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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ILLUSTRATIONS IN PREACHING:
UNDERSTANDING AND RETAINING BIBLICAL TRUTHS

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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ILLUSTRATIONS IN PREACHING:
UNDERSTANDING AND RETAINING
BIBLICAL TRUTHS

A MAJOR APPLIED PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY STUDIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
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BY
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ABSTRACT

This project explored how illustrations function in sermons to facilitate the understanding and retention of Biblical truths. Personal interviews with members of the congregation and focus groups that evaluated sermons provided feedback and insights related to the effectiveness of illustrations in preaching. The researcher compiled responses from the interviews and the focus groups to draw some conclusions about how illustrations function most effectively in aiding comprehension and facilitating an effective hearing of the message. On the basis of this study the researcher offers recommendations that preachers may find helpful in using illustrations in their preaching.

CHAPTER ONE

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE PROJECT

Problem Addressed by the Project

The world in which we live has changed. Some of those changes have been profound enough that trend watchers have needed to coin new words to describe the radical shifts that have taken place, shifts which affect the way people see the world, interpret what they hear, and process the data they receive, words like postmodernism, deconstructionism, multiculturalism, seeker-sensitive, and therapeutic culture. The modern worldview has given way to a new perspective that questions even the existence of truth. Since truth is at the very heart of what we assert and proclaim as preachers of the Gospel, we are forced to think more carefully than ever not only about the unchanging message we proclaim, but also about how that message is communicated. There have always been formidable challenges associated with preaching the Word, but the increasingly diverse nature of those who sit in our pews and the shifting expectations they possess have raised the stakes even higher. These hearers come from a world accustomed to a multitude of choices and like the digital finger on the remote control their minds, if not engaged, have already moved on.

In one sense we can assert that the preacher has little control over how the listeners hear, understand, and respond to his message. He has little control because words do not convey meanings perfectly. Once released words tend to have a mind of their own. But in a culture where communication is in flux, attention spans are growing shorter, people are more

dependent on the visual, and truth is assumed to be experiential,¹ speaking the truth with credibility and authority demands the very best we have to offer. To be conscious of the needs of the hearer and concerned that the message is being heard and understood compels the preacher to invest himself more fully in the communication process so that every impediment to the hearing of the message is removed and every communication technique that engages and assists the hearer is employed in service of the Gospel.

Metaphorical language has a great capacity to assist in communication. When metaphors are shared, they define and shape the way people think and experience life. At one time, Biblical metaphors were drawn from the literal experiences of people who made covenants, shepherded sheep, offered sacrifices, redeemed slaves and trampled grapes. Such experiences enabled them to appreciate and understand the metaphorical language which the prophets and apostles chose to express God's own gracious actions. These experiences are no longer common to the people who sit in the churches' pews, so preachers cannot rely on such familiarity in their hearers. In fact, widespread Biblical illiteracy hinders many people from even understanding and appreciating the core stories of salvation history.² People with little familiarity with God's Word have difficulty connecting with the very metaphors that have always been at the heart of Biblical preaching.

The lack of a significant, communal metaphorical field rooted in the Scriptures has challenged preachers to seek other metaphors and images that will resonate with their hearers. This, in part, has contributed to an increase in the use of other metaphorical applications, like illustrations in preaching. The use of metaphorical language in preaching is

¹ The rapidly changing context of communication has been discussed widely in the literature but Graham Johnson, *Preaching to a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001) 8-21; and David Henderson, *Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) 15-36, provide a fairly comprehensive look at how these changes affect the preaching task.

² William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992) 75-76.

hardly new. Jesus was a master at using extended metaphors (parables) to enlighten His hearers and share with them the secrets of the kingdom. He has given validity to the power of story or narrative to convey truth and become a vehicle of the Gospel of the kingdom. Jesus could rely upon the fact that his audience shared a metaphorical field rooted in Old Testament images like covenant, sacrifice, and kingdom. But when He began to proclaim the advent and shape of a new kingdom, He had no reservations about crafting stories that touched their lives in many familiar ways like the workers in a vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16), a wedding banquet (Mt.22:1-14), or a woman searching for a lost coin (Lk.15:8-10), but exposed them to the radical nature of a gracious God who could offer gifts beyond their imagining. They could perhaps relate to a wayward son who would shame his father, the whole village, and waste his inheritance, but not in their wildest imagination envision an extravagant father who would welcome back such a son with a prodigal celebration (Lk.15:11-32). Jesus used the inherent power of parables to draw people in and expose them to the reality of a new creation already taking shape in the midst.

The congregation to which I preach on a typical Sunday morning is diverse rather than homogeneous, complex rather than simple. Engaging each of the hearers requires an intentional effort to draw people into a story that touches their lives in meaningful ways. To believe that the Scriptures are the inspired and inerrant Word of God is to confirm their relevancy. They have always been and will always be relevant, because they speak to universal needs and offer the grace and forgiveness available only in Jesus Christ. But while the Scriptures are always relevant, not everyone can immediately appreciate their relevance. Effective communication requires that the preacher engage the hearer fully so he or she will be compelled to consider that message as a Word of God directed to him or her.

David Henderson, in his book *Culture Shift*, makes clear this distinction between actual and functional relevance. In order for a message to be relevant to any particular person, it

needs to be pertinent to his or her life, speaking to the issues that are actually of concern to that person. But that by itself is not sufficient to make the message relevant. It only becomes functionally relevant when the person is able to see and understand the connection it makes to his or her situation.³ A message may be of vital importance (have actual relevance), but if it is communicated in an unintelligible form it has no functional relevance. Preachers of the Gospel message know the relevance of God's Word for every human being, but proclaiming it clearly and effectively so that it is perceived to be pertinent to each individual in his or her life is an enormous challenge. It is certainly a challenge preachers can meet only with the assurance that God's Spirit is working through that Word in the hearts of those who hear.

The problem that this project will seek to address is related to the effectiveness of the use of illustrations in the communication of Biblical truths. Illustrations may be stories, current events, historical events, examples, statistics, and even quotes, but the primary emphasis in this study will be on the use of stories used analogically or to enhance the participation of the hearer. The widespread availability of sermon illustrations and the fact that suggested illustrations are offered along with exegetical helps in many preaching journals suggests that illustrations are being used more frequently in sermons today than in the past. One only needs to compare past bound issues of *Concordia Pulpit* to the corresponding publication that Concordia Publishing House now produces, *Concordia Pulpit Resources*, to recognize the more prominent role that sermon illustrations are now playing. But how effectively are these illustrations being used? And how effective are even good, relevant illustrations in helping hearers both apprehend and retain the Biblical truths that preachers want to communicate? These questions have not really been addressed, much less answered in the homiletical literature.

³ David W. Henderson, *Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 24.

My own use of stories in preaching has been influenced by eight years of experience in the mission field of Papua New Guinea. In the context of these tribal cultures where narrative was an integral part of the passing on of culture and where stories and parabolic language was a part of everyday communication, stories assumed a more significant role in my attempts to communicate the Gospel story to tribal peoples who had no experience or familiarity with God's Word. Making the Gospel functionally relevant in an oral culture means casting that message in a form congruent with the culture, even if that message will ultimately turn that culture up side down.

People love stories. Stories engage their attention. They captivate the emotions. A good story will draw people into participation in its action and suspense. None of these things are in dispute. Stories have always had their power and attraction. What is at question is the value stories play in preaching. Detractors question if they should be used at all, while others extol their value. But there is little research available to examine the problem of whether illustrations actually enable better understanding of Biblical truths and assist people in retaining those truths. It is the purpose of this project to demonstrate through qualitative research in the local congregation that illustrations do contribute to helping hearers understand Biblical truths and retain them.

I use illustrations extensively in my own preaching because I believe they do illumine points that may be difficult for some to grasp and provide depth of understanding for others who may already be familiar with such a concept. But I have not previously validated my assumptions with any careful research. The qualitative research in this project will either help substantiate my assumptions or raise further questions about the value of illustrations in preaching. At the very least, this research will provide helpful information about how illustrations function in preaching. For anyone passionately concerned about effective communication in preaching, the results of this research project should be of interest.

The Purpose of the Project

The primary purpose of this project is to enhance effective communication in my own preaching ministry. The specific scope of this research centers on how illustrations contribute to this effectiveness in preaching. Achieving this goal will involve research into how illustrations impact the hearts and minds of hearers and contribute to greater clarity and understanding in the communication process. Insight into how hearers relate a given illustration to the central theme of the message will enable the preacher to more carefully use, adapt, and integrate illustrations into the homiletical task.

While the primary purpose is somewhat subjective in nature, there are some outcomes of the research that are more quantifiable. Through survey and interviews, it will be possible to determine how effective the use of illustrations has been in helping members of the congregation at Timothy Lutheran Church to understand the central truths of Law and Gospel. It will be important in the research to distinguish various types of illustrative material and determine which types are most helpful for the hearer in connecting them to the central theme of the message.

Another secondary focus of the research will involve the attempt to better understand how illustrations function in helping people both gain and retain insight into the scriptural truths. The personal interviews will allow the exploration of these various functions and how they contribute to the hearing and understanding of the message. A more complete grasp of this process will contribute to the development of guidelines for the selection, adaptation, and use of illustrations in preaching.

While the primary purpose is to benefit my own preaching, it is hoped that the insights gained and guidelines developed might have broader applications for other preachers. These

applications could be shared in a variety of ways with those who are interested in effective communication, especially in preaching the Word of God.

The Process of the Project

This research project will begin with a broader, more general survey of the congregation where I have been preaching for 18 years. This survey will test some of the basic assumptions of the researcher, provide some contextual information that will assist in subsequent stages of the research, and allow more people to participate and provide data for the project. This survey was conducted over the space of 2 weeks in January 2005 and both youth and adults were invited and encouraged to fill out a survey form. Participants were informed about personal interviews, which would take place later in the project and asked to indicate on the survey their willingness to participate.

After tabulation of the survey and summarization of the responses, a group of potential interviewees were chosen from those who had indicated their willingness to participate. While there were some random aspects to the selection process, it was more important to include a broad spectrum of Timothy members in this smaller sample: male and female; long-term members and newer members; young and old; less educated and well educated. These interviews were conducted during March and April. The interviews explored interesting and pertinent aspects of the data gathered in the survey as well as probed the specific aspect of how illustrations assist in long-term retention of Biblical truths. With permission of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded so that more careful analysis could be made of the responses.

The final stage of the research consisted of the formation of focus groups that met during the week after the researcher preached to evaluate the Sunday sermon. Insights gained from earlier phases of the research guided sermon preparation, particularly the choice

of illustrations, in order to “test” certain conclusions about the use of illustrations with the focus group. The reflective evaluation of the focus group provided more concrete data about the effectiveness of illustrations in achieving their desired purpose.

The Parameters of the Project

The scope of the project is limited primarily by the membership of Timothy Lutheran Church, where the researcher has served as pastor from 1988 to the present. The average worship attendance of 320 provides a significantly sizable group with which to do the proposed research. While there may be some references made to sermons delivered by other preachers (Associate Pastor Bill Wilson or Assistant Pastor Erik Herrmann), the focus is on sermons preached by the researcher.

There are some assumptions, which underlie this study. Foremost is the assumption that the heart and center of preaching is the story of God’s redemption in Jesus Christ. The story of His life, ministry, and especially His suffering, death and resurrection is the well from which the preacher draws to share the water of life with the hearers. Preaching the Gospel is always more than the telling of this story, it is the sharing, the offering of a gift, which is Jesus Christ. It is through the foolishness of the message of the cross that God comes with His wisdom and power to intervene in the lives of His people. He awakens them to life by the power of His Spirit, creates true and living faith, and enables them to respond in love and obedience to His Word.

The preacher has the responsibility to ensure that the powerful Word he proclaims is clearly heard, touches the lives of his hearers in a functionally relevant way, and is memorable for their reflection and meditation. He ought to use every means and skill to communicate the message effectively. The preacher knows that there are many obstacles and

barriers to effective communication. He employs every persuasive and rhetorical technique at his disposal to engage the hearer and overcome the obstacles that impede the Word.

