

PREACH

the Word

Vol. 3 No. 5

May/June 2000

DISTRICT PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE ON PREACHING

"He'll make a good preacher. He has a good voice." Perhaps you've heard that analysis of a novice preacher. If only it were that simple!

Our editor asked if I would offer "the perspective of a district president who hears from people about their preachers." I've been keeping notes. Other DPs have offered comments. Especially helpful are the comments provided at pre-call meetings, when congregations have an opportunity to describe what they appreciate about their pastors, including their preaching ability.

At the risk of being "that simple" I'll summarize my thoughts in this phrase: "Preach from God's Word through your heart to their lives."

FROM GOD'S WORD . . .

Overwhelmingly, our people trust the preaching of their pastors. They expect the doctrine and applications in the sermon to square with God's Word. They expect the message to expound the text with Christ at the center and present good law and gospel. Even when a district president hears the occasional complaint about a pastor from a parishioner, it rarely has to do with his failure to expound the Word in its truth and purity. To God be the praise!

Are there negatives? Yes, occasionally. A preacher may fail to be specific in law applications, or he uses his sermon to scold a member (without using names, of course) for what is perceived as an offense to him. He may also fail to be specific with the gospel message, or use the same cliches week after week.

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.

Continued on page 2

Preacher to Preacher

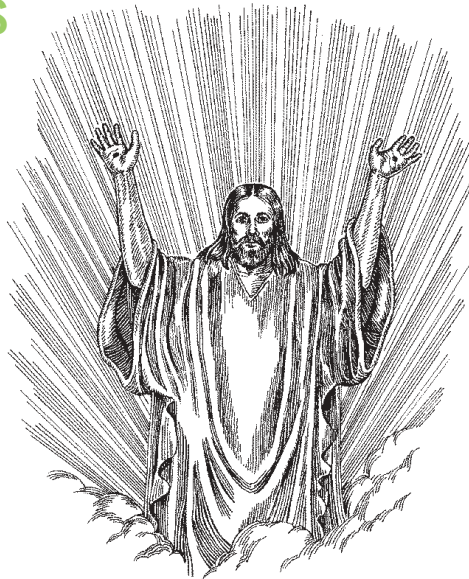
The editor of this newsletter is on the receiving end of a number of e-mail messages. Recently a young pastor wrote: "When I read *Preach the Word*.....I really want help with my sermon writing, and how I can be a better preacher."

Obviously a newsletter can do only so much in helping one to become a better preacher. Improvement always begins with one's own burning desire to become better. Along with this, one needs the constant awareness and confidence that the Spirit of God, working through the Word, will help us improve.

All of life is preparation for preaching. What we observe in our daily routines, our experiences in dealing with people, hearing about what is going on in the world, our devotional life, the books and periodicals we read—all these can contribute to making us better preachers. Be alert to what might be useful in your next sermon. Think preaching all week long.

Approach sermon text study with anticipation and enthusiasm. This is God's word addressed first of all to you and then to your

Continued on page 2



Continued from page 1



people. Start early with text study and do it thoroughly. In general the better we prepare, the better we will preach.

Beware of trying to include everything learned from text study in your sermon (see comments in this newsletter's "Worth Quoting"). A sermon is not like a Bible class which seeks to explain everything in a text.

A sermon should have one specific goal and needs to be shaped accordingly. Which leads to a question from another correspondent: "Is there a trend among our ministerium to preach sermons that are unclear?"

That's a question I can't answer. But if our preaching is unclear, one reason may be our failure to think through what our purpose is in preaching a particular sermon. We should be able to complete this sentence: "My purpose in preaching this sermon is...." If we are not clear about our purpose, our hearers will also be unclear. Our purpose should be expressed in a theme which needs to be firmly fixed in the minds of our hearers by the end of the sermon. This goes a long way to making our sermons clear. Never stop trying to become a better preacher.

Continued from page 1

THROUGH YOUR HEART

God's people also want us to be ourselves when we preach. That does not mean bringing in all your life history. It means being real. Sometimes a preacher apparently feels that he could improve his preaching if only he would be like "brother so-and-so." Yet the Holy Spirit has gifted you to be yourself, not someone else. Don't despise the Holy Spirit by ignoring your own gifts, modest though they may appear to you. Discover, refine and utilize the gifts and abilities you possess.

Our hearers would like us to listen to ourselves once in a while. Popping a cassette of our sermons into the player or watching ourselves on video can be a valuable tool to improve our preaching.

