

## Preaching Workshop

### PART I MARRY THE TEXT

- I. Start by getting acquainted with the relatives, even keeping in mind the neighborhood.
  - A. Keeping a notebook with summaries of readings is very useful.
    1. If you are the only preacher, it can make you more aware of the sequence/progression of themes during the church year, especially during the Pentecost/Trinity season.
    2. To better see the progression of themes, consider sticking to one set of texts for half of the church year; for example, all gospel texts for the festive half, then epistle texts for the non-festive half, then Old Testament texts for the next festive half, etc.
    3. Every text has a thousand sermons in it. You can narrow down the choices by having the auxiliary readings always fresh in your mind as you study the text; the readings should not just be busy work leading up to what **I'M** going to say but part of the unity of the service. Consider, for example, John 1:29; it could occur in Advent; depending on the other readings the emphasis could be on why Christ is coming into the world or on the office of the Holy Ministry. It could occur in Epiphany with an emphasis on Christ's devotion from the very beginning of his ministry to its ultimate goal. It could occur in Lent with an emphasis on the text's most basic point of the Savior as sacrifice. It could occur in Pentecost/Trinity with the emphasis on the way that the church is created or the way that faith is created and preserved in the individual – again depending on the auxiliary readings and the particular Sunday in the liturgical year. Always the center of the sermon will be Christ; the rays that emanate from the heart of the Lamb however are manifold, perhaps inexhaustible.
    4. Especially when preaching on epistle texts, it is useful to keep the gospel lesson in mind. Remember that preaching epistle texts is in a way an unnatural use of the text, since it is part of a letter with its own extensive context; usually the gospel lesson will point the way to the particular emphasis for that epistle text on that particular Sunday.<sup>1</sup> A *lectio continua* presents a different set of considerations, and the auxiliary readings may or may not be as helpful.
    5. Ignoring the context of the liturgical year is the same as ignoring the auxiliary readings; it will tend to make our preaching

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<sup>1</sup> It's perhaps worth noting that the epistle readings and many Old Testament prophetic text readings currently in use are often way too long. Their length suggests that the ones who choose them didn't expect us to do a careful Greek/Hebrew exegesis. It's not a sin to shorten the text. Again, the auxiliary readings will help you find the essential point for that Sunday.

superficial, with a scatter gun approach to the text that misses its depth, its richness.<sup>2</sup>

- B. A fundamental way of moving towards your marriage with the text is to ask it questions.
1. What makes this text unique, or at the very least unique in its setting of that particular Sunday with its family of surrounding readings?
  2. If it is an O.T. Bible history text, why did God include this event in the Bible, of all the events that he could have included? What's special about it, what eternal relevance does it have in a changing world? How is the character in his world like me/us in our world, and how does God deal with that character with the law and the gospel? How does the character reflect his times? In what **particulars and specifics** are these characters and their temptations like ours? E.g. the key to David's fall is in the first verse of the chapter (2 Sam. 11:1). How are Samson's temptations to the same kind of sins different? What about Solomon's sins? Given the assumption that the Holy Spirit is not usually redundant, why does God repeat the exhortation to Joshua that he should not be afraid (Josh 1:6, 7, 9)?
  3. If the text is a miracle of our Lord or a parable, how is it unique, different from every other miracle or parable? For example, how is the healing of the one leper in Mark 1:40-45 different from the healing of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11-19? In the great parable chapter (Luke 15) what's the difference between a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son? Note the rich variety in points of emphasis in the many parables about the Word as seed, about its nature as the ultimate source of the kingdom of God. How many different points of emphasis can you find in the *the kingdom of God/heaven is like ...*

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<sup>2</sup> If you read the sermons of the greats, e.g., Gerhard, C.F.W. Walther, George Stoeckhardt, you will find that they sometimes suggest in the introduction a number of points made by the text and then tell us which one they are going to concentrate on this Sunday.