It is assumed by the researcher in his preaching experience that illustrations are effective in engaging the listeners' participation. They draw the hearer into a more active role in the process of communication. If multiple senses are awakened or if the emotions are involved, even greater engagement takes place. The Scriptures themselves are predominately narrative in their literary character and Jesus in His preaching and teaching used parables as the primary vehicles for sharing the good news of the kingdom. Truth is often communicated in the Scriptures in forms other than propositions. The research done in this project deals with the effectiveness of illustrations in helping hearers to understand and retain Biblical truths.

While the entire congregation is participating in this study to some extent, the more intensive research will be carried out with a group of 25-30 members. Those who are interviewed and make up the focus group will be relied upon to represent the congregation as sample listeners. They will have indicated their willingness to participate in this way and therefore probably possess higher than average motivation. Their reflections on the function, value, and effectiveness of illustrations in preaching will provide the data for evaluation and the conclusions that are to be formed. While this group is rather small, it will be as representative of the congregation as possible and mirror the diversity of the typical Sunday congregation.

The essential research for this project took place between January and August of 2005. During this time period, the congregation was surveyed, the interviews with a sample group conducted, and a focus group convened to respond in an interactive way with actual sermons that have been preached. However, the interviews focused attention on illustrations that have been used in the past years, if such memory indeed exists. While the researcher obviously

uses illustrative material in his sermons in a very personal style, conclusions about their effectiveness should have a wide range of application to other preachers.

CHAPTER TWO
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Power of God's Word

The subject of preaching of necessity must always begin with a word about the Word. Proclamation, properly understood, is always centered in God's Word. In fact, it is God's Word that is preached. That Word comes to God's people as a message of Law and Gospel. The Law discloses and exposes our true condition before God – that we are sinners in need of forgiveness, beggars in need of grace, the sick in need of healing, the broken in need of binding-up, and the lost in need of a searching Savior. The Gospel offers and conveys the very thing we need – forgiveness, hope, and salvation. In the preaching of the Gospel God comes to His people with His power to create the faith that grasps the very gift being offered. Proclamation is much more than the announcement of God's condemnation of sin and His forgiveness and love for the sinner. God's Word has the intrinsic power to do what it says. The Spirit of God is at work in that Word so that it is God who speaks and acts simultaneously. The Psalmist describes that connection:

*For He spoke and it came to be;
He commanded, and it stood forth (Ps. 33:9).*

The preacher depends upon both the Word of God as his source and the Spirit of God who is active in and through that Word. So he is able to approach the preaching task with authority and confidence that God is speaking through his words. "The written Word, the preached Word, the Word treasured in the believer's heart, is one Word of God which carries

with it by virtue of its divine *formula* (nature) the power of very God.”⁴ Ronald Feuerhahn, in an article in *Liturgical Preaching* describes this authority in this way, “We preach as if we know what is wrong with the world... as if we know the King of the world... as if we know the end of the world... as if we know who will save the world... as if we know about heaven – and we do.”⁵

The preacher, like Ezekiel, is commanded to prophesy to “dry bones” (Ez 37:1-14) with the promise that God can raise them up and breathe new life into them by the power of His Spirit. The Gospel is the “power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” (Ro 1:16). The preacher, like the prophet in the Old Testament, trusts in the inherent power of God’s Word. He depends upon the promise given to Moses, the reluctant herald with a speech impediment, “I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.” (Ex 4:12). It is God’s living and enduring Word which causes people to be born again (1 Pe 1:23), gives life (Ja 1:18), sanctifies (Jn 17:17), creates faith (Ro 10:17), and is useful for “teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Ti 3:16). This dynamic, powerful Word acts to accomplish God’s foremost purpose – to save the lost.

The Lutheran Confessions recognize clearly the power of the Word to accomplish God’s purpose. “It is God’s will to call men to eternal salvation, to draw them to Himself, convert them, beget them anew, and sanctify them through this means and in no other way – namely, through His Holy Word (when one hears it preached or reads it) and the sacraments.”⁶ Again in the same article the confessions affirm the primary role of the preaching of the Word, “All who would be saved must hear this preaching, for the preaching and the hearing of God’s

⁴ Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 363.

⁵ Ronald R. Feuerhahn, “Speaking For, Not Just to the Church,” in *Liturgical Preaching*, ed. Paul Grime and Dean Nadasdy (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 244-251.

⁶ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, II, 51 in Theodore G. Tappert, ed. *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 531.

Word are the Holy Spirit's instrument in, with, and through which He wills to act efficaciously, to convert men to God, and to work in them both to will and to achieve."⁷ A person does not contribute or assist in his or her own conversion, but God "has His Holy Gospel preached to us, through which the Holy Spirit wills to work such conversion and renewal in us, and through the preaching of His Word and our meditation upon it kindles faith and other God-pleasing virtues in us."⁸ God uses means to accomplish His saving purpose and "He employs to this end the preaching and the hearing of God's Word."⁹

The Word which is proclaimed by the preacher has inherent efficacy and power to expose sin and bring a knowledge of salvation which leads to faith because it is God's Word. St. Paul acknowledged that the Thessalonians had accepted the Word which had been proclaimed to them "not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the Word of God, which is at work in you who believe." (1 Th 2:13). The Gospel of salvation (Eph 1:13) is a living and powerful thing. This message which is proclaimed / preached has a power and capacity inhering in it to enlighten, regenerate, and save those who believe.¹⁰ It may be a "foolish" message which is preached, but it has the power to save (1 Co 1:21) those in whom the Holy Spirit works faith. This powerful Word (and the sacraments which depend upon the Word of promise in them) is efficacious even when wicked men proclaim it (or administer them).¹¹ Following a controversy in the early 17th Century generated by the writings of Hermann Rathmann,¹² the orthodox Lutherans spoke even more insistently about the inherent power of

⁷ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, II, 52 in Tappert, 531.

⁸ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, II, 71 in Tappert, 535.

⁹ Formula of Concord, Epitome, II 3 in Tappert, 470.

¹⁰ Preus, 366.

¹¹ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, VII and VIII, 19 in Tappert, 171.

¹² Rathmann, a Lutheran pastor from Danzig, published a book called *Vom Gnadenreich Christi*, in which he argued that Scripture itself was not a means of grace, but rather a sign and witness to God's grace. The Holy

God's Word. That power was always in the Word and even though it could be resisted it could never be separated from the Word.¹³

The orthodox Lutheran position on the origin and basis of the Word's power is a Trinitarian one.¹⁴ The written Word of Scripture and that proclaimed Word drawn from Scripture derive their power from God, who is the author of that Word, from its content, Christ, and from the Holy Spirit, who is united with and operative through that Word.¹⁵ Therefore when the preacher proclaims a message drawn faithfully from God's Word that conveys Christ to the hearer, he is assured that the Holy Spirit is always at work through that Word to convey the very forgiveness and life which Christ brings to our lives. "Because it is God who speaks, and the Holy Spirit who attends the Word, those who preach, teach, and give testimony do so with the assurance that the Word's effective power is not diminished."¹⁶

Ultimately, it is the Gospel which is the power of God to salvation (Ro 1:16). The Law has the power to threaten, to judge and to kill, but it does not have the power to awaken faith or to justify the sinner.¹⁷ The Law shows the sinner the extent of his or her true condition before God – one who is condemned and without hope. It is the good news alone which offers hope in the forgiveness of Christ. That message justifies the sinner, creates true faith in the heart, and brings Christ to the sinner so that he or she might cling to the Savior. Gerhard Forde understands proclamation in its functional sense. The Word is proclaimed to "put the

Spirit alone converts men through an immediate act. His writings were condemned as heretical and caused Lutherans to formulate their doctrine of the Word more precisely. See Preus, 367-370 for a fuller presentation of this controversy.

¹³ Preus, 368.

¹⁴ Ibid., 371.

¹⁵ Ibid. 371-4.

¹⁶ Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Durham, North Carolina: The Labrynth Press, 1992), 53.

¹⁷ Preus, 364.

old to death and to raise up the new in the Spirit.¹⁸ Law and Gospel function in proclamation to kill and to make alive as St. Paul writes in 2 Co. 3:4-6. So in proclamation the focus is on what the Word is doing, the goal ultimately being absolution.¹⁹ The Gospel must point the sinner to Christ alone as the only answer, the only hope, the only way. Therefore a sermon without this message of grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ does not have the power to save the lost. Kyle Haselden says that the good sermon

dare not leave the people either comfortably or miserably suspended between an unfronted Peril and an ungrasped Promise. It cannot leave them wondering how the horrors of so great a Peril can be escaped and how the blessings of so good a Promise can be obtained... the sermon is not an exercise in nondirective counseling... it is boldly indicative and declarative. However much we may warn men of the Peril and offer them the Promise, we have not preached the Gospel until we proclaim to men that One who transforms Peril into Promise for those who believe in Him, until we have declared to them that Christ in whom 'all the promises of God find their Yes.'²⁰

Therefore, with St. Paul, we must strive to "preach Christ crucified" (1 Co 1:23) for it is in His suffering and death that He validates the promise of God and secures our justification. The crucified Christ is the very heart of the Gospel message, for without the cross there is no hope and no salvation. Bonhoeffer understood that the proclaimed word is the incarnate Christ Himself walking through His congregation as the Word.²¹ That is, in the proclamation of the Gospel Christ becomes real, incarnate, present to His people as the only Savior of the world. In His presence He offers the very forgiveness that sinners desperately need. If we are concerned with the salvation of the lost then this Gospel must be preached, for it alone can offer hope and salvation to sinners.

¹⁸ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁰ Kyle Haselden, *The Urgency of Preaching*. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963), 62.

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. And trans. Clyde E. Fant (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 101.

Proclamation and Communication

The Lutheran presupposition that proclamation of Law and Gospel is the very heart of preaching has sometimes made it difficult for us to give attention to the rhetorical dimensions of the preaching task. At the same time there are significant voices emphasizing the importance of communication to the detriment of or lack of concern with the message proclaimed. Proclamation and communication are both important components of the preaching task and should not be set against each other. Either extreme of this tension filled spectrum ignores the challenge of keeping these two aspects of preaching connected in a way that neither diminishes the power of God's Word alone to work faith in the heart of a hearer or the importance of clear and articulate communication so that the message is actually heard.

Centuries ago St. Augustine brought the disciplines of rhetoric and homiletics together in a productive relationship that linked content (message) to form and style (communication) in a marriage that worked and even flourished.²² But this relationship was not always a healthy one and when interest in rhetoric declined and the discipline itself was ignored in the academic realm, the complementary nature of this relationship was questioned. Indeed, Karl Barth denied that communication had any role at all in relationship to proclamation. Because the Word of God and humanity in its sinful human condition were completely discontinuous from each other, there was no possibility that rhetoric could contribute anything to the Word of God as it was proclaimed.²³ According to Barth²⁴ the preacher should have no concern at

²² Thomas Long, "And How Shall They Hear," in *Listening to the Word*, ed. Gail R. O'Day and Thomas Long (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 173.

²³ Glen Nielsen, "No Longer Dinosaurs: Relating Lutheran Homiletics and Communication Practice," *Concordia Journal* (January, 1999), 15.

²⁴ Thomas Long has an extended section in his opening chapter of *The Witness of Preaching* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1989), 24ff. where he describes the "herald" image as a preaching model. He defines this particular model of preaching as leaving no place for any rhetorical complement to the proclamation of the Word or any discussion of making the sermon "more effective."

all for the hearer's situation, for rhetorical issues were not compatible with the homiletical method for epistemological reasons.²⁵ Barth insisted that only the Biblical text could shape the message:

I have the impression that my sermons reach and 'interest' my audience most when I least rely on anything to 'correspond' to the Word of God already 'being there,' when I least rely on the 'possibility' of proclaiming this Word, when I least rely on my ability to 'reach' people by my rhetoric, when on the contrary I allow my language to be formed and shaped and adapted as much as possible by what the text seems to be saying.²⁶

For Barth and for those he influenced the preacher had only one task – to reproduce that which had been revealed by God, the action of God's grace in Jesus Christ. He could add nothing to the message.

