal devotional trainers. Make Sunday morning the priority. I know that stuff that can come up, that you can get sick, that you might have to be out of town. But make it the priority. And I'm talking the Sunday morning package—45 minutes in Bible Study, it's awesome. An hour in worship. And if you have some hang up, some reason that is preventing you from coming, talk to me, Pastor Dauck, or the elders. If someone says that they aren't coming because the pews are uncomfortable, let us know. We will remove a pew and put in a Lazy Boy for you.... That's how much we want you to be here with your brothers and sisters, remembering your baptisms, hearing the Word, and receiving the Lord's Supper.

(God tells us to continue in what you learned) for a really important reason. Because he says in verse 15 that the Holy Scriptures are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (The Holy Scriptures) make us, who are born spiritually dead, spiritually alive. They share with us this incredible message—that because Jesus, God who took on human flesh, lived a perfect life, died on the cross, and rose from the dead, our sins are forgiven ... and that when we die, we live with God for all eternity in a place he describes as Paradise....

We will remove a pew and put in a Lazy Boy for you.

And contrary to common thought, it's not just for the future—not just for after death. No, God wants us to continue in what we have learned because, *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

When you become the famous athlete, continuing in God's Word prepares you for fame and what you're going to do and say in your 30 seconds in the spotlight. When you're diagnosed with a horrible disease, continuing in God's Word prepares you for processing that difficult news. When you become extremely wealthy, continuing in God's Word prepares you and helps you understand where it came from and how to use it faithfully. When you're struggling in school, when you're dating that special someone, when marriage gets tough, when family grows or doesn't grow, when you're struggling with an addiction, when your loved ones are being



Times of celebration are wonderful opportunities for outreach.

called Home, in every circumstance that you can ever think of in life, continuing in what you have learned prepares you for it."

Here is an excerpt from one of Pastor Berger's funeral sermons on Revelation 7. He exhibits what he commented on earlier—preaching Christ-centered funeral sermons as a pastor who has a close relationship with his people.

Your sins, the things you have done wrong in your life, the ways that you have disobeyed the Almighty God—they are forgiven! That secret something that you did in your younger years, that very few people know about, that burdens your conscience to this day and still you lose sleep because of it, Jesus tells you, "I suffered for that sin on the cross. It is finished. The price has been paid!" One day, on a day only God knows, you will stand before his judgment throne and you will hear the two most beautiful words, "NOT GUILTY!" ...

This is a short summary of things Frank, Tudy, and I would talk about around their kitchen table. And Frank, when he'd hear that gospel message, that good news that heaven is secured for him not because of anything he could possibly do but because of what Jesus has already DONE, COMPLETED, and FINISHED, you'd see his face just light up. Because this meant that one day when he died, he would be with the Lord in paradise with 100% certainty because what was necessary for his salvation was already accomplished.

One day having talked about the Bible's clear main message, the gospel, I gave Frank and Tudy bread, which Jesus says is his body. And then I gave Frank and Tudy wine, which Jesus says is his blood. And I told them, "Frank and Tudy have peace today knowing that your sins are forgiven, and heaven is won for you." And Frank gave that Frank Imes' laugh and said to me, "Pastor, that's the best news in the world!"

Why did Frank say that? Because he knew his sin. Over his 80 years, he knew his thoughts, words, and actions did not always line up with God's will. He knew that he fell far short of God's standard, which is perfection. But this good news

“It’s good for the shepherd to smell like his sheep.”

about what Jesus did for him—taking upon himself Frank’s sin and giving to Frank his perfect record.... Yes, that wonderful message of the gospel changed everything for Frank. It meant peace no matter what happened on this earth. The best news in the world meant that Wednesday was the best day of Frank’s life because God whispered in his ear, “Today you will be with me in paradise” and then peacefully took him there. And John in Revelation 7 gives us a glimpse of what Frank is experiencing right now.

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

A longtime District President is a member in my congregation, and he often stops by the office and says, “I always worry about a pastor spending time in his office.” I usually respond back, “I find myself worrying about you a lot too,” mostly because I don’t know how else to respond to that. But I think he makes a good point. Or as another pastor once said, “It’s good for the shepherd to smell like his sheep.” Probably more than another book to read in our offices, my best preaching comes after spending time with those I’ve been Called to serve. The more I get to know them, the more I know in what ways the text I’m preaching on will apply to the joys and difficulties they are facing in their life. Not only will interacting with our members give good flavor to our sermons, it will also give them encouragement to be with the church family around Word and Sacrament on Sunday mornings.

But if you really want a book, *Just Say the Word!: Writing for the Ear* (by G. Robert Jacks, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996) is a good resource to transition seminarians from essay writing to sermon writing. But otherwise, put down the book, close Facebook, and spend time with your members and prospects.

Put down the book, close Facebook, and spend time with your members and prospects.

Timeless Reminders

Editor’s note: This issue’s timeless reminder comes from Rev. Daniel Leyrer, currently serving at St. Marcus in Milwaukee, WI. You can read Pastor Leyrer’s three articles, “Full Strength Law and Gospel Preaching” in their entirety in Preach the Word, Vol. 6:1-3. This excerpt comes from “The Pastor Preaches Full Strength Gospel” (Preach the Word 6:3). All back issues are available at worship.welsrc.net/downloads-worship/preach-the-word.

One of my favorite lessons on preaching comes from the story of the minister who was scheduled to conduct worship at the state penitentiary. The day before the service he walked around the chapel with the warden to “get the lay of the land.” As he viewed the seating arrangements, he noticed that one of the chairs was draped in black cloth. The preacher asked the warden about the chair. “The man who sits in that chair tomorrow morning will be executed tomorrow night,” the warden explained. “His chair is draped for death. Your sermon will be the last one he hears.”

Every time I mount the pulpit I may very well be preaching to someone sitting in a pew draped for death.

That story reminds me that every time I mount the pulpit I may very well be preaching to someone sitting in a pew draped for death. My pulpit might be draped for death for that matter. The point is we never know. We preachers never know if this is the last sermon a parishioner will hear or the last one we’ll have a chance to preach. Seen from that perspective, preaching a sermon is urgent business.

If you knew it was the last sermon for somebody, what approach would you take? It would be a good time to remember one of our titles: minister of the gospel. Given one last chance to preach a sermon, we would present the gospel as clearly and personally as we knew how. This is full strength gospel preaching—speaking not so much about Jesus’ word of forgiveness but becoming Jesus’ voice to speak that word of forgiveness.