## PART II MINE THE TEXT

## II. Dig into the text.

- A. Pay particular attention to the specific words the Holy Spirit has chosen and carefully note difference in emphasis in synonyms.
1. *Grace* is not the same as *love* is not the same as *mercy*. Each of these words has a special and distinct emphasis. Consider St. Paul's magnificent interplay with these words in Eph. 2:4-5. Even with the word *love*, there is a difference between *agapao* and *phileo*, and it is sometimes surprising to see where the one is used when we would have expected the other (e.g., Titus 3:4). Note too the vast difference between *agapao* in Greek and *love* in ordinary English usage - - Is love an emotion or a choice? Does it reside chiefly in the heart or in the will? What difference does it make?
  2. Note the difference in the different words for sin; when they are used in a sequence or in Hebrew poetry the difference between *sin*, *transgression*, and *iniquity* can be very rich; even the word *sin* can have an abundance of differing points of emphasis, depending on its context. Is *sin* an offense against God that needs to be punished? Is it a debt that needs to be paid? Is it a wrong that needs to be made right? Is it filth that needs cleansing? Consider all the questions in this point just with Psalm 51 and the point is made: God is indeed a rich master of language! We don't want to short change his mastery by being careless in our examination of his choices.
  3. Pay attention to the syntax that the Holy Spirit has chosen to use; Greek word order is emphatic; Greek tenses are rich - - there is often a world of difference between an aorist and a perfect tense, e.g., *It is finished*. In the Old Testament notice the difference between *will* as a future tense and *will* as an expression of volition when God is the subject of the sentence. (Luther's translation of the Old Testament is especially interesting in this latter regard.)
- B. Make it your concern to preach the text, rather than to preach about the text.
1. As with the rich variety of emphasis in specific words, so also there is a rich variety in the presentation of specific doctrines.
  2. The doctrine of the forgiveness of sins can be spoken of as justification, as reconciliation, as atonement, as an expression of God's grace, of his love, of his mercy or of his election; the doctrine can be expressed with words that serve as a key to heaven; it can be presented with shocking examples in Bible history texts (David and Nathan, as penitent and pastor), in heart wrenching parables (the Prodigal Son in the context of God's family), the shocking beauty of God imitating man (the Fifth

Petition!), the example of an aching heart that longs to forgive a brother (Paul and the Corinthian member in 2 Cor. 2); it can be the mind boggling picture of forgiveness in the sacraments - - one sacrament forgives even tomorrow's sin, and the other assures me yet again of forgiveness for yesterday and today and forever; one sacrament made me holy, the other gives me the price of my salvation, my Savior himself, to keep me company all the way through the valley of the shadow of death!

3. Use the imagery of the text itself; consider the ways that you might preach on the passage that Paul (Rom. 10:21) quotes from Isaiah (65:2), *All day long ...* (The imagery in a language as concrete as Hebrew is especially noteworthy in contrast to the Greek love of abstractions.)
4. In passage that deal with the doctrine of sanctification and in the law what's the chief point of emphasis? Which use of the law do you want to emphasize in texts from the Sermon on the Mount? More than one? In epistle texts on sanctification, mischief gets done when law and gospel are confused or any use of the law is trivialized or negated by an inappropriate insertion of the gospel: **WATCH OUT FOR THE LUTHERAN EARS SYNDROME!** (Paul and the Confessions warn against it too: ... *those who live like this*<sup>3</sup> *will not inherit the kingdom of God – Gal. 5:21. Therefore, there is no true, saving faith in those who have no contrition and sorrow and who have the evil intention to remain and continue in sins. Instead, genuine contrition comes first, and true faith is found in and with true repentance – F.C., S.D., Art. III, 26 [Kolb, p. 566].*)
5. The point is that while the Holy Spirit is not redundant, he is rich, rich, rich, in the variety of ways that he can say the same thing. If we stick to the text, we will not be any more redundant than the Holy Spirit is; so preach the text, not about the text.
6. When we mine the text, by means of the Word we climb into the heart of God where he shares it all with us (cf. Jn. 15 esp. vs. 15-16<sup>4</sup>). When we mine the text, we come back from the heart God and speak his heart into the heart of those who hear us. That's way too important a matter and way too beautiful to subject it to

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<sup>3</sup> The Greek participle translated in the NIV as *those who live like this* is from the verb *prasso*, not the verb *poieo*; the contrast in meaning and use in the New Testament is an important one for keeping law and gospel properly distinguished. Notice the usage of the participles of both verbs in Jn. 5:29.

<sup>4</sup> As an interesting digression: Note the two very different Greek words that God uses for *friend* in the gospels. The one we would expect to be used is in Jn. 15; but a very different one occurs three times in Matthew, in 20:13, 22:12, 26:50. While translations give the word as *friend*, *comrade*, the root meaning of the word lends a much more pungent implication to the word, an implication that might sharpen one's use of the text in preaching. It is well and often said that word study is not the beginning and the end of a good sermon. But word study is a beginning, a good beginning, a beginning that may well deepen the preacher's appreciation for the language that God has chosen as the necessary vehicle for imparting grace and salvation.

expression in the pulpit that is merely cute or clever or just amusing.

