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# **The Problem and Power of Preaching: Romans 1:16**

**Loren Kramer**

## **Introduction**

We are preachers, you and I. That is our calling. It is our primary task. No time is more important in our ministry than the moments spent in the preparation and preaching of sermons.

How are you feeling about preaching these days? Do you anticipate the task with delight or dread? Is preaching a great blessing or heavy burden? Reinhold Niebuhr kept a journal through the years of his ministry. The entries he made in the early days after graduation from the seminary are most revealing. His first call was to serve a congregation consisting of eighteen families. Here is a short sample from his journal in those early days in which he articulates his feelings about preaching:

Now that I have preached about a dozen sermons, I find I am repeating myself. A different text simply means a different pretext for saying the same thing over again. The few ideas that I had worked into sermons at the seminary have all been used and now what? They say a young preacher must catch his second wind before he can really preach. I'd better catch it pretty soon or the weekly sermon will become a terrible chore. . . . Here I am trying to find a new message each Sunday. I struggle to find an idea worth presenting and I almost dread the approach of a new Sabbath. I don't know whether I can ever accustom myself to the task of bringing light and inspiration in regular weekly installments.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Chicago and New York: Willet, Clark, and Colby, 1929), 4.

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***The Rev. Loren Kramer is President of the Pacific Southwest District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.***

Have you ever had similar feelings? I must confess that I have. Sermonizing is like trying to conceive and give birth to a new baby every week. If that sounds like a lot of hard work, that is because it is! But that is our task. That is our calling as preachers. Knowing that, with the Spirit's blessing, let us take a look at the problem, power, and promise of preaching.

### I.

What is the problem with preaching? When we get frustrated by something we are trying to do, the most natural thing is to point the finger of blame at someone else. The problem with preaching is the audience. If we had better listeners, the task would be easier. Somewhere I read of a seminarian who was deathly afraid of the prospect of preaching. The thought of getting up in front of the congregation terrified him. One of his professors, seeking to be helpful, encouraged him to have a mental picture of the congregation as a cabbage patch. That way, each one of those heads out there would be basically harmless. That may have eased the student's anxiety, but it did not get at the real problem of preaching. Those are not just a bunch of benign and empty cabbage heads out there. The problem with the audience is more serious than that. Listen to the opening paragraph from a book entitled "The Twenty-first Century Pastor":

Being a pastor today is more difficult than any time in memory. This century has witnessed the collapse of the Christian consensus that held American culture together for centuries. The secularization has pushed the churches to the margins of our nation's consciousness. George Hunter claims that 120 million Americans are virtually secular. They have no Christian influence, no Christian memory or vocabulary, and no Christian assumptions or world view.

How do you go about trying to reach those people with preaching? That is an enormous problem for us as preachers.

It is not, however, the only problem. An equally pressing problem for preachers is the one that stares back at us from our

mirror. A big problem with preaching, simply put, is the preacher. That is not a new revelation. That recognition is as old as the call to become a preacher. Remember Moses? When God called him to be his spokesman, Moses said, "I cannot do it. I have a speech impediment." When Jeremiah was called to speak he said "I cannot go, I am too young. I am only a child." When Isaiah heard the call, he cried out "Woe is me. I am undone for I am a man of unclean lips and dwell in the midst of people of unclean lips." All of them felt inadequate. None of them felt up to the task. It overwhelmed them. And frequently, the call threatens to overwhelm us as well. We pastors are called to work and to speak for God in a disbelieving world. It often drains and debilitates us, saps us of our energy and enthusiasm. So what is a preacher to do when he feels frustrated and unfulfilled? That is a dangerous moment. Sometimes the temptation is to turn to gimmicks and fads that will hold the audience's attention and feed the fragile ego of the preacher. But that is not the solution. It simply adds another element to the original predicament.

## II.

The real solution is to do what we have been called to do—preach the gospel. That is what Paul did. Talk about a preacher who had every reason to toss in the stole and take up tent making full time. In his journal, he could recount that his preaching had gotten him imprisoned in Philippi, thrown out of Thessalonica, smuggled out of Berea, and laughed at in Athens. All of that and more for doing what we do every week—preaching the gospel. It looks like enough to discourage anyone, but not Paul. Instead of hanging his head, turning tail, and slinking away, he says with confidence and conviction, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. I am proud of it." Then he adds this awesome confession of faith: "It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." Let that sink in. The gospel is the power of God.

Recently, through the Hubbel telescope, that powerful lens in the heavens and on the heavens, we were treated to some truly magnificent pictures of gaseous masses, which, as astronomers

tell us, are stars and galaxies in their formative stages. One scientist, looking at the phenomenon said, "I have seen the face of God." Awesome as that sight is to behold, as hard as it is to comprehend what we are seeing, it is nothing when compared to the power of God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The same God who shows His almighty power in creation, shows us His true face, not in a gaseous cloud, but in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. The same God who called the world into being—the sun, the moon, and the stars—by the word of His power, rescued and redeemed that world when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He saves people, not by the might and mystery of fission and fusion, but by the mystery and miracle of One who became a suffering servant and bore our burdens, forgiving us our sins and comforting us in our sorrow. The same One who defeated death now gives us everlasting life. Our task and calling is to proclaim this truth. It is our highest and holiest privilege. God has put into our hands and into our hearts and on our lips the good news of His plan and purpose for all the problem people of the world, starting with us. Our task is not to change the message, but to preach it. It is what we have been called to do, and we dare not be ashamed of it, even today, here and now. It is God's power to save people. Nothing else can or will do the job.

