

Preaching with Outsiders in Mind *Insights from a Pastor Reaching Unexpected Prospects*

By Joel Russow

Editor's note: This issue continues our series on preaching with those outside our church membership in mind. It provides insights from Pastor Ben Kuerth, from Divine Savior in Doral, Fla., a northwest suburb of Miami. Prior to his ministry in Florida, Kuerth started a mission church, Victory of the Lamb in Franklin, Wis., where he served for twelve years.

Divine Savior operates an academy with 1,150 students and a special needs school with 40 students. A unique challenge is preaching to 65 WELS called workers who are mostly from the Midwest while also connecting with many who have never heard the pure gospel. Doral is home to immigrants from Venezuela, Colombia, most of South America, and many other countries since those who want to do business in South or Latin America have offices in Miami. This presents opportunities to share the gospel with souls who have little Bible background and for whom English is often not their native language.

Ideas from Pastor Ben Kuerth

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

The first three examples are of people in suburban Wisconsin—one from the early days of renting a Polish beer hall, one from our days in a movie theater, and one from our new ministry center. The last example is from Florida.

A tough father. He did MMA fighting at a local gym—not a big guy, yet wiry and tough. I sat next to him at the closing picnic for our soccer Bible camp which his daughter had attended. I invited him to church. He smirked and said, “Nah, church is for wimps.” I ended up daring him to come to church for the sake of his daughter and prove to her that he was a tougher and better

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man than Jesus. He said, “Okay, you’re on!” To my surprise, he actually came that Sunday . . . and faithfully almost every Sunday after that. Baptizing him and his daughter was a special moment. He thanked me for making church feel like a place where guys like him who were rough around the edges could come and not feel weirded out. He helped me realize that a lot of guys deep down are craving someone to call them out and call them to something more, Someone bigger.

A tearful mother. One night the phone rang. The woman was in tears because her son had committed suicide the day before. The reason she called me was because three years earlier I had knocked on her door while canvassing and invited her to church. She never came. What I didn’t know is that she had been watching our services online for years. Even though I barely knew her, she knew me and considered me her pastor. On the phone she told me the previous night she had watched one of our services on repeat over and over from 2:00 to 4:00 A.M. God’s Word was the only thing that soothed her broken heart. She reminds me of something now whenever I see the camera at the back of church: somewhere at the other end of that camera lens’s tunnel is someone else just like her—a soul hungry for what only God’s Word can give, someone who at some point will likely look to me as their pastor.

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A trembling woman. One Sunday I noticed a car I didn't recognize. It was parked some distance from the doors of our ministry center. For 15 minutes it just sat there. No one got out. Worship was about to start. But I felt I needed to go out there. I introduced myself and said, "Can I walk you in?" The woman in the car was trembling. She said she'd been battling depression. She had prayed to God for a sign—either to get out and actually go inside or to go away for good. She had recently considered ending her life. She then said something I'll never forget: "I came here thinking maybe I'll first give church one last shot." I think of her often on Sunday mornings even now as I pray, "Lord, help me today to speak and act as if someone here is giving church one last shot." This has had a lasting impact on me.

A grieving son. Recently in Doral I'm grateful for Bruno who has started bringing his two daughters to church. A few years ago, his dad died of cancer, and it was brutal for him to watch. How his dad faced death without hope did a number on him. During the pandemic he began seeking God, thinking that there must be more than this material world. Thoughtfully he wondered, "There has to be a God since I have this desire to be a good person and want to make the world a better place." So out of the blue, he came to our church. From his home office he can look out his window and see our "Divine Savior" sign—a sign from God he now calls it! I can still see Bruno leaning in, intensely listening as I preached that first Sunday. Over a strong cup of Colombian coffee two days later, Bruno shared what had hooked him: "It's like you were saying, 'Let's get back to the basics . . . but in a good way.'" My sermon that previous Sunday was nothing special—except for the simple, clear law and gospel with Jesus at the center. But, of course, (silly me) that's exactly why it was so special for him! God brought Bruno into my life at just the right time when I needed to be reminded that I don't need to carry the burden of always being super creative or needing to come up with "new-to-me" content. What people need, more than anything, is the clear, Christ-cen-



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tered truths of the Bible communicated simply and sincerely. That is sorely lacking in so many South Florida churches. Is it also by you?