C. If the exegetical/expository part of the sermon is textual, introductions and applications will be too.

1. The common lament of many pastors is that they have difficulty with the introduction to the sermon. If you mine the text and marry it as well, any number of introductions may suggest themselves either from the auxiliary readings or from Bible history (cf. the example of Johann Gerhard).
2. On the increasingly common habit of many to use the introduction as the place for their own autobiography ...
3. The best place to start in applying a text is, of course, with the text itself. If the text seems too broad or general, the second place to look is in the auxiliary readings. A third place to go for a start is the Table of Duties in the Catechism; for all of God's Word applies to us collectively and individually according to our station in life. Consider, for example, how a text on the mercy of God might apply differently to parents and employers than to children and employees, to the wealthy and powerful than to the poor and the sick.
4. Remember that the goal from introduction through application and conclusion is that the hearer should hear in the sermon an echo of the prophets, *Thus says the Lord!* If we write and preach so that they remember the text, then the seed has been planted and the Holy Spirit can do his work with it.<sup>5</sup> That's his promise. He would not lie to us.

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<sup>5</sup> Has it ever happened to you that weeks later someone comments on a sub point of a sub point that you made in a sermon as if it were the whole sermon? There was something there that the Holy Spirit used that you may not even have thought important, but it was important to that individual in his *Sitz im Leben*. Points from your autobiography will never have that effect, no matter how interesting you thought they were!

## PART III MIND THE TEXT - - in a liturgical and doctrinal context

III. Keep in mind the basic rule that *Theologia est habitus practicus!*

- A. Spend a few minutes from time to time going through the liturgy and mapping out its doctrinal content.
1. As with the Bible itself, it will not be a waste of time to consider the *why* of each line. E.g., Note the distinctions in the prayers of confession. Why do we have a salutation before the pastor prays? Why does the Creed follow the gospel lesson or the sermon? Why the three exchanges at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Sacrament? What doctrines lie hidden just under the surface? Is the Apostolic Greeting at the beginning of the sermon nothing more than a churchy *hello*? What about the blessing at its conclusion? What about the Benediction - - just a churchy *goodbye*? How many doctrines can you find in the common confession and absolution? How many in the *Gloria in Excelsis*?
  2. Every major doctrine has at least one place of emphasis in the Liturgy. That should be comforting to the preacher who always has reason to despair of his own feeble efforts in presenting clearly the truths of the gospel. In many times and places it has been the liturgy that kept faith alive, since the gospel was all but absent from the pulpit.
  3. Keep in mind that liturgical worship is and ought always to be *Gottesdienst*, chiefly God's service to us in the Word and sacraments and secondarily ours to him in receiving what he has come to church to give us. Thus the liturgy is an integral part of the service, not just busy work leading up to what **I'M** going to say in the sermon.
  4. While not every sermon needs to make reference to some part of the liturgy, it might help our people appreciate its beauty and significance as a summary of everything that God has to say to us if from time to time we referred to it. A Bible class series every now and then devoted to a careful study of the meat and potatoes of our faith in the liturgy would be time well spent. And time devoted to a consideration and teaching of this historic 2000 years-in-the-making Western Rite will for most be time better spent than that devoted to re-creating the wheel.
- B. Mind the text in doctrinal sermons.
1. The benefit of using a pericope series is that it makes doctrinal preaching easier. Every season has its specific set of doctrinal emphases that should keep the preacher from the temptation of "grinding an axe" in the manner of many of the sectarians.
  2. The progression through the church year is an orderly one, even though points of emphasis may vary from pericope series to pericope series. The doctrinal progression is fairly easy to follow in the Festival Half.
  3. In the Pentecost/Trinity cycle there is a fairly but not slavishly consistent progression of emphases<sup>6</sup>: The doctrine of the Means of Grace by which

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<sup>6</sup> Often the readings for Pentecost/Trinity will follow an approximately seven week cycle, with a shift of focus every seven weeks or so. One of the more interesting features in many series is a Sunday either at the end of the first cycle or near the beginning of the second cycle that has readings with a strong emphasis on

the church is created; the doctrine of the *Una Sancta* (sometimes these first two occur in reverse order with effect first and then a consideration of cause/means); some series begin the non-festive half with the emphasis on the faith of the individual, its creation and attributes; then comes variously emphasis on its fruits in good works or in the life/growth of the church; finally a consideration of Last Things immediately after the Reformation and All Saints feasts. These last two feasts before the consideration of Last Things can serve as summaries of the whole Pentecost/Trinity season. Last Things sermons need to be planned so that the coming Advent season's readings and sermons do not prove to be redundant.