While, theologically speaking, Barth took the high road with his distinct emphasis upon the power of the Word and his reluctance to allow any rhetorical considerations to diminish its power, in reality, the actual context of preaching challenges these assumptions. Those preachers who totally disregard their hearers and their concerns, questions, and interests end up with messages that fail to engage listeners and frequently bore them. God's Word is certainly relevant to every human situation and need, that is, it has "actual relevance." But unless it is given "functional relevance" by being proclaimed in such a way that the hearer recognizes or perceives its connection to his or her life, he or she is just as likely to turn a deaf ear or ignore the preacher as he or she is to put any effort into listening. King David might have easily dismissed a conventional word of judgment spoken by the prophet Nathan, but he was so drawn into the story of the rich man stealing the poor man's sheep, so enraged by his indifference to what was right in God's eyes that he unwillingly condemned himself and felt the full weight of the Law pressing upon himself (2 Sa 12).

²⁵ Long, 177

²⁶ Karl Barth, "Nein!" in Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology* (London: The Centenary Press, 1946), 79-80.

It was in 1971 that Fred Craddock turned the attention of the homiletic community to the listener with his book *As One Without Authority*. His inductive approach to the preaching task recognized the considerable responsibility the preacher had to ensure the engagement of the listener and the significant role of the listener in grasping the message and, in effect, completing the circle of communication. Following the lead set by Craddock, a host of prominent homileticians gave increasing attention to the listener²⁷ and the authority of the congregation in creating the relevance of the message by their level of participation and encouragement.²⁸ Such an emphasis on the listener also elevates the responsibility of the preacher to know the congregation and communicate effectively so that the message is heard. Such a framework for the preaching task suggests to some that preaching is a synergistic process.²⁹ Whether the responsibility is assigned to the listener or to the preacher, there is at least a subtle assault on the efficacy of the Word.³⁰ Robert Schaibley goes even farther in condemning the emphasis on communication because it elevates the subjective over the objective, and the personal over the propositional, by “legitimizing the synergistic process of sharing truth.”³¹

Schaibley’s distinction between communication and proclamation clarifies the issues inherent in this tension. However, separating them completely from each other creates an unhealthy choice between what are really essential components of the ministry of the Word.

²⁷ Among these homileticians were David Buttrick, Calvin Miller, Eugene Lowrey, Richard Jensen, and Richard Eslinger. All of them gave attention to the affective experience of the listeners and how their involvement could be enhanced.

²⁸ Nielsen’s article, “No Longer Dinosaurs” summarizes well this shift of emphasis to the listener’s role.

²⁹ Robert W. Schaibley, “Lutheran Preaching: Proclamation, Not Communication,” *Concordia Journal* 18.1 (January 1992): 13.

³⁰ Nielsen, 17.

³¹ Schaibley, 15.

While it is true that “proclamation bestows being,”³² it does not necessarily follow that striving to share meaning through effective communication is necessarily bad. The strategic role played by media in our culture is a continual challenge to the pastor as proclaimer of God’s Word. Reaching the hearts and minds of listeners who are accustomed to changing channels whenever they are not engaged by what they are seeing / hearing presents the preacher with a significant communication challenge. While acknowledging that the Word of God is powerful to accomplish its purpose even if the message is poorly articulated or proclaimed, certainly it is true that the same message proclaimed with genuine conviction and passion and applied in relevant ways to the lives of the hearers has great potential to enhance the hearing of the message that will allow God’s Spirit to work mightily through that Word. Ineffective communication techniques and skills entail the risk that the Word is never heard, and that makes it much easier for the “birds of the air” to consume the precious seed before it ever has a chance to take root, much less bear the fruit of faith. St. Augustine in Book Four of *On Christian Doctrine* argues persuasively for the importance of rhetoric in preaching the message:

Since rhetoric is used to give conviction to both truth and falsehood, who could dare maintain that truth, which depends on us for its defense, should stand unarmed in the fight against falsehood? This would mean that those who know how to use an introduction to make their listeners favorable, interested, and receptive, while we would not; that they would expound falsehoods in descriptions that are succinct, lucid, and convincing, while we would expound the truth in such a way as to bore our listeners, cloud their understanding, and stifle their desire to believe; that they would assail the truth and advocate falsehood with fallacious arguments, while we would be too feeble either to defend what is true or refute what is false; that they, pushing and propelling their listeners’ minds toward error, would speak so as to inspire fear, sadness, and elation, and issue passionate exhortations, while we, in the name of truth, can only idle along sounding dull and indifferent.³³

³² Ibid., 14.

³³ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. and ed. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 197-199.

The Holy Spirit works faith through the means of grace alone, but the preacher is compelled by the Spirit's call in his life to be a good steward of all God's gracious gifts, including those related to effective communication. These gifts, which might be referred to as first article gifts, stand in service to the revelation of God's grace in Jesus Christ when that message is proclaimed. It is not a denial of the efficacy and power of God's Word to insist that the preacher has a responsibility to engage the hearer in a dialogue, make the message functionally relevant, and strive intentionally to make the message vivid, memorable, and captivating. Certainly the Devil will employ every technique and tool at his disposal to disrupt and distract the hearer so communication fails to take place. That behooves the preacher to use every linguistic and rhetorical tool he possesses to ensure that the seed of God's Word is planted in the hearts of his hearers. St. Paul says that he "planted the seed...but God made it grow" (1 Co 3:6). The creation of faith is God's work alone, but God does not work immediately in people's lives. He works through means, means handled by men, primarily the proclamation of the Gospel message and that message can only be heard if there is someone to proclaim it. (Ro 10:14). Dale Meyer notes this essential, complementary interaction thus:

So there are these two powers at work in an effective sermon: persuasive power and Divine power, rhetoric and Word. We use the first to make room for the second, that God's Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edification of Christ's holy people.³⁴

John Michael Reu, in his *Homiletics* recognized the necessity of using every available means to communicate God's truth:

The day and the hour in which God will work faith in the hearts of those who hear His Gospel is in His own power and not in the preacher's (Article V, Augsburg Confession). To conclude from this, however, that it does not matter whether or not my sermon possesses force and energy would be to prove unfaithful to my trust. For though I can never force my hearer's will by any art of mine, and have no right to

³⁴ Dale A. Meyer, "The Place of the Sermon in the Order of Service," *Liturgical Preaching*, ed. Paul J. Grime and Dean W. Nadasdy (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 19.

presume to do this, I am none the less bound to use the means by which, according to the laws of psychology, which come from God, entrance is gained to the hearts and souls of men. These laws include, as we have seen, the convincing clearness, the pleasing beauty, and the moving energy of the spoken word. The preacher can never shirk with impunity the requirements which every other orator is bound to obey.³⁵

Robert Kolb takes up the issue of this tension between proclamation and communication with reflections on the challenge of giving a “winsome witness” to the Gospel. He talks about the problem Lutherans face when speaking about giving witness to their faith.

The problem had to do with saying ‘winsomely’ winsomely. I wanted to avoid a term which would seem to make the effect and power of the Word somehow dependent on our formulation of its message. This particular problem might be labeled the ‘synergism of the convert-er.’ We are familiar with the synergism of the convertee ... Like all heresies, the synergism of the converter has its opposite number, its mirror image: belief in a kind of magical working of the Word. Between these two poles...the synergism of the converter and the magical belief that the Word works without our working at it...the Church attempts to fulfill its God-given mission of making disciples. Or, better said, we function as God’s coworkers (1 Co 3:9) in the tension between a doctrine of creation which places in our hands all the tools of human communication, research, and insight on the one hand, and on the other hand, our confidence that God alone works conversion and salvation through His Word, and that often in ways which defy our explanation.³⁶

Clearly this tension is not to be resolved, but acknowledged and embodied in preaching, lest one wander into either heresy on the edge of this issue. The “tools of human communication, research, and insight” which Kolb mentions are really means. To be sure they are not “means of grace”, but they are means of communication and communication is the province of the preacher. He communicates so the Word may be heard and in the hearing God uses His means to produce saving faith (faith comes by hearing – Ro 10:14). In some respects the preacher is like a carpenter who uses tools (hammer, saw, level, plane, square, etc.) to build a house. The house is really built with wood, brick, cement and other materials, but without the proper tools the materials will never be shaped into a suitable habitation. Preachers use the

³⁵ John Michael Reu, *Homiletics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), 221.

³⁶ Robert Kolb, an address given to the “College of Fellows” in a continuing education program at Concordia Seminary, 1997.

tools of communication to shape the Word for effective hearing, for it is in the hearing that faith is given birth by the Spirit.³⁷

It would be helpful to make a distinction between what Samuel Nafzger calls the means of grace and the use of the means of grace.³⁸ Nafzger argues that this distinction is similar to that which the confessions insist must be made between justification and sanctification. Justification and sanctification must not be mixed up or confused lest we undermine the Gospel truth that “we are justified before God and saved through faith alone.”³⁹ But at the same time justification and sanctification must not be separated, for good works of necessity flow from faith. Nafzger suggests that the means of grace are related to the use of the means of grace in precisely this same way. The means of grace alone is responsible for the growth of the Church. The faith that brings people into the fellowship of believers is always a miracle of God’s grace working through the means of grace in Word and sacraments.⁴⁰ But that does not mean that how we use the means is insignificant or unimportant. Laziness, apathy, and indifference in the use of these precious means is nothing less than a failure to be faithful to our calling to be good stewards of the mysteries of the Gospel.

“Before man is illuminated, converted, reborn, renewed, and drawn by the Holy Spirit, he can do nothing in spiritual things of himself and by his own powers.”⁴¹ Although he can hear, talk about, and even meditate on the Word, he cannot believe it. He is instead actively

³⁷ C.F.W. Walther uses a similar building analogy to describe how two architects (builders) might construct vastly different structures even if they were supplied with identical *building materials*. He notes that two preachers might use the same doctrines, but if one does not properly divide Law and Gospel, the results will be all wrong. C.F.W. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 32.

³⁸ Samuel Nafzger, “The Growth of the Church: The Means of Grace and the Use of the Means of Grace:” *Issues* (Winter 1995), 21-26.

³⁹ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, III, 36, in Tappert, 545.

⁴⁰ Nafzger, 25.

⁴¹ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, II, 24, in Tappert, 525.

resistant to and unable to grasp the spiritual nature of God's grace.⁴² But the person who is not yet converted "can hear and read this Word externally, because, ...even after the Fall man still has something of a free will in these external matters, so that he can go to church, listen to the sermon, or not to listen to it."⁴³ It is precisely here in this external matter that effective proclamation is necessary. Because the hearer can listen or not listen and because faith comes by hearing (Ro 10:17), the preacher must spare no effort to see that an intelligible hearing of the message takes place. The confessions rightly acknowledge that:

It is true that both the preacher's planting and watering and the hearer's running and willing would be in vain, and no conversion would follow, if there were not added the power and operation of the Holy Spirit, who through the Word preached and heard illuminates and converts hearts so that men believe this Word and give their assent to it. On the other hand, neither the preacher nor the hearer should question this grace and operation of the Holy Spirit, but should be certain that, when the Word of God is preached, pure and unalloyed according to God's command and will, and when the people diligently and earnestly listen to and meditate on it, God is certainly present with His grace and gives what man is unable by his own powers to take or to give.⁴⁴

"When the people diligently and earnestly listen to and meditate on it" is to some extent a function of how that message is proclaimed. They imply that the heard message is understood. Anyone can be bored and indifferent to a message poorly prepared and delivered. In the same way people can be actively, consciously engaged with God when the Word is proclaimed earnestly, convincingly, passionately, and with rhetorical competence. Surely preaching the Gospel involves both proclamation, which is the work of the Holy Spirit whose purpose is to "bestow Christ and His benefits upon the hearers" by bringing them under the Word of God,⁴⁵ and communication, which is the art or craft of conveying a message clearly, meaningfully, and persuasively, which Lischer describes as the preacher's

⁴² Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, II, 24, in Tappert., 526.

⁴³ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, II, 53, in Tappert, 531.

⁴⁴ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, II, 55, in Tappert, 531.

⁴⁵ Schaibley, 16.

attention to the craft or rhetoric of preaching.⁴⁶ Proclamation is concerned with “what”, the message, and communication with the “how”, the manner in which the message is delivered. While the preacher gives necessary attention to the “what”, it is God’s Word, His means, and His Spirit who does that work. The “how” is about craft and skill and the fervent desire to shape that message so it can be heard.