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

1. Clear beats clever. Sometimes I try and get too clever, and I end up confusing people. Clear *and* clever? That's great when you can pull it off. Sometimes the occasion calls for it, perhaps. But if you're trying to communicate with people whose first language is something other than English, or with people who are brand new to Christianity (or both!), being clear is the vital task. The more people I meet from other countries, the more I'm starting to realize this.
2. "There's a soul at the end of that tunnel." I tell myself this whenever I look into the livestream camera lens. There are potential pitfalls to preaching when you're aware of people "eavesdropping" anonymously from anywhere in the world. Yet over and over, for years now, I've met or interacted with people who've reached out to me as their pastor even though I had no clue I was pastoring them. This is simply because someone invited them to watch online, linked them to a particular message, or they stumbled onto our website where at some point the Spirit prompted them to take a next step. So, keep them in mind. Consider greeting those who are worshiping online. Invite them to reach out to you if and when they're ready. Simply acknowledge their "presence" with gratitude whether or not you know if anyone is actually out there watching. With archived services and messages online, it's virtually guaranteed that someone will be eventually. It's also a great way to establish a culture that communicates, "We are a church that is always expecting guests."
3. Imagine someone present in person or online who is giving church one last shot. Between people disillusioned with some church experience and those doing the trendy thing of "deconstructing" their faith, this is a huge segment of people. When you prepare for a service imagining that such people will be present, it changes how you plan to greet people in the parking lot, host the service, conduct the liturgy, and communicate during the sermon. At least it has for me.

Two sermon excerpts of preaching with outsiders in mind:

Here is an excerpt from Pastor Kuerth's sermon on 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10. You will hear his theme "Only Jesus Provides Eternal Home Security" echoing in the excerpt below.

The Thessalonians knew that ultimately only Jesus provides eternal home security. They knew that only in Jesus would they be kept safe from God's judgment against sin. How about you?

There is a danger today, I think, that we would be so lulled into a false sense of earthly security that we forget about our real need for Jesus and his saving grace. There is a danger today facing everyone in Doral that if we just have enough money, or toys, or technology . . . and that if our earthly lives and houses feel safe . . . and we have the sense that we're in control and if we keep our lives so busy that we don't even really think about death or God's judgment or wrath . . . then everything must be okay, and we just assume we'll be safe forever and ever. There is a danger today specifically for Christians too that we would compromise the convictions of our faith and the teachings of the Bible in order not to experience conflict with the world. There is a danger that we would make our own personal comfort a higher priority than taking up our cross and following Jesus no matter the cost rather than be made fun of by our friends who don't believe what we do.

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But no matter what the cost, no matter how heavy the cross we have to carry in life or how much conflict we face, to those who cling to Jesus, he promises relief. Paul says, *"He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well."* This is why the Christian church is the only place where you are perfectly safe. You're safe here not because this earthly building is built impossibly strong. You're safe here not because nothing bad could ever happen here. You're safe here because *only Jesus Christ provides eternal home security.* Like Paul told the Thessalonians, *"This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you."* . . .

Everything Jesus accomplished as the stand-in for sinful humanity, he did for you. When he died on the cross, those were your sins he was paying for. When he rose from the dead, that was your victory over the grave that he won. When he comes back in glory, he will come to bring you safely home and glorify you with him forever. It's something we can look forward to. Only Jesus provides eternal home security until the day he says, "Welcome home." Then we will be forever safe from all violence, selfishness, exploitation, and greed. Then we will be forever safe from all the consequences of sin and from endless ruin itself.

Here is an excerpt from Pastor Kuerth's sermon on Matthew 1:18-25 with the theme, "Jesus Gives Us What We Need."

