



Rev. Michael Mueller



Questions of Faith

What does 'good' preaching look like?

Preaching is not a Bible study, nor is it Aesop's Fables for good, moral living. Rather it is the application of the Scripture to the daily life of the congregation. It is not about the pastor, his style, demeanor, dress, eloquence or gestures—these can all affect the reception of the sermon—but the object is to get out of the way and let the congregation see Christ (John 12:21b).

A preacher then must present all the articles of faith in accordance with Scripture and rightly distinguish between Law and Gospel. It is important not to avoid certain parts of the Law because it makes people uncomfortable, nor avoid the Gospel passages because we mistakenly believe they will motivate to do good works. Those who hear only Law will be driven either to despair or self-righteousness. Those who hear only Gospel become lulled into a spiritual sleep and become proponents of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "Cheap Grace"—an antinomian view of life which removes all constraints of moral law from the Christian.

Rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and of pastors in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience. When the Law condemns, you must reach for the Gospel at once. The very essence of being a Christian is that one knows how to seek salvation in Christ and thus escape the Law. A preacher therefore must know the art of giving each person at the proper time what is needed—be it Law or Gospel. This skill is acquired only through the Holy Spirit over time.

God must be sought where He has revealed Himself, that is, in Jesus. To find God, we turn to this humble Jew of Nazareth, who long ago had told Thomas: "*Jesus said to him, 'I AM the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him'*" (John 14:6-7) Of all places, the glory of God is to be sought on the cross of Golgotha. We agreed profoundly with St. Paul's words to the Galatian Christians: "*Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (Galatians 6:14) The central figure in Christian theology is the crucified and risen Christ.

This is where the paradox of the righteousness and holiness of God and His unfailing mercy come together to be resolved. Everyone must pay for their sins with death, so the sacrifice must be by a man who can die, and yet the defeat of sin and death must be by God, so we have this conundrum satisfied only by the incarnation of God-man in Jesus, His perfect life and sacrificial and substitutionary death for us. God brings this message of hope to us through His Word in ways that we can perceive: His breath of life in the words of Holy Scripture, the cleansing water of our Baptism and life-giving sustenance of His body and blood in, with and under the bread and wine.

This is not just for our benefit and salvation, but also to transform us to become fisher's of men (mission) and to disciple those whom the Holy Spirit has called (church). This is not our church, but the Church is the very Body of Christ, led by Christ, powered by the Holy Spirit and preserved by God the Father. This invisible true Church is united and revealed wherever it is under the cross of Christ (Apologia 7-8:18). It is Christ's mission that we are called to take part in, so we look for where He is at work and listen to what He is calling us to do.

Like Paul in the Areopagus, we must be winsome in seeking permission to teach (Acts 17:22), look for cultural bridges to the Gospel (Acts 17:23, 28), then break down walls to the Gospel (Acts 17:24-27, 31), and finally let God do His work (Acts 29, 32-34).

As to the preference of Textual (Lectionary) versus Topical (single issue or series), there is no real preference. Both have good points and drawbacks. Generally, topical sermon series are used where there is a particular seasonal or event driven need (i.e. the parts of the worship service for Advent/Christmas, or the Gospel of John for Lent/Easter). Otherwise, following the Lectionary provides a fairly good survey of Scripture.

These are the principles that should guide good sermons:

First, always try to be humble and depend upon the Holy Spirit. It is easier to get out of the way if it's not about the preacher in the first place. Prayer is the source of power.

Second, take the opportunity to listen to or read to as many good preachers as possible.

Third, get trusted people to critique the sermons to help improve them.

Fourth, spend at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of sermon preparation time in research. Write and then let it sit for a day before revisiting it.

Fifth, re-read Walther and others on Law/Gospel to keep the distinctions sharp.

Sixth, make sure the outline works, the illustrations fit and one sentence theme is clear.

Lastly, record sermons before giving them and ask the following questions:

- 1) What have I heard and seen in the sermon just preached? Not just points, ideas, and themes—but pictures, phrases, questions, personal connections. These may well be different—even conflicting—for different church members. What would I hear and see that may continue to grow in the minds and hearts of the congregation?
- 2) What strategies and techniques did the sermon employ to evoke these impressions? What people remember was somehow communicated—how did I help this happen?
- 3) Where is the sermon inviting them to go—in their thinking, feeling, and acting? Sermons take their listeners on some kind of journey—where did this one lead them?
- 4) What costs and benefits seem involved in the way this sermon is crafted? No sermon strategy is cost-free. What is gained, and what is given up in this particular attempt?
- 5) How might the sermon grow more fully and effectively into the Word of God addressing this community, on this occasion, through the listening and speaking of this preacher? Did I divide the Law/Gospel of the text rightly? No preacher's sermon is ever "done"—what is this sermon in the process of becoming? "What would happen IF...?" Did the unbeliever feel despair and hopeless in his condition and want to hear the Gospel? Did the believer feel comforted and inspired by the Cross?
- 6) What does my voice and gestures in particular contribute to their hearing of the Gospel? How is that voice changing and developing from one sermon to the next? No good preacher is a clone of any other; and no good preacher ever quits growing!