Does the person in the pew think our sermons are too long? In this age of 30 and 60 second sound bites, it's an ongoing testimony to the power of the Word that the sermon still "competes" and succeeds. At the same time, longer is not necessarily better. Our hearers have grown accustomed to more compact communication. Without shortchanging the message, work at being more concise in stating it. How long a sermon seems often depends on the preacher's ability to expound the text clearly and apply the text relevantly and plainly.

Be alive when you preach. While our members might come to worship somewhat sleepy at times, you cannot. Don't read your sermon. If you can't remember it, neither will they.

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.

TO THEIR LIVES

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.

From the Word ... through your heart ... to their lives. It's a little more than "He has a good voice; he'll be a fine preacher," but it captures what God's people want and need out of their pastor as preacher.

Herbert H. Prah

Prah is pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Eau Claire WI, and president of the Western Wisconsin District.

w o r t h
" Q u o t i n g "

What follows is a potpourri of quotations from a variety of sources with comments suggesting application for preachers.

"Less is better." That's what a landscape instructor kept emphasizing on a field trip. He pointed out examples of overgrown shrubs and trees which detracted from the beauty of houses and yards. "Less is better," he kept saying. Can this also be true with preaching?

Recently I heard a lecture on the painting of Andrew Wyeth where a similar point was made: "Wyeth only put in what was necessary; a lot is left out." What is left out in a painting will help to emphasize what is really important. What is left out of a sermon may help to emphasize what really needs to be said.

Johannes Brahms said about writing music: "It is not hard to compose, but it is wonderfully hard to let the superfluous notes fall under the table." Does it sometimes happen that preachers will keep a well written paragraph in a sermon even if it doesn't quite fit? One needs to identify superfluous words and get rid of them. That's hard work.

Along the same lines is the observation of an adviser in a presidential campaign: "Some consultants try to put things in a candidate. I try to empty things out. It's too easy to wander off." Preachers may "wander off" especially when there is no clear idea of where one is headed.

Ludwig Beethoven described his way of shaping notes: "I alter some things, eliminate, and try again until I am satisfied. Then begins the mental working out of this material in its breadth, its narrowness, its height and depth." Beethoven worked hard at composing music. A preacher will want to do the same in shaping words.

Karl Barth does not have a good reputation with WELS preachers. But a couple observations he made about preaching are worth passing along. He urged preachers to avoid quotations in a sermon, saying: "Stand behind your own poverty." And be biblical: "Against boredom the only defense is again being biblical. If a sermon is biblical, it will not be boring. Holy Scripture is in fact so interesting and has so much that is new and exciting to tell us, that listeners cannot even think about dropping off to sleep."

This is something about sermon preparation which comes from *Worship* magazine: "There are no magical keys to effective preaching. The only way is study of the Scriptures, pastoral concern for people, sensitivity to liturgical context, and the creative imagination which is born partly out of native talent, but even more out of meditation and quiet reflective prayer."

And finally an encouragement from Luther to use illustrations: "Ordinary people are caught more easily by analogies and illustrations than by difficult and subtle discussions; they would rather look at a well-drawn picture than a well-written book." (LW 26.359)

SERMONS OFTEN DISAPPOINT

This was the headline for a January 8 article in the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel. It began:

"The power of the pulpit ... is being wasted because a large majority of ministers and priests do not communicate effectively in their sermons. Listeners are begging for relevancy, and they're not getting it," said Lori Carrell, an associate professor who holds an endowment-for-excellence chair in speech communications. She continued:

"Most preachers rarely consult with congregation members in advance to find out how the Sunday Scripture readings might relate to the real-life issues they are facing."

WELS preachers might respond:

1. A house-going pastor makes a church-going people. Pastors who know their flock well—and the world we inhabit—also know how to apply God's word to their lives.
2. God's word is eternally and unchangeably relevant, even to narcissistic itching ears that don't know what they really need.

But, having responded in this way, it's still good to ask: How do I get preaching feedback? If you have a system, great. If you're looking for new ideas, here are three.

1. The roster of WELS preaching consultants is posted on the worship website, <www.wels.net/sab/frm-cow.html>.
2. Some pastors have trained their Board of Elders to offer substantive preaching critique. A form for offering this critique is available at the worship website.
3. Freddy Krieger shared a useful suggestion. Use lessons for the upcoming Sunday at a midweek Bible class. This helps one dig into the text both exegetically and with an eye to application well before writing the sermon. Participants in a midweek class assist in discerning useful applications. For more comments from Freddy, see the worship website.