### III.

With that firm conviction, I want to narrow the focus from the "what" of our task to the "how," from the content to the container, from the means to the method, from God's part to our part. I am talking about us, you and me, as preachers of the gospel and how we go about preparing and doing what we have been called to do. Recently, I was listening to an interview with a man whose ministry had been enormously blessed in a few short years. He was reaching all kinds of people in a part of the city where other churches were closing their doors. When asked if he saw any reason why his ministry was flourishing when others were failing, he reflected for a while and then said, "Too many shepherds don't smell like sheep anymore." What a comment! It reminded me of an experience I had as a first-year seminarian. A small group of us had received an assignment to

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meet with the pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in downtown St. Louis. This was one of the four original congregations served by C. F. W. Walther. Pastor Lange shared with us future preachers some of the richness of his own years of experience. This statement I remember as clearly as if I had heard it yesterday. He said: "A pastor has two hands. You need to use both of them. One hand must be out and about with your people. The other one must be deeply imbedded in the scriptures, especially the New Testament." We are called to be two-handed preachers, good shepherds who know their sheep and are known by them. People come to hear what you have to say because they are looking for something. They have hungers to be satisfied, thirst to be quenched, hurts to be healed, fears to be overcome. They seek understanding of their failures, forgiveness for their sins, hope for their future.

Robert Randall, who is both a licensed clinical psychologist and pastor, has written a book entitled "What People Expect from Church: Why Meeting the Needs of People is More Important than Church Meetings." Listen to this excerpt:

People long for words of life from their preacher. Fruitful preaching has always been rooted in the lived experiences of the congregation. Preaching will be effective when it conveys a deep understanding of human pain and struggles and of hopes and joys. People will then know someone has broken through their loneliness. Sermon preparation consequently will begin by the preacher being with the people.

Being with your people is essential, but that is not enough for productive preaching. First and foremost, preachers of the gospel need to spend time with their Lord in His word – not just professionally, in preparation, but personally for daily living. If we are to speak for him we need to listen to him. If we are to lead others to Him, we need to know where to find Him ourselves. And we need to ask for His help and blessing as we go about the task.

Sometimes, we as Lutherans, are so concerned about avoiding the appearance of making prayer a means of grace, that we go

to the opposite extreme. We neglect the power that is promised by the One who calls us to preach the good news. Jesus was a man of prayer. On the mountainside, by the seaside, in the garden or in the upper room, he prayed continually. And the blessing came.

Erasmus has great counsel for those who would take on the task of preaching. He compares it to what the disciples did when they brought the loaves and fishes to Jesus. This is what Erasmus says:

Just bring those two little fishes, bring them to Jesus. Nothing he has not touched will be to any avail. Have you then, eloquence, have you philosophy, have you ability, have you knowledge of the sacred scriptures? Whatever you have, place it in the hands of Jesus. Let Him bless it and break it and give it to you. Then you can give it to the people, not as your own, but as coming from Him.

From Him, His blessings — that is where the power comes from in our preaching.

One final bit of counsel, fellow preachers. This is a call to commit yourselves to doing the very best that you can. Write clearly. Speak the word well. I am reminded of the story of the man who went to church one Sunday, leaving his family behind. The children were sick and the mother stayed home to care for them. When he returned from church, the wife was interested in the message for the day. She asked "What did the pastor preach about?" The husband thought for a moment and then answered. "He didn't say." Once again, write clearly and speak well. Luther's counsel is still excellent for preachers to heed. "Pray as if all depends on God. Then work as if all depends on you." Inspiration and perspiration are necessary companions in preparation and preaching. Someone recently found an original manuscript of a sermon by the great preacher Charles Spurgeon. At the top of the page he had penned the words, "Jesus deserves my very best." And He does. God held nothing back. He gave the His very best — His own Son — to give the gospel its power. We who are called to preach should never settle for mediocrity. If you are a preacher, heed these words from another preacher.



Study diligently, pray fervently, write clearly, speak boldly, say it well. Then trust the promise. The gospel is God's power to save. His word will accomplish the task for which He sends it. That is His promise.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude with some words that I shared at a previous pastors' conference long ago. These words helped me through the years of parish ministry. As I stepped through the sacristy door, to enter the sanctuary, I had these words posted there as a reminder of the privilege of preaching. They come from the mind of O.P. Kretzmann, a master preacher of his generation:

I am a preacher. . . . I am one of the greatest line in the history of men. . . . My line reaches back beyond the Cross to the days when the flood came over the earth . . . only because of the Church I serve and the Word I preach does God permit the world to roll on its way. I have watched men step quietly through the last gate because I had been permitted to show them the way. . . . There are men and women, and children too, before the throne of heaven today who are my children. . . . They are there because God let me bring them there.

The saints of the church are my joy, and the sinners are my burden. . . . I am an ambassador of the King of Kings. . . . My lips are among the few left in the world that speak truth. . . . I almost alone among men deal day after day with eternal things. . . . I am the last echo of a far voice that forever calls men home. . . . I am the hand of the bridegroom, the shadow of the Cross, the trumpet of the King. . . . Neither obscurity nor popularity can rob me of my glory. . . . It is not my own but the reflected glory of Him whose free and happy slave I am. . . . I am driven. . . . I must preach faith in a world that disbelieves, hope in a time that has no hope, and joy in an hour that knows only sorrow. . . . I am at home in a tenement house or in a mansion because my home is neither. . . . I and my people alone stand between the world and destruction. . . . The

flames on my altar will not die and the lights in my sanctuary will not be quenched by flood or storm. . . . I am a preacher – and very glad of it. . . .