Relevance in Preaching

The Word of God carries in itself the power to speak to the ultimate need of all people. But even if that is a given, it does not follow that efforts to shape that Gospel to each context are unnecessary. Content does not automatically produce the right form and technique any more than an unattended apple tree will naturally produce succulent and wormless apples.⁴⁷

Luther’s own desire for relevancy is evident in his translation of the Pentateuch where he wrote, “I endeavored to make Moses so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew.”⁴⁸

It is true that we cannot make the Gospel relevant, because it is already inherently relevant.

We are however concerned that the hearer discern its relevancy for his / her life. But the actuality and vitality of the Gospel do not “prevent the ministry from being superficial, the sermon from being impertinent, or the Church from being peripheral.”⁴⁹ If preachers are indifferent to the challenges of communication they should not be surprised if the hearing they desire is muted by their failure to take seriously their responsibility to proclaim the

⁴⁶ Richard Lischer, “Cross and Craft: Two Elements of a Lutheran Homiletic,” *Concordia Journal*, 25.1 (January 1999): 5.

⁴⁷ Haselden, 72.

⁴⁸ Haselden quotes Luther in his chapter “The Meaning of Relevant Preaching.” While he acknowledges that this is excessive zeal for relevancy it is refreshing in contrast to so many who rebuke all talk of relevancy and communication.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

Word clearly and effectively. C.F.W. Walther noted the importance of the preacher having a clear goal and purpose to effect the hearing of God's Word:

The worst fault in modern preaching, my dear friends, is this, that the sermons lack point and purpose; and this fault can be noticed particularly in the sermons of modern preachers who are believers. While unbelieving and fanatical preachers have quite a definite aim, -- pity, that it is not the right one! -- believing preachers, as a rule, imagine that they have fully discharged their office, provided what they have preached has been the Word of God. That is about as correct a view as when a ranger imagines he has discharged his office by sallying forth with his loaded gun and discharging it into the forest or as when an artilleryman thinks he has done his duty by taking up his position with his cannon in the line of battle and by discharging his cannon. Just as poor rangers and soldiers as these latter are, just so poor and useless preachers are those who have no plan in mind and take no aim when they are preaching.⁵⁰

Christian preaching is distinguished primarily by the conversation it effects between the hearer and the God of the Bible.⁵¹ It is ultimately a false dichotomy to set proclamation against communication. Effecting a meaningful hearing of the Word is certainly an important part of the responsibility the preacher has as a steward of those mysteries entrusted to him for proclamation. The preacher is not an artist in the sense that he creates anything new through his preaching. But he is an artisan, a craftsman, whom God has chosen to declare a new message to His people, and he ought therefore show himself approved as a workman unto God.⁵²

St. Paul exhorted Timothy to be a workman who "correctly handles the Word of truth." (2 Ti 2:15) and in conjunction with the responsibility to "preach the Word," he ordered Timothy to "be prepared in season and out of season." (2 Ti 4:2). In defending his own ministry of the Word St. Paul asserted that "we do not use deception, nor do we distort the Word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to

⁵⁰ Walther, 99.

⁵¹ Ibid., 74.

⁵² Ibid., 73-74.

every man's conscience in the sight of God." (2 Co 4:2). Such preaching does not seek to "control" the Word of God, but exercises considerable control over what is said and how it is said.⁵³ It is one thing to be careful not to equate what God is doing in the activity of preaching and the preacher's actions. It is another thing altogether to disconnect them so completely that they are not related at all.⁵⁴ This disconnection seems unrealistic at best. From the moment the preacher begins the exegetical task, he is already asking questions about what this Word means for his hearers. In this exegetical process the preacher is continually moving from the text to his hearers and back to the text again to better understand what God's Word truly has to say to his people. For the preacher to assume the herald mode is in effect to deny his own responsibility in the preparation of the message to be proclaimed. When the preacher reflects upon his hearers and the particular situation or context into which he proclaims the message he is already making adjustments to ensure a good hearing. To do so is not to diminish the power of the Word or the agency of the Holy Spirit, but only to recognize the responsibility of the preacher to communicate the message so a genuine hearing takes place. To preach is, as Craddock defines it, "to shout a whisper." It means to speak the Word boldly and clearly, at the same time trusting the Word to carry its own future and make its own way into the heart.⁵⁵ The preacher must proclaim what has been received as revelation, but be careful to frame it in the context of the hearers. While the preacher cannot make the message be heard, he can, at the least, remove some obstacles to their hearing.⁵⁶ Preaching then is not to make a claim on what God is doing, but to attempt to discern the way of God's Word in the world and to align one's mode and manner of

⁵³ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abiding Press, 1985), 64.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 64.

preaching in accord with that discernment.⁵⁷ No matter how seriously the preacher takes his responsibility to communicate effectively, he does not need to abandon his reliance upon the Holy Spirit and the power of the Word to accomplish its ultimate purpose, namely, to bring people to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as Savior and create saving faith in their hearts, which even the most effective preacher has no power to do.

Herman Stuempfle makes the point that the preacher must often go beyond the simple announcement of the Gospel to interpreting it – unfolding with care and imagination its meaning and implications. To be content with a mere announcement of God’s forgiveness may presume that the hearers can flesh out such a statement with a body of meaning.⁵⁸ The actual ability of hearers to experience the rich dimensions of a statement like “God forgives you,” may simply not be possible unless they are led into a story that invites them to identify with a character like the Prodigal Son and experience in a vicarious way the incredible nature of undeserved grace. It is in this respect that the preacher must know his hearers and focus his message in such a way that a genuine hearing can take place. If the words the listener hears do not connect with his or her life, it is risky to assume a hearing has taken place, and no less an authority than St. Paul asserted that “faith comes by hearing the Word of God.” (Ro 10:17). The twenty-first century presents the preacher with some significant challenges in relating God’s Word to people in a meaningful way. The preacher will need to be urgently aware of how language works and human beings understand, so that he can think out the rhetorical means appropriate to contemporary consciousness.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁸ Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr. *Preaching Law and Gospel*. (Ramsey, NJ: Sigler Press, 1990), 40.

⁵⁹ David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching*. (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1994), 112.

While the preacher must give due attention to the communication issues that preaching presents, it is important that he not trust rhetorical skills to accomplish his ultimate purpose. Willimon warns that we should not act as if the contemporary cultural context, described with the conventional language of that culture is a fixed entity to which the gospel must be made relevant.⁶⁰ The Word of God challenges the presuppositions of the contemporary culture. It seeks transformation rather than accommodation. Willimon relates the task of preaching to a genuine appreciation of the power of baptism:

The church awaits a more robust celebration of baptism, even as it awaits a more robust pulpit speech. When baptism is a bit scary, incomprehensible, dark, primordial, risky, then we will have achieved truth in advertising, and discipleship will again be more fairly represented. When preaching is a bit arrogant, pushy, assertive, incomprehensible, then our medium will more appropriately fit with the message and the gospel will be more fairly proclaimed.⁶¹

Lischer agrees that preaching cannot be reduced to communication. He recalls the line from Robert Frost: “I gave up fire for form / till I was cold,” with the assertion that preaching finds renewal in theological rather than rhetorical reflection.⁶² While we strive to meet people where they are, we proclaim a message that disrupts the comfortable contours of their everyday life and challenges every human assumption about what is wise, powerful, and true. Preaching exists in this tension between trying to connect with the hearer and the awareness that the Gospel message is always an intrusive one, a Word from God that breaks into our world with an unsettling, disruptive force. It is in particular the message of Law that affects us with the clear reality of our predicament as sinners in the presence of a righteous and holy God. This message we proclaim is not a set of interesting ideas about which we are invited to

⁶⁰ William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 53.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶² Robert Lischer, “Cross and Craft,” 6.

make up our mind.⁶³ This is a message which evokes newness, challenges our presuppositions, and confronts us with the reality of grace. Law/Gospel preaching seeks to rescue people from their “informed and uninformed subjectivity,” and evoke a peculiar experience, an encounter with Jesus Christ that involves a total reorientation of who we are.⁶⁴ So even as our preaching struggles for connections, associations between the lives of the hearers and the message, it also “expects disassociation, gaps, tension between my story and the Gospel.”⁶⁵

In the final analysis Lutheran preaching must live in the tension between the proclamation of God’s Word to His people – a Word that confronts God’s people with both the accusation and condemnation of the Law and the healing power of God’s grace and forgiveness secured for us in the death and resurrection of Christ – and the necessary, intentional effort to communicate that message so it becomes functionally relevant to their lives. It is not either proclamation or communication but both / and. The power of the Gospel is inherent in the Word itself – the power to convict, heal, restore, comfort, encourage, renew and ultimately to give new life through the work of the Spirit working through that very Word. At the same time that Word proclaimed must be heard, and therein lies the challenge that confronts the preacher as he strives to connect that living message of grace and power with the lives of those who come to hear.

⁶³ William Willimon, *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 39.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁶⁵ Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, 17.

CHAPTER THREE
THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT
OF COMMUNICATION

Language and the Challenge of Communication

Over a century ago, in the Yale Lectures on Preaching, Phillips Brooks defined preaching as “the communication of truth by man to men.”⁶⁶ If preaching involves communication then it is important for us to be concerned not only about what is being communicated, but how it is being communicated and what goes into effective communication. That is not to say that the sermon is a speech. While a sermon may involve the use of rhetorical skills, it is no more a mere speech than the Bible is a mere book.⁶⁷ But the challenges that are inherent in any form of oral communication also confront the preacher who desires to share the eternal truths of God’s Word with those who gather to listen on any given Sunday morning. Faithful preaching requires study, practice, and hard work, but it is ultimately more than a matter of acquired technique.⁶⁸

While it is not possible in this study to examine in detail the whole range of communication issues that preachers must confront, we want to focus carefully on how the Gospel is communicated effectively in an image conscious and image-driven world. The subtle and profound impact of modern media on the ways people hear, think and learn necessitates this concern. Thomas Long described the people coming

⁶⁶ Phillips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1989), 25.

⁶⁷ Calvin Miller, *Spirit, Word, and Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 17.

⁶⁸ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 21.

into our churches today as not having a theological vocabulary like their grandparents did.⁶⁹ They are no longer able to relate to or understand those words that we Bible committed pastors depend upon in large part to carry the freight in our preaching.

The language problem we face in the church is a significant challenge to the preacher who desires to communicate effectively. Barbara Brown Taylor described it like this:

Some of our best words have decayed from long use and rough treatment. Others have been kidnapped by strangers and yet others institutionalized by so-called friends...other words have been used as weapons for so long that no one will go near them anymore...The language of faith is like soil that has been farmed too hard and for too long... We preach in a diluted and disillusioned land where language is used to conceal the truth, not to tell it, and words are distrusted by those who have been bullied and betrayed by them.⁷⁰

When words lose their authority, they are replaced by other authorities. The primary authority for our post-modern world is experience. But the problem with communicating to the congregation today is that their experiences are so varied that connecting with them seems impossible. Those raised in the Depression and the children of baby boomers have little experience in common. In the same pew is a single parent struggling with her two children and a couple celebrating their 20th anniversary. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that a connection can be made by the preacher willing to evoke a common experience by “being willing to stand in the synapse between heaven and earth and tell others what happens to them when they do.”⁷¹ If the preacher can link his experience to the experience of the listeners at one end and link it to his experience of God at the other end, he can become a live wire “through which holy current may pass” and illuminate the ordinary with the

⁶⁹ Thomas G. Long in the Wenschel Lectures at Concordia Lectures at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis on May 4, 2005.