So how could (Joseph) be sure (of what the angel told him and if he was equipped for the task of raising and protecting



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the Son of God)? Because he simply took God at his word. He went all in trusting God's Word instead of his initial feelings. There's a great lesson for us. That's why months later Joseph followed through and named that little boy Jesus. Even after he had time to think things through, he was still sure. Even after the emotional high of a personal visit by an angel had long worn off, Joseph kept hanging on to God's Word. He knew that God was with him.

And you can be sure of that too, no matter what you're going through right now and no matter what surprises you will find in the future. For even though life often takes us by surprise, nothing takes God by surprise, and his presence in your life means you have nothing to fear. In our world there are lots of uncertain things. Pop up ads promise you too-good-to-be-true deals if you just click on them right now. Weather predictions are sometimes right and often not. The stock market is volatile and not even the experts seem to know whether it'll go up or down. You might not be sure what the next year is going to hold for you and your family. You might not always be sure where you're going to find the courage to deal with the different people and situations you face.

But you can be sure of Jesus. You can be sure he came to pay for your sins as the only one perfectly qualified to do so because he is both fully God and fully human. You can be sure that he lives to take you to be with him forever heaven. You can be sure that Jesus is your Savior God who is with you as you go forward into the future. Because he is Immanuel.

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

I need to talk through the ideas in my head with others in order to sift out the wheat from the chaff, so for years now the most helpful resource in preaching preparation has been to meet regularly with other pastors to share key insights, applications, and ministry stories of the real people we're thinking of as we

prepare a sermon on the same text. I feel blessed to get to do that via Zoom with other Divine Savior campus pastors as part of our multi-site ministry.

A preaching book that I regularly consult is *Stories with Intent* by Klyne Snodgrass. Prof. Paul Wendland suggested this in a satellite summer quarter class on preaching parables. The book provides useful insights into story structure, historical context and interpretation, and relevant modern applications. I've realized that I could improve how I tell stories, so the book has been a help in thinking through the ways Jesus used stories.

Timeless Reminders

Editor's note: This issue's timeless reminder comes from Prof. Emeritus James Westendorf's article, "Passionate Preaching for Impassioned Preachers." You can read Prof. Westendorf's article in its entirety in Preach the Word 4:1.

Know Your Text. Often when you go up to a person you didn't know very well before and start asking him questions about himself, rather than simply listening to what other people have to say about him, you find out some very interesting things. You may get to know the person so well that you want to introduce him to your friends. The same thing can happen with texts. You begin a dialogue with a text, asking questions of it and listening for its unique answers, given in a way that perhaps no other text can give, and you start getting excited. The conviction begins to grow in mind and heart, "Wow, this text has some amazing things to say, and it says them so marvelously. I can't wait to introduce it to my people next Sunday."

Know Your Pulpit. The sermon is our chance to tell others what we have seen and heard from the mouth of God himself. I wonder with what feeling Philip spoke the words to Nathanael, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph"? I don't think those words were said matter-of-factly because what they revealed was so mindboggling and amazing. You are in the same situation when you preach, only you don't have to find the people first. They have come to you! Don't hide the excitement. Let the enthusiasm that is in your heart show!



Know Your People. The impassioned preacher is not just a visiting pastor, he is also a listening one. He does the hard work of actually paying attention to what his people are saying. He makes mental notes of the fears, disappointments, doubts, and hopes which his parishioners describe. . . . When he is in the pulpit, all those conversations come flooding back into his memory. In his voice can be heard his unrestrained joy that says, "Boy, do I have something wonderful to tell you."

Know Yourself. I'm sure you have been told more than once in your career, "Preach every sermon and apply every text to yourself before you take it to your people." When that is done faithfully and regularly, the enthusiasm to share grows. . . . There are no magical formulas and no artificial contrivances that can keep the fires burning and the juices flowing, but that doesn't mean there are no solutions to the absence of passion in our hearts and in our sermons. You are regularly working with the Spirit's own instrument. Let it have free course in your heart. The passion will be there; passionate sermons will be the result. You and your people will reap the benefits.