The Journal-Sentinel article is at <www.jsonline.com>. Steven Pagels offers comments at the worship website.

Bryan Gerlach

Preaching Preview

Prepositions are sometimes very significant words. That's true of the way the Sundays of the Easter season have been renamed in the revised church year calendars. What was formerly called the "First Sunday *after* Easter" is now the "Second Sunday *of* Easter." This change in prepositions from "after" to "of" means to suggest that the entire Easter season is one long celebration of the resurrection. Easter hymns are appropriate on all the Sundays of Easter. We give forty days of special emphasis to Lent. We should give equal billing to Easter.

Are we short-changing the message of Easter in our preaching? Perhaps, if what Pastor Steven Degner heard from one of his relatives is true. The following paragraph was included in an essay Degner delivered at the 1999 fall pastoral conference of the Arizona-California district:

"Steve, I don't hear enough *preaching about the resurrection*. I hear that Jesus suffered and died for my sin, but I don't hear enough about the resurrection.' Those were the pleading words that came from one of my relatives whom I visited in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, while passing through to a mission board meeting in Milwaukee several years ago. These words keep going through my head, over and over again. 'We don't hear enough about the resurrection.' The resurrection is the supreme evidence that the Father accepted the sacrifice Jesus made for our sin. It is the kind of big picture.....that we need to bring into every presentation of law and gospel. It is the message of the resurrection that galvanized the early church and propelled it to speak with boldness."

Every Sunday is a little Easter. But especially on all the Sundays of the

Easter season, let's make sure that the message comes through loud and clear:

Christ is Risen! Alleluia!

On the Sundays of Easter in this Year B of the three-year lectionary, the second lesson is from *First John*. The opportunity presents itself, for six consecutive weeks, to lead our hearers into the message which the apostle John sounds forth: "We proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us" (1:2). Preach life, the life which is Christ, the risen Lord!

Here's a preview of the texts from I John for Sundays 2 through 7 of Easter:

April 30 (Easter 2): 5:1-6 By his resurrection Christ won the victory over sin, death, and the devil. By faith in him that victory is ours. Celebrate the victory!

May 7 (Easter 3): 1:1-2:2 There's a lot in this text. The tone is set in verse 1: "We proclaim...the Word of life." Because of this Word of life, there is forgiveness of sins for the whole world. Rejoice!

May 14 (Easter 4): 3:1,2 The Easter message carries with it this promise: the best it yet to come. We are God's children now, but the full implications of that truth will only become evident to us when our living Lord comes again. Lift up your hearts!

May 21 (Easter 5): 3:18-24. Two words in verse 23 sum up our life in Christ: believe and love. Luther in his great 1535 Galatians commentary describes the whole of Christian life this way: "inwardly it is faith toward God, and outwardly it is love or works toward one's neighbor" (LW 27,30). Live in Christ!



May 28 (Easter 6): 4:1-11. As we near the end of the season of Easter, our eyes turn to Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The risen Lord sent the Spirit (John 16:7) that we might know his sacrificial love for us. God loves us sinners perfectly. Therefore love one another!

June 4 (Easter 7): 4:13-21. This has sometimes been called the "in-between Sunday." For ten days, between the Ascension and Pentecost, the apostles waited. We 21st century Christians also wait: for the day of judgment. We wait without fear of that day because of God's perfect love for us. The first words spoken by our risen Lord are meant for us as well: fear not!

Many congregations are beginning to schedule year round worship on weekdays. Whether or not your congregation does this, consider celebrating the *Festival of the Ascension* on the fortieth day after Easter. This year that would be June 1. It's a great service in which to schedule special singing by adult and children's choirs. Including Holy Communion is especially appropriate as a reminder that though Christ has removed his visible presence from us, he is still very much with us. Making something special of the Ascension is a fitting climax to the Easter season.

four

PREACH
the Word

Preach the Word is published bimonthly by the WELS Commission on Worship
2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398 • 414/256-3265
FAX, 414/256-3899 • <brygerlach@aol.com>
<www.wels.net/sab/firm-cow.html>

Victor Prange, editor • 520/798-3601 • <vhptucson@aol.com>
Wayne A. Laitinen, managing editor