⁷⁰ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Preaching the Body,” *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred Craddock*, ed. Gail R. O’Day and Thomas G. Long. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 207.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 210

extraordinary brightness of God.⁷² In effect, this is what Jesus did to help His hearers experience the kingdom of God in the ordinary, commonplace things of their lives. In the language of story, the listener is seized at the level of emotion and intuition and religious meaning is evoked that the ritualized language of creed, even though true, cannot touch.⁷³

Although experience may be the primary authority for many listeners, words are still necessary to describe and evoke experiences. That means that preachers do not sacrifice the language of theology for the language of image, but seek proficiency in both.⁷⁴ Jesus enabled his hearers to discern the shape and dimension of the kingdom of God by inviting them to consider a field of wheat, a mustard seed, a new wineskin, breadcrumbs under a table, lilies in a field, a lamp on a stand, a woman adding yeast to her dough, laborers in a vineyard, or a host of other everyday events of life. He used words to describe those images, painting pictures that everyone could see in their minds, albeit in new and revelatory ways. In essence, that is the same challenge facing the preacher today—discovering or creating those images that will evoke and divulge the divine dimensions that are hidden in the ordinary.

The Role of Imagination and Images in Communication

The essential nature of imagination and its place (or lack thereof) in preaching is still a lively debate in the arena of homiletics. Some homileticians believe that doctrinal reflection precludes imagination while others identify it with narrative form and inductive learning that

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 212.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

stands opposite propositional preaching.⁷⁵ Paul Scott Wilson asserts that people think in different ways, namely “linear thought (or progression and movement) and polar thought (or digression).”⁷⁶ He describes linear thought as logical, informational and sequential. Polar thought allows for digression from the linear movement and is very important for establishing relevance in the lives of the hearers.⁷⁷ Wilson prefers to think of imagination as a mode of thought that contrasts logic and yet is its necessary complement. Logic is primarily linear or unidirectional and discovers connections between ideas on a temporal axis of cause and effect while imagination finds meaningful connections between apparently dissimilar ideas that have no causal relationship.⁷⁸ Preachers then use imagination to construct a “meeting place between God and humankind” where the sacred and commonplace mingle in holy significance.⁷⁹

Imagination is a creative ability to perceive or see things that are not actually present. Preachers use this process to evoke images in the minds of listeners so they find themselves in a new, wider world. They enable hearers to make connections between two different frames of reference so that a spark is struck at the point where they intersect, illuminating a new possibility.⁸⁰ Job’s encounter with God created a new awareness he described this way: “I had heard of Thee, by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees Thee.” (Job 42.5)

⁷⁵ Paul Scott Wilson provides a very helpful overview of how imagination has been understood within the history of Western thought in his article “Beyond Narrative: Imagination in the Sermon” in *Listening to the Word*, Ed. Gail R. O’Day and Thomas G. Long (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 131-136. He begins with Aristotle’s identification of imagination with metaphor to the more recent philosophical thoughts of William Lynch, Paul Ricoeur, and Sallie McFague who argue that the way people think is fundamentally metaphoric.

⁷⁶ Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 220.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, For a fuller discussion of how these two ways of thought are both important for effective preaching see his chapter, “Linear Thought and Homiletical Movement” which begins on page 20.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, 213.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

God chooses to set preachers between the Word of the Bible and the way of people in the world so they might frame the Word in such a way that Jesus Christ fills the imaginations of their hearts and becomes the image—the sole reality by which they order their lives.⁸¹ Imagination operates out of the deep human sensitivity that there is more meaning to be had than meets the eye.⁸² Imagination is always open-ended, not confining. Its very ambiguity raises possibilities inherent, but not yet grasped. The preacher opens doors that imagination can begin to enlarge and explore to discover new significance and new meaning for life. St. Paul preaching to the philosophers in Athens used the image of an altar to establish a connection with the Athenians and from that image bridged to the worship of the only true and living God (Ac 17.11f). We cannot assume that man's imagination in itself is capable of discerning and discovering these spiritual truths. In the days of Noah, the Lord God saw the greatness of man's wickedness, and that "the imagination of his heart was only evil all the time" (Ge 6.5). The imagination, like every other part of our being, has been corrupted by the pervasive power of sin at work in the world since the fall. St. Paul makes it plain that, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Co 2.14). But the Spirit of God is always at work through the Word. In the hearts and minds of His people He uses words, images, metaphors, similes, and other literary forms to stimulate thinking, create faith, and renew the hearts and minds of people. For as St. Paul says, "The Spirit searches all things," and again referring to how the Spirit helps the preacher he says, "We speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (I Co 2.10,13).

⁸¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching: Finding the Words* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 29.

⁸² Edward Riegert, *Imaginative Shock: Preaching and Metaphor* (Burlington, Ontario: Trinity Press, 1990), 46.

The Scriptures do not so much articulate a dogma, but tell the story that enables us to enter that world, allow the story to become our story and ultimately be transformed by it.⁸³ Before there was Christian doctrine, there was a Christian story.⁸⁴ Indeed, when Luther's Small Catechism invites us to consider the attributes of the divine, it references not so much passages that state, "God is omnipresent or omnipotent," but rather the stories that describe God's intervention in history, in the lives of His people—stories that invite us to experience a God who is all-powerful, all-loving, full of compassion, gracious and just. The images of God as a Father, tenderhearted in His care, or as a warrior, fearsome in His majestic power and wrath are much more profoundly memorable than a simple declaratory statement that might summarize such an experience. The image of Jacob's limping from his wrestling with God would never be forgotten. Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush, Jacob's dream at Bethel of a ladder reaching to heaven, Aaron and Hur holding up the hands of Moses, the healing of Naaman the leper at the word of Elisha, and a host of other dramatic stories reveal the true character and power of God. The vivid images created in the mind by those stories are more firmly embedded in the memory of those who experienced them indirectly in hearing the account than any proposition expressing that same truth.

Images have impact on the imagination and get lodged in consciousness. They gain their power to shape consciousness by adding particularity to faith and life.⁸⁵ The specific

⁸³ Elizabeth Achtemeier, 46. Recent perspectives on the relationship between the "world of the Bible" and the "contemporary world" and how these two worlds interact, particularly in the preaching task, have called into question some of the presumptions of narrative homiletics. Charles Campbell has highlighted the critique of Hans Frei in *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), see especially chapter 6. Frei argues convincingly that the narratives of the Biblical story must be the center from which proclamation flows and the Christian community to which this proclamation is addressed and which it shapes plays a significant role in the interpretive tradition of that sacred text.

⁸⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, 213.

⁸⁵ Robert G. Hughes and Robert Kysar, *Preaching Doctrine for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 56.

and the concrete invite the hearers to consider their own specific experience of reality, to connect the Biblical experiences of God's people with the concrete realities of their own lives.⁸⁶ People can only live in the particularities of their own lives, but they may be able to find connections with those archetypal stories and images that the Scriptures relate.

Abraham and Sarah's struggle to trust God for a son, the intense conflict created by jealousy in the lives of patriarchs, the insistent pleading for help of a father for his son possessed of a demon, the struggle of Job to understand the enigma of suffering, and a host of other images that flow from the Scriptures beckon to our hearts through the experiences of our lives. In addition, the imaginative stories like Nathan's parable that prompts David's repentance, the prodigal love of a father for his lost son, a king's wedding banquet for his son, and a king who cancels the unimaginable debt of one of his servants resonate in a profound way with our lives and help us discover new truths about God and His kingdom.

The power of images comes not only from the particularity they add to reality, but also to their ambiguity, which stimulates the imagination to reflection.⁸⁷ Biblical images like salt, a cornerstone, blood, circumcision, sheep, shepherd, door, and gold all possess sufficient ambiguity that they compel some thought on the part of the hearer. All of the significance of such images is not immediately apparent. In metaphorical language both similarities and dissimilarities become important to a full appreciation of what is being said. Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard and the seeming injustice of paying all the workers a full day's wage, regardless of their hours in the field (Matthew 20.1-16), clashes so abruptly with what we usually think of as God's justice that the dissimilarity triggers reflection and engages the hearer in contemplation of the real meaning behind this action.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 58.

With the language of faith and a multitude of Biblical images with which to describe the truths God reveals, the preacher strives to evoke the connections that give life and hope to God's people. It is in these connections that the sparks of illumination occur. These connections can be made between the faith of the past and the perplexities of the present, between self-transcendence and self-interest, and between a flat, disenchanted world and a world stacked with layers of meaning.⁸⁹ The preacher encourages the hearers to be involved in making these connections so they have a share in the discovery and trusts that the Holy Spirit will guide that process as He leads His people deeper into the truth. Unwillingness to allow the listeners to share in this process causes preachers to turn stories into morals and parables into allegories. This flattens out experience so that advice can be written all over it, and turns an exciting, tension-filled "synapse" into a concrete bridge that eliminates all ambiguity, short circuits the imagination and turns preaching into propositions.⁹⁰ But the part the preacher plays in evoking the discovery of connections through images is always dependent upon the work of God's Spirit, hovering over the message with the divine power to illuminate the truth in ways that enrich and strengthen both understanding and faith.

The Importance of Metaphorical Language in Communication

Increasingly, we are becoming aware that in our culture neither the rational/logical nor the intuitive/affective interpretation of reality is superior to the other or alone adequate to explain reality.⁹¹ Both are essential components of our way of thinking, knowing, and interpreting reality. Because we relate to our world in complex, multidimensional ways, we

⁸⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, 219.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁹¹ Webb B. Garrison, *Creative Imagination in Preaching* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 14-15.

are appreciating anew the need for images, imagination, and feeling.⁹² Such dimensions may provide more effective ways to open the minds of people to the depth of reality and the richness of relationships between the sacred and profane, the divine and the human.

The electronic media has played a major role in creating, shaping, and transforming the way we think of reality. Critics of the powerful influence of television in our culture have suggested that television shapes its own world and then convinces us that the illusion is true.⁹³ Philosophical movements, influenced by David Hume and Immanuel Kant, had already laid the groundwork for the crucial role of image in the achievements of human knowledge and memory. Imagination has the capability to function

both in the presence of an object of perception in the world, and in its absence, when we turn to it in our thoughts. Imagination both presents and represents things to us. Its power is the power of forming images, which may be used as the means of interpreting what is before our eyes and ears in the perceptual world, or as constituting our interpreted world, when we are separated from the actual objects of which our images are the images.⁹⁴

There has historically been a suspicion about the validity of imagination in preaching. A kind of on-again, off-again relationship between homiletics and imagination can be attributed in part to the value given to the imagination in various historical epochs.⁹⁵ Post modernism has given new life to the role of imagination in seeing, perceiving, and understanding and has opened the door to more homiletical possibilities. Whatever else imagination achieves in terms of empathy, creativity, or vision, its core function deals with

⁹² Ibid., 151

⁹³ Professor George Gerbner of the University of Pennsylvania is quoted in this argument by William R. White in *Stories for Telling* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 10.

⁹⁴ Drawn from Mary Warnock in *Imagination* by Richard Eshinger, *Narrative and Imagination: Preaching the Worlds that Shape Us* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 47.

⁹⁵ Richard Eslinger provides a helpful historical survey of this somewhat turbulent relationship between homiletical and imagination theory in *The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletical Method* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 246-248.

perception, the ways in which human beings perceive their world.⁹⁶ Imagination thus performs an essential work of mediation between the self and the world, so that one's knowledge of the world is achieved largely through the ability of the imagination to elicit and retain the image or shape of our perceived world's objects.⁹⁷ Obviously, such a view of imagination invests it with a great deal of significance in the process of constructing meaning or perceiving something as meaningful. If imagination truly plays such a role, it becomes of great interest to the preacher.

What Eslinger refers to as the "house of imagination" relies heavily upon the metaphorical shape of language, which he describes as the "birthing room" of meaning.⁹⁸ Metaphor is, Philip Wheelwright believes, the most appropriate term to represent the essential character of tensive language.⁹⁹ Tensive language is the true character of man's ongoing attempt toward adequacy in giving expression to the experiences of tension and conflict in relating to his world.¹⁰⁰ Metaphor is not to be defined by grammatical form, but by the quality of semantic transformation achieved. What really matters, Wheelwright argues, in a metaphor is the depth at which things, actual or fancied are transmuted by the cool heat of the imagination.¹⁰¹ This transmutative process is described by Wheelwright as semantic motion, the double imaginative act of outreaching and combining that is at the heart of the metaphoric process. This semantic movement usually involves the transference of a

⁹⁶ Ibid., 251.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Richard Eslinger, *Narrative Imagination*, 46,67.