4. There are a number of doctrines that come up more than once, but each time with a special twist from the season of the year. There is, for example, an emphasis on the holy office of the ministry on either the Third or Fourth Sunday in Advent (both its great glory and its lowliness as exemplified in St. John the Baptist), and usually another during the first or second cycle of readings in the Pentecost/Trinity (with an emphasis on its importance as a divine institution for the public proclamation of the gospel in the creation or preservation of the church in general and of faith in the individual). There is an emphasis on the family on at least one of the Sundays in Epiphany (the boy Jesus in the Temple or the Miracle at Cana), and then usually again somewhere in the third cycle of Pentecost/Trinity.
  5. If a doctrine comes up only once, the preacher may want to take special note of it in the sermon or at least in the bulletin. The doctrine of the angels, for example, could find its way into the Christmas story, the Passion history and the Easter story; but what we have to consider on those days is so much more important that the angels get lost in the shuffle, so to speak. All the more reason to consider them on the Feast of St. Michael, especially since false teachings about the angels are becoming popular these days.
- C. Our goal is to present yearly the whole counsel of God for us and for our salvation.
1. Remembering the doctrinal content of pericope texts and preaching it helps to keep us from becoming sectarian in our preaching; a hallmark of sectarian preaching is that in the name of being practical it has its focus on the third use of the law and ignores the *analogy of faith*.
  2. It helps keep our members as well as ourselves aware of the truth that doctrine is always law and gospel, is always ultimately practical, is always whole cloth.
  3. The role of polemics in the pulpit: A good shepherd warns the sheep and guards them against the poison of false doctrine and the jaws of

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purity of doctrine; I like to call that Sunday "Orthodoxy Sunday." In Series B it happens to be the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost; Series A and C could also have that as the theme; in the Ancient Church series it's the Eighth Sunday after Trinity. For examples of how the themes can be worked out progressively through the whole of the church year, cf. the series published by the Commission on Worship, *Planning Christian Worship*; there are suggested themes for each Sunday of the A, B, and C cycles printed on pp. 163-166 in the front of the hymnal.

the wolf (Matt. 7:15, Ezekiel 13 and so often elsewhere in Ezekiel; note especially God's charge in Ezekiel's call in chp. 2 - - Warn whether they listen or do not listen!) In it all we follow the example of St. Paul *speaking the truth in love* (Eph. 4:15) with no sacrifice of either. We serve under the cross, in imitation of Christ's state of humiliation; we're not in heaven yet.

4. Conclusion caution # 1: When preaching textual and doctrinal sermons - - and the terms should be all but interchangeable - - be aware that there are two people in church: One is in despair and the other one ought to be. Doctrinal sermons preach to both. Remember the rule in the Confessions: Sound doctrine has three marks; it is scriptural; it gives maximum glory to Christ; it comforts the sinner in his temptations and afflictions (*Anfechtungen*).
5. Concluding caution # 2: Doctrines are like great pillars that hold up the church; each one must be respected both in its wider context and in its uniqueness; by both God makes a mockery of rationalism while he puts reason to its best and most sublime use. It is one of the great hallmarks that God has given to us as confessional Lutherans that we delight in both. Thus for example, preach about prayer on Rogate Sunday and again when it comes up in the third or last cycle of Pentecost/Trinity without contradicting what God says about his providence in Romans 8; preach about the need to share the gospel on the Feast of Pentecost and elsewhere, but don't deny the doctrine of election in the process - - and, obviously, when preaching the doctrine of election, don't use it as an excuse to be lazy in evangelism; the gospel is not a license to sin and the law is not an excuse for either ultimate despair or for pride and self righteousness.

*Having done all these things, give thanks to God that none of the glory for the success of the gospel belongs to the preacher; it all belongs to him who gave it and has won us by it to love him and trust in his merit; having done all these things, give thanks to God that he has bestowed on vessels of clay the highest honor in the world, that of proclaiming him to the world; for by that proclamation and not apart from it he gathers in those whom he has chosen!*