⁹⁹ Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 66-69. He argues that metaphor is a more adequate word than either symbol or image because of certain limitations and misleading aspects of the two later terms.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 46.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 71.

name from something familiar onto something which is more vague or strange, creating a shock of recognition. Metaphors call attention to similarities not readily noticed, or to use Aristotle's phrase, "an intuitive perception of the similarity of dissimilars."¹⁰² It is in the tensive vibrancy that metaphors create that the imagination is stirred to life and new significance is grasped.

Metaphor is not some extraordinary form of language, but rather a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically.¹⁰³ Metaphor suffuses our thoughts, because it is integral to our thinking and our language, indispensable to both imagination and reason.¹⁰⁴ Being aware of the basic conceptual metaphors that have become conventional in our language enables us to understand, to think, to speak, and to reason. When we rely on metaphors constantly and unconsciously, we accept their validity, and that gives them persuasive power over us.¹⁰⁵ Because of the pervasive use of conceptual metaphors, there is no adequate substitute for a profound metaphor.¹⁰⁶ At the same time that metaphors become standard (for example: God is our Shepherd, our Father; Jesus is the Light of the world, He is the Life) they also function to communicate new insights. Jesus used extended metaphors/similes, which we commonly call parables to reveal the truths of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son; like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom; like a mustard seed;

¹⁰² Wheelwright draws heavily upon Aristotle's distinction between the "epiphor" and the "diaphor" in the metaphoric process—the distinction in motion "over on to" from motion "through" certain particulars of experience that produces new meaning by juxtaposition alone. Usually, the most powerful metaphors are those that combine both factors, because they produce more tensive vibrancy.

¹⁰³ Lakoff, George and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), XI.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰⁶ Peter W. Macky, *The Centrality of Metaphors to Biblical Thought* (Lewiston, NY: The Edward Mellen Press, 1990), 3.

like a man who sowed good seed in his field; like a treasure hidden in a field, a merchant looking for fine pearls, a net let down into the lake. With these and many other metaphors, Jesus unveiled the secrets of God's new kingdom. Only those who had the imagination of faith were able to understand the fullness of those mysteries.¹⁰⁷

The use of metaphors encourages the creation of mental images that allow hearers to conceptualize precisely what is being linked so that they can see things in a new way or from a new perspective. This process fosters new understanding and greater perception into truth that might never be seen in a more literal use of language. Some metaphors have become so familiar in the experiences of people that they function symbolically, but can still be given new tensive energy by recontextualization.¹⁰⁸ Recontextualizing takes place when symbols that have undergone some petrification or lost their tensive vibrancy are discovered afresh in new contexts of imagery.¹⁰⁹ This is precisely what the preacher is trying to do when he strives to find a fresh and exciting way to unpack the significance of a Biblical story that is well known to the hearers. An example of this is a sermon by Eugene Lowry, based on Matthew 18.22-34, entitled, "Down the Up Staircase."¹¹⁰ Lowry explores the significance of this parable while turning the archetypal symbols "up" and "down" upside down. In providing a new context for the hearing of the parable, he engages his hearers with a tensive vibrance that not only captures their attention, but also stimulates their imagination in some exciting ways.

¹⁰⁷ Francis Rossow notes the importance of metaphorical language in understanding and proclaiming the Gospel in the second chapter of *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983), 32ff. He argues that some metaphors have universal application, while others have domains largely unfamiliar to the contemporary person.

¹⁰⁸ Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality*, 97.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 96-97/

¹¹⁰ This sermon is included by Mike Graves in his book, *The Sermon as Symphony: Preaching the Literary Forms of the New Testament* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1997), 53-60.

Imagination's core function deals with perception, the ways in which people perceive the world. Images thus play a role in mediation between perception and recognition. Eslinger quotes David Bryant, "The ability to create an image of something, a form that possesses a certain significance, and apply that image or form to things we experience is what makes it possible to see something as meaningful."¹¹¹ Thus our knowledge of the world is heavily dependent upon the ability of the imagination to elicit and retain the image or shape of our perceived world's objects.¹¹² Living in a time when the visual image is the dominant mode of perception, the preacher must be aware not only of the powerful images that plaster the walls of our social consciousness,¹¹³ but recognize those significant Biblical images that can and should shape the Christian's worldview and how these different images interact and interplay in the minds of those who hear the message.

The Power of Story in Communication

When the Israelites first heard the word of the law in the Ten Commandments, so the old rabbinical story goes, they swooned. Their souls left them. So the Word returned to God and cried out, "O Sovereign of the Universe, You live eternally and Your law lives eternally. But You have sent me to the dead. They are all dead." In response, God had mercy and made His Word more palatable.¹¹⁴ God's solution was to retell it in stories. The rabbis were in effect affirming that story had the potential to express the way and mind of God more than any other expression.¹¹⁵ In a sense, stories are original experiences. Inevitably, people began

¹¹¹ Richard Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching*, 251. He quotes David Bryant, *Faith and the Play of Imagination: On the Role of Imagination in Religion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989), 88-89.

¹¹² Richard Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching*, 251.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹¹⁴ Quoted by William Bausch from Rosemary Haughton, *Tales from Eternity* (New York: Sebury Press, 1973) 14.

to reflect upon those stories, draw conclusions, and codify such conclusions into propositions, systems and creeds. The result is what we call systematic theology.¹¹⁶ Story remains however the more basic and original experience of God. The Scriptures are not content to give us a series of propositions about the nature of God. Instead, we are given stories of how God interacted in history with His people, and from these stories we learn of God's love, His power, His gracious promises, and the inexorable working out of His plan of salvation for all nations. Despite the prevalence of narrative in the Scripture we must note the necessity of a different approach to both the interpretation and application of narrative in preaching and teaching. Narrative is descriptive rather than prescriptive and this means that propositional texts will always have some priority over narrative texts in the hermeneutical task.¹¹⁷ Sallie McFague asserts, "Where theology becomes overly abstract, conceptual and systematic, it separates thought and life, belief and practice, words and their embodiment, making it more difficult, if not impossible, for us to believe in our hearts what we confess with our lips."¹¹⁸ It is by way of myth,¹¹⁹ metaphor, and story that we get closer to the way the original event was first transmitted. Sooner or later, someone will say, "What originally happened was that this man or this woman had an experience..." and the story begins.¹²⁰ Systematic theology engages the intellect, while storytelling engages the heart and indeed the whole person. Logic is one avenue of truth, but limited. Imagination as myth and story is

¹¹⁵ William Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1984), 15.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹⁷ James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 329. Voelz argues that if we try to "see ourselves within the story" we run the risk of *allegorizing* the story instead of *applying* the meaning of the story.

¹¹⁸ Quoted by Bausch from Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 17.

¹¹⁹ Myth is used here in the sense of a story that has become determinative for a group of people, a story that defines their very existence, their worldview, and the essence of who they are.

¹²⁰ William Busch, *Storytelling*, 18.

another avenue that involves, engages, disturbs, and challenges people and as such is to be preferred.¹²¹

Part of the inherent power of story is its ability to provoke curiosity and compel repetition. King Clorain was betrayed by an unfaithful wife. Because he was so distracted, hurt and upset, he became distrustful of all women. He decided, being the king, that every day he would marry a wife, but in the morning have her killed. And that is what he did. Finally, he married a clever woman named Scheherazade. She was determined to keep her head and break the cycle of death. Each evening as they retired, she told the king a fascinating story. Toward the end, she would grow so tired she couldn't finish the story and she would fall asleep, leaving the king in high anxiety until he could hear the rest of the story the next day. So, of course, he put off her death. But each evening she started another fascinating story. And so it went for 1001 nights. During that time, both Scheherazade and the King changed. He worked through his disgust with life and his hatred for women and she fell in love with him.¹²² It is this compelling nature of story that draws in and engages the hearer in an intimate participation with the story. In such participation, truths are learned and shared, mutual understanding is achieved, and community is created. Or, as Gail Eifrig defines the way a story works, first it captivates us, then it "identifies" us, then it moves us, and finally it invites us to live in the world it has disclosed.¹²³

Another aspect of stories is their inherent power to engage people both rationally and emotionally as the hearer identifies with events in the story, one of the characters,¹²⁴ with an

¹²¹ Ibid., 27.

¹²² Ibid., 30-31.

¹²³ Riegert, *Imaginative Shock*, 105.

¹²⁴ Thomas Long discusses how narrative functions to draw people into the Biblical story by inviting their identification with one of the characters or by making claims about life which the reader or hearer must evaluate for truthfulness. See *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 74-80.

experience of one of the characters, or in the sharing of feelings that are part of the story.¹²⁵ When people are thus engaged in a story they are necessarily moved along with the conflict of the story to some kind of resolution and with that resolution some kind of transformation occurs. It is in this process that what Riegert calls “imaginative shock” takes place, namely, “the metaphoric process of disorientation and reorientation” that invites the hearer to live in the new world it has disclosed.¹²⁶ Because stories function metaphorically, moving us to see and understand things differently, they are an important vehicle for the communication of the Gospel. Stories can take on a redemptive and formative quality. Consider this story about a rich sultan in Baghdad who gave a banquet in honor of his son’s birth. All the nobility participating in the feast brought costly gifts, except a young sage who came empty-handed. He explained to the sultan, “Today, the young prince will receive many precious gifts, jewels, and rare coins. My gift is different. From the time he is old enough to listen until manhood, I will come to the palace every day and tell him stories of our Arabian heroes. When he becomes our ruler, he will be just and honest. He kept his word and when the prince became sultan he was widely known for his wisdom and honor.”¹²⁷ This story about the power of stories demonstrates how stories can shape and define reality in new ways and in the process redefine how people see and interact with their world.

There is a relationship between imagery and story that is centered in this metaphoric quality. Images educe photographs, still pictures in the minds of the hearers as the imagination gives shape to the image shared in words. For example, “She cowered in the crowd waiting for Jesus” invites the hearer to envision a still picture of the woman with the

¹²⁵ Ibid., 107.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 110.

¹²⁷ Story related by William Bausch, *Storytelling*, 50.

flow of blood planning her approach to Jesus (Mk. 5.24-25).¹²⁸ Stories, like images, summon forth mental pictures, but they involve action in time, creating, in essence, a motion picture. Both image and story thus share a common function, namely, the potential for metaphoric references that evoke response,¹²⁹ but story, because of its linear motion, can draw in and engage the hearer in a fuller level of participation. Images and stories thus enhance the possibility that hearers will participate in the message, and that participation, particularly if it involves the emotions and the will in addition to the mind deepens the impact of the message and enhances its retention. Robert Fulghum describes the storyteller's creed,

I believe that imagination is stranger than knowledge.
That myth is more potent than history,
That dreams are more powerful than facts,
That hope always triumphs over experience,
That laughter is the only cure for grief,
And I believe that love is stronger than death.¹³⁰

Story has the ability to punctuate any message, even one laden with propositions and precepts, with interest. Meir Sternberg notes how the Biblical narrative manages to bring together certain principles (the ideological, historiographic, and aesthetic) which are generally incompatible with each other by allowing history to mediate between the other two principles.¹³¹ Narratives in the Scripture are always more than a simple recounting of the facts for they are unfolded and shaped within a peculiar understanding of God's dealings with His people and His control of history. So the telling of the story

¹²⁸ Hughes and Kysar, 55.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 55-56.

¹³⁰ Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (New York: Villard Books, 1988), 1.

¹³¹ Thomas Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 68. Long's discussion of Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* is particularly helpful in understanding the interplay between the literary, historical, and theological elements in Biblical narrative.

casts reading as a drama, interpretation as an ordeal that enacts and distinguishes the human predicament... with the narrative become an obstacle course, its reading turns into a drama of understanding – conflict between inferences, seesawing, reversal, discovery and all... It is by a sustained effort alone that the reader can attain at the end to something of the vision that God has possessed all along: to make sense of the discourse is to gain a sense of being human.¹³²

Robert Alter argues that the religious vision of the Bible is “given depth and subtlety precisely by being conveyed through the most sophisticated resources of prose fiction.”¹³³

Jesus used both story and precept to convey the truth of the kingdom of God He announced. In a conversation with an expert in the law, Jesus is engaged in a propositional dialogue, but in response to the expert’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10. 25-37). Again, Jesus shifts smoothly from a precept like, “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of His possessions” to a parable about a rich fool who thought it did. Sometimes the story serves primarily to explicate a propositional statement and sometimes the precept follows the story so as to nail down clearly its point.

The ultimate story that we tell is the story of salvation in Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection. The heart of this story is the truth about our lives and in the effective telling of that story people are able to connect that truth to the brokenness and despair they know only too well in their own lives. The old cliché, “where there’s life, there’s hope,” is nonsense for too many people. Where there is life, there is often despair, suicide, tears, grief, death wish, scandal, shame and disillusionment. In the proclamation of the Gospel message, we invite the hopeless to find hope in the promise of Him who was lifted up on the cross for our salvation. The storyteller gleans secondary narratives that will help in the telling and

¹³² Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Reading and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985), 41.

¹³³ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981), 22.

understanding of the ultimate story.¹³⁴ Not all stories will serve this purpose. They must be chosen carefully lest they obscure the Gospel or distract the hearer. Stories fall into two categories: “amusement (those stories that keep our minds occupied while we sit idle) and gestalt models (those stories that impact our selves at deeper psychological levels)”.¹³⁵ The gestalt story invites the hearer into a level of participation and engagement that allows the story to bring change and transformation. Gestalt stories can be used in a secondary way to connect the hearers to the ultimate story, and there alone by God’s power is real transformation.

Eugene Peterson says that we keep telling stories, “to locate ourselves in the human condition.”¹³⁶ Story has the strong relational power to connect people. It binds families and nations together.¹³⁷ The stories of Abraham became the glue and mortar of a nation that defined who they were by the covenant God had made with a “wandering Aramean” and his response of faith to God’s promises. Stories pull interest into intensity. They pull the interest of thousands of people until the whole audience is fused in a focused relationship. Because the stories of our lives are part and parcel of someone else’s story, a single powerful story can weld the whole together.¹³⁸ When the story touches us at an emotional level, the bonds of relationship are made even stronger, for emotion is the very language of relationship. In the hearing of a story we move closer together and nothing can move people closer than “the old, old story of Jesus and His love.” Emotion is to the mind as a kaleidoscope is to the eye.¹³⁹ It only takes a slight adjustment to produce an abundance of

¹³⁴ Calvin Miller, *Spirit, Word, and Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 164.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹³⁶ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 19.

¹³⁷ Calvin Miller, 173.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

rich new patterns. Emotion is far more than an appendage to thought; it is, rather, a major variable in all seeing and knowing.¹⁴⁰ It is emotion that contains the power to set men “seeking new goals with such force that discoveries are inevitable.”¹⁴¹ Emotion has a way of focusing and narrowing the attention. Luther’s excitement and joy in the discovery of God’s grace in the doctrine of justification by faith enabled him to discern that truth embedded throughout Scripture and enhanced his joy in the good news of salvation. Supporting evidence was found in places that seemed barren to less fervent eyes.¹⁴² Emotions can be touched by little more than the passion of the preacher for his message. The Law and the Gospel are not to be communicated with the same emotional tone. Congruence between the mood and the message allows the listener to perceive more clearly the real force of the words being proclaimed. While emotions can be misused and manipulative, they are an essential aspect of every person’s makeup and must not be ignored or discounted as unimportant in the communication of the Gospel message. When the message resonates with our emotions, it touches a part of our being deeper and more profound than any other and stimulates the mind and heart to new levels of intensity and action.

Illustrations In Communication Let In The Light

An illustration is like a row of floodlights that shed light on what is present on the stage.

If you turn the lights on the audience, they blind the people. (Haddon Robinson)

¹³⁹ Webb B. Garrison, *Creative Imagination in Preaching* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 82.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 86.

It is the Word of God which is the sword of the spirit (Ep 6.17). But that sword must be unsheathed if it is to penetrate effectively the hearts and minds of the hearers.¹⁴³ An illustration is, by definition, that which illumines a topic,¹⁴⁴ casting a light that brings into sharp relief and focus some idea, thought, or word that may not be easily grasped by the listeners without some illumination. An illustration may be a story, but not every story is an illustration. The parables of Jesus were intended to provide illumination and help hearers to grasp the true nature of the kingdom, but without faith those secrets remained hidden. While the parables function as part of the catechesis of the disciples and so impart knowledge of the kingdom, there is also a sense of mystery in them that is clearly related to the very nature of the kingdom that they offer to illustrate. The parables operate analogically by suggesting that “the kingdom of God is like...” Because they compare the mysterious things of God to the things of this world, their meaning will be hidden from those without faith – whose eyes and ears are closed.¹⁴⁵ The parables do not deal with abstract truths, but describe the kingdom of God in action, what happens when God is establishing Himself as King among the people of His world.¹⁴⁶ The parables of Jesus may certainly be considered as a special category of illustrations, but have some unique characteristics that set them apart from other extended metaphors.

Metaphors often shed light on something otherwise obscure. But unless these means actually illumine and clarify they must not be considered illustrations. Obviously, even quality illustrations can be so poorly presented that they fail to illustrate. Paul Lehman defines an illustration as a “basic, identifiable, everyday idea in which a listener may find

¹⁴³ Dale Meyer, “PDAs and the Spirit’s Sword,” *Concordia Journal* 29:2 (April 2003), 176.

¹⁴⁴ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching*, 104.

¹⁴⁵ Arthur A. Just Jr., *Concordia Commentary: Luke 1:1-9:50* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 347.

¹⁴⁶ Martin H. Scharlemann, *Proclaiming the Parables* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 13.

himself related to the preacher/teacher and to the message.¹⁴⁷ It is a piece of life, a setting so totally believable that a minimum of description enables the hearer to see and live it.¹⁴⁸ Homileticians of the 19th and early 20th centuries began to move away from preaching as persuasive rhetoric to the idea that the preacher was to make the Gospel understandable, and for this purpose all kinds of illustrations were enlisted to clarify and facilitate understanding.¹⁴⁹ In effect, they are “windows on the Word,” providing illumination that enables the obscure to become visible, the complex to be made simple, and the abstract to become concrete. Such a view of illustrations however, tended to understand preaching as a “didactic, rationalistic, and conceptually oriented” business,¹⁵⁰ when it is clearly much more than that. Illustrations were discovered to be much more than clarifying devices. Because illustrations have such communicative power and energy, they engage hearers in an intense way. They can be more than “windows on the Word,” they can be arenas for “encountering, discerning, discovering, and experiencing the Word” as well.¹⁵¹

Eldon Weisheit describes the role of an illustration as akin to that of a flashlight on a nighttime nature trail. The leader uses the flashlight to point out things of interest or importance to the hikers. When the flashlight lights up the object under discussion, the response is, “we see it.” In the same way, the preacher shines light on scriptural truths or doctrines by means of an illustration so that the hearers can respond, “we get it.” The illustration is not what needs to be learned, but the means of illuminating that which is

¹⁴⁷ Paul Louis Lehman, *Put a Door on It* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1975), 27.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 158-9.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

important. When the flashlight is turned off, people still remember what they saw.¹⁵² It is for this reason that illustrations must be clearly focused or pointed. They are not like searchlights that randomly flash through the sky seeking to locate something. Illustrations must not ramble aimlessly, but contain “pointedness.”¹⁵³ They need to be clearly understood in their intent and purpose. They should be shaped for a single purpose. When they are expected to do more than one thing, they end up being weakened and ineffective.¹⁵⁴

Illustrations, of course, are able to do much more than just clarify a concept; they invite hearers to participate in the process of understanding the truth. Every house must have a door or the outsider cannot enter. Those who proclaim the message need a door somewhere in the message so the spectator can become a participant.¹⁵⁵ Participation through reflection may be enhanced when illustrations open up possibilities without providing resolution. Allowing that ambiguity to exist encourages the hearers to discover the implications of the message for their own life. In a postmodern era, such indirect forms of communication may assume greater significance. Story and imagery may facilitate the kind of insight that cultivates real hearing of the Word.¹⁵⁶ In a time when people have lost credence in words, the need to stimulate the mind with visual images becomes even more imperative.

Preaching to some extent always involves abstractions. Because preachers deal in high and low levels of abstraction, “particulars must be gathered up in generalizations and abstractions must be taken down to particulars to be made understandable.”¹⁵⁷ The Bible is

¹⁵² Eldon Weisheit, *Let's Illustrate* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 32-33.

¹⁵³ Calvin Miller, 191.

¹⁵⁴ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 12.

¹⁵⁵ Lehman, Preface ix.

¹⁵⁶ Hughes and Kysar, 73.

full of abstractions like depravity, grace, God, sanctification, justification and a host of other terms that we rely upon to describe the nature of faith, which is in itself an abstraction. Illustrating is the attempt to move from the realm of abstraction down to the level of the particular and familiar. Depravity doesn't illustrate sins, but sins illustrate depravity.¹⁵⁸ This means that the craft of sermon illustration is always subservient to the purpose of communicating the message.¹⁵⁹ But even if the role of illustrating the message is subservient, it is not of trifling importance. Whatever can clarify the Word, or carry conviction to a hesitating mind, or help vanish doubt, should not be easily dismissed.¹⁶⁰

Preaching, by its very character, is the craft of communicating the same message, namely Law and Gospel, in fresh and “new” ways that challenge and stimulate the hearers to give their attention to a message they may assume they already know. Illustrations can be important in making this repetition possible without weariness.¹⁶¹ Making the “old, old story” new and interesting to those who are already familiar with it is a considerable challenge. Illustrations help give it new life, create mental images or pictures that enable the hearers to also see the truth, and stimulate the mind to genuine reflection. Ralph Waldo Emerson once remarked, “I cannot hear a sermon without being struck by the fact that amid drowsy series of sentences what a sensation a historical fact, a geographical name, a sharply

¹⁵⁷ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 149.

¹⁵⁸ Michael J. Hostetter, *Illustrating the Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 12.

¹⁵⁹ W.E.Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Illustration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), 17.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

objective illustration makes!”¹⁶² The human mind yearns for, and needs, the concrete to anchor the abstract.¹⁶³

Human understanding in its fullest sense has to do with much more than the intellect. It involves “the will as well as the intellect, the heart as well as the mind, emotion as well as cognition...”¹⁶⁴ Reaching peoples’ hearts and wills requires more than a carefully crafted, logical exposition of truth. It is in the experience of truth, especially in a story, that the whole person is engaged. Jesus’ formulation of the most important commandment, “to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mk 12.30), emphasizes the necessity of involving every aspect of our being in our relationship with God. It is that whole person that the preacher seeks to reach, challenge, motivate, engage, and move through the proclamation of the Gospel message. Jesus demonstrated clearly in His own preaching the importance of story or parable to illustrate the truths of the kingdom. Even St. Paul, who relies heavily upon propositional argument in his epistles, sprinkles his most doctrinal passages with liberal allusions to the narrative history of Israel, the arena, the sports field, the military, the marketplace, the temple, the home, the school, and more.¹⁶⁵ If the Spirit of God found illustrations useful in communicating the divine revelation to us, it should, at the very least, encourage us to be as sensitive to the form of the message we rely upon as we are to its content.

People’s own experiences are often the link between their own world and the words others speak. It is precisely in this area where illustrations can help bridge that gap. People may know a biblical truth intuitively or logically, but fail to understand it emotionally,

¹⁶² Michael J. Hoseteler, 19.

¹⁶³ Bryan Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1992), 14.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

psychologically, or spiritually by guarding themselves from experiencing the truth.¹⁶⁶ The use of illustrations to help communicate that truth helps preclude such evasion. When listeners enter the experiential world of an illustration they find themselves participating in the experience of that truth. The Pharisees who heard Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan could not escape the truth that the story so profoundly illustrated. Killinger rates highly those very personal illustrations that are:

Stories from men's and women's experiences, from children's experiences narrated by the persons they happened to, shared by a preacher. There is a warmth about them that makes them very appealing. They give an honest ring to the gospel that does not come from anything else. They make the gospel seem real, touchable, and truly incarnate.

They have the quality of witness, or personal experience, that cannot come from another source.¹⁶⁷

The message of Christianity finds its beginning in the incarnation of God in the flesh. Preaching also involves incarnation—putting ideas and theological abstraction into real, warm, and living pictures.¹⁶⁸ While propositions are appropriate for sharing truths within a community where meaning and values are shared, they are less functional in transmitting truth where cultural and linguistic barriers exist. Such barriers also cause difficulty in understanding even when narratives are the means of communication. The communicator always has to be sensitive to the potential difficulties that differing cultural perspectives might raise.¹⁶⁹ At the same time, stories, because they major in actions rather than abstractions, can be more effective in conveying meaning across these barriers. The stories of God's mighty acts of deliverance in history convey the transcendent truth of His power,

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 57.

¹⁶⁷ John Killinger, *Fundamentals of Preaching*(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 118.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 104.

¹⁶⁹ See Don Richardson's book *Peace Child* for a dramatic illustration of this cultural difficulty that profoundly affected the communication of the Gospel and made Judas, the betrayer, a hero because he was a master of a culturally valued trait – betrayal.

His love, and His grace in dealing with His people. When propositional truths are contextualized in narratives, they bridge cultures and enable people to share in the kinds of experiences that signal meaning.¹⁷⁰ Effective communication usually involves a healthy balance between abstraction and imagery. Such communication appeals both to those who are more tuned to the logical and propositional and to those who need to “see” the message in a pictorial form. The Scriptures consistently demonstrate this kind of balance “so that story is always given a rational spine and statement is always provided a nearby illustration.”¹⁷¹

Illustrations are capable of performing multiple functions in the context of the sermon. They primarily serve to make clear what otherwise might be obscure. They relate theology to life, bolster credence, make the truth impressive, help to persuade the listener, help make the message memorable, engage the heart and thus the whole person, and intensify emotions. They also help create movement in the sermon, may be used to provide structure in the sermon, bridge time, join concept and precept, and stimulate interest in the message.¹⁷² There is another noteworthy function of illustrations that deserves our attention. Listening intently is hard work and requires considerable concentration. Illustrations allow people to relax for a few moments—they let the congregation rest.¹⁷³ That respite allows the hearers to renew their focus on the thought line of the message without becoming weary. Illustrations are like windows which let the light in, but a house cannot be built out of windows. It needs a structure, a frame, a clear purpose, and the preacher must give most careful attention to the materials he uses to build this house.

¹⁷⁰ Bryan Chapell, 69.

¹⁷¹ John Killinger, 106.

¹⁷² The many and varied ways in which illustrations may function are covered most extensively by Buttrick, *Homiletic* 127ff and Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Illustrations*, 18-24, but many other authors give attention to this aspect of preaching.

¹⁷³ John Killinger, 108.

Illustrations have great potential to present the truth in ways that allow people to apply it to their own experiences in life. But there are obviously many ways that illustrations can be abused. Illustrations are often poorly prepared, rambling stories that contain more detail than necessary and only serve to confuse. Illustrations must be accurate so that the credibility of the messenger and the message is firmly established. Illustrations should always be appropriate, realistic, and truthful. They should never betray confidences. It is essential that the illustrations used be clearly focused on the point of the message. They are frequently powerful enough to distract the hearers if they do not drive the message in the same direction the preacher is going. When people take a picture of an activity in their lives—a vacation, a reunion, a special celebration—they trip the shutter and frame the experience. That moment is separated in the photo from all the other surrounding experiences.¹⁷⁴ An illustration is like that snapshot, holding up an experience like a moment in time, so that the mental image it evokes is properly exposed and clearly focused. It should not be blurry or overexposed lest the image be damaged. If the picture is clear and distinct, it is worth a thousand words. The preacher who finds the appropriate illustration that makes the obscure or abstract clear and distinct has done a great service in helping his hearers grasp the truth he wishes to proclaim.

¹⁷⁴ Bryan Chapell, 104.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

The Design of the Project

This project was designed to provide a qualitative evaluation of the effectiveness of illustrations in helping the hearers to both apprehend and retain Biblical truths. That illustrations are being used more frequently by preachers is a given. A brief review of the homiletic textbooks being written recently would verify the fact that homileticians are giving more attention to the use of illustrations, stories, images, and metaphors. That people like stories is nothing new. It has always been that way. But although the benefits of using illustrations in preaching are extolled by many homileticians little research or study has been devoted to actually trying to access how effective they are in helping people to understand the message.¹⁷⁵

The researcher has made use of illustrations in his preaching for many years, and has probably used them even more extensively of late than in his earlier years of ministry. While he is of the opinion that they are effective in the communication of the Gospel, he has never invested any time in actually researching this issue. He has served as pastor at Timothy Lutheran Church in St. Louis, Missouri, since 1988. This extended ministry in one congregation provided the context for this research project.

¹⁷⁵ Research done for this project included extensive reading of homiletical texts and other materials related to preaching. Although most authors make reference to illustrations and sometimes devote chapters to discussing their rhetorical importance, the author found no references to studies or research that explored the effectiveness of illustrations in preaching.

The research project was designed not only to provide some more general observations about illustrations and their effectiveness from a broad cross-section of the congregation but also to use guided interviews with a smaller cross-section of Timothy's members to delve more deeply into the function of illustrations in the communication process. The primary objective of this study was twofold: 1) to determine if illustrations enable people to better understand the precepts of the message, do they actually illumine that which otherwise might be obscure so that real apprehension of the message can occur; and, 2) to determine if illustrations help people to remember or retain the message by helping them connect something vivid and concrete to that which is more abstract. If those two objectives can be achieved through the research and analysis of the data, then a more confident assertion about the value of illustrations in preaching can be made.

General Congregational Survey

The first step in the research project was a general survey to be completed by the members of Timothy Lutheran Church. It was designed to garner some general observations about the use of illustrations in sermons that the researcher has preached. The survey instrument (see Appendix A) took the form of a questionnaire which could be answered rather quickly. This was done to help ensure a significant number of responses. The normal worship attendance at our weekend services is about 325. 128 surveys were returned, probably about 50% of the communicant members in regular attendance.

The congregation was informed several Sundays in advance that a survey would be conducted in conjunction with the researcher's Major Applied Project. On the Sunday that the surveys were first distributed, a more thorough introduction to the surveys was given in the announcements. The invitation to participate in the survey was extended encouraging the response of the members. A majority of the total survey responses were returned that same

Sunday/Monday, but there were some (about 15%) that were returned later over the next 2-3 weeks. Although written comments were not solicited, there were many surveys that included some short comments related to the questions being asked.

One of the questions on the survey instrument asked if the respondent would be willing to be interviewed by the researcher as part of the second step in this research. There were 45 respondents who indicated their willingness to participate in the interview, and consequently added their name to the survey instrument. Those who did not indicate any interest in the interview process were not asked to give their names. The researcher felt that respondents could be honest and free in their responses if they could answer anonymously. The survey instrument was not designed to meet the standards of a quantitative study, but rather to provide some general background information related to the value of illustrations as people in the congregation perceived them. The responses were helpful in designing the questions for the more important interviews which were of primary importance in the research.

Personal Interviews

By the first week in March, the congregational survey forms had all been returned and the data was summarized. Those respondents who had indicated their willingness to be interviewed were divided into four groups: 1) Males who had been members of Timothy for seven or more years; 2) Females who had been members of Timothy for seven or more years; 3) Males who had been members of Timothy for six or fewer years; and 4) Females who had been members of Timothy for six or fewer years. In group #1, the average years of membership was 12 and the mean was 13 years. In group #2, the average years of membership was 20 and the mean was 16 years. In group #3, the average years of

membership was 4 and the mean was 2 years. In group #4, the average years of membership was 4 and the mean was 3 years. A concerted effort was made to include both older and younger members in each group to achieve as representative a sample as possible of the Timothy worshipping community. An effort was also made in qualifying the sample to include women who were very well educated (3 PhD's were in the group of interviewees), as well as some who had less formal education. Group #1 consisted of 7 interviews; group #2 consisted of 8 interviews; group #3 consisted of 5 interviews; and group #4 consisted of 6 interviews. Based upon the researcher's own knowledge of the pool of those who indicated a willingness to be interviewed, he chose those most likely to provide an honest appraisal of his sermons and those most capable of articulating their insight clearly.

Based in part on the data from the congregational survey, the questions were formulated to explore in more depth the function of illustrations in the sermons as they were perceived by those being interviewed, particularly how the illustration benefited each hearer. A significant part of the interview was devoted to how illustrations were remembered, what made illustrations memorable, and how a memorable illustration might help the hearer to recall the message of the sermon. Respondents were also asked to evaluate various types of illustrations as to which types were most helpful to them.

These interviews were conducted in the researcher's office beginning March 17th, 2005 and ending June 15th, 2005. The majority of the interviews were conducted in April and May. The interviews were scheduled at times convenient for each person. Interviewees were asked to devote up to 45 minutes of their time to respond to the questions. However, most of the interviews lasted about 30 minutes. The interviews were consistently open and frank. Respondents shared both praise and constructive critiques that were very helpful in understanding the value of illustrations in sermons. With the permission of those being

interviewed, the interview sessions were tape-recorded. The researcher also took notes during the session, noting especially those responses that merited a careful hearing when the tapes could be analyzed more closely.

Although the researcher had prepared questions to guide the interview, there were times when tangential lines of questioning were pursued. This happened especially when the interviewee offered some special response or insight that merited follow-up. There were a number of instances when these lines of questioning produced helpful responses that were beneficial to the researcher. It seemed helpful not to be too restricted by or bound to the prepared questions because each interviewee is unique and deserved an approach designed for him or her. This kind of departure is allowable, even necessary, in a qualitative research process, but not possible in an effort to obtain quantitative data.

The personal interviews were very helpful in contributing to the objectives of this research project. Some very helpful insights were shared with the researcher that provided a glimpse into how illustrations function in oral communication such as a sermon. The interview process in this qualitative study enabled fruitful discussions of key issues that could not have taken place in a quantitative study. The diversity in the group of interviews was also helpful in understanding how different generations responded to and benefited from illustrations in the sermon. Communicating with a diverse audience on a Sunday morning through the preaching of God's Word demands a sensitivity to and awareness of many important factors.

The final question in the personal interview format was, "Would you be willing to be part of a small group that would convene after each sermon the researcher preaches to evaluate the sermon?" The question was not addressed to every respondent, but only those that the researcher felt could provide honest, helpful, insightful feedback in a small group format. Obviously, this decision was somewhat subjective, but there were 26 people interviewed and a maximum of 12 were needed to participate in the small group evaluation stage of the

research project. It was essential for this final stage of the research to have people capable of genuine participation in a small group context. Although all of the interviewees were well-known to the researcher, their ability to respond in significant ways during the personal interview was a crucial factor in selecting those who were asked to participate in the sermon evaluation group, the final stage of the research in this MAP.

Sermon Evaluation Group

Twelve people indicated their willingness to participate in this sermon evaluation group. Based on their preferences, the Wednesday evening following each Sunday that the researcher preached would be the time for the group to convene. It was anticipated that because of vacations and other conflicts with social activities and work, there would never be more than about eight to nine people participating in the evaluation group. The researcher asked the assistant and associate pastors to facilitate this small group evaluation. Their facilitation of the process would allow each participant to speak freely and openly. If the researcher were facilitating this process, participants might not be as willing to share their true responses to the sermon.

A letter was sent to each participant describing in detail the goals for the sermon evaluation group with a schedule for convening of this group. The sermons that they would evaluate would be preached on July 17th, July 31st, August 14th, August 28th, September 11th, and September 25th. A set of questions was prepared as an instrument to guide the discussion and the researcher met with the facilitator to offer suggestions for the facilitation of this process. It was determined after discussions with the facilitators that the sessions would not be tape recorded lest that inhibit participants. The facilitators would take notes on the comments offered and debrief the researcher after each evaluation session. This would

ensure adequate feedback for the researcher without any undue restraints placed on the group process.

The focus of these discussions or evaluations of the sermon is on the value of individual illustrations in helping people understand the truths being proclaimed. Because the evaluation group met only three days after the delivery of the sermon, the illustrations and their impact were still fresh in the minds of the participants. In that context, the issues of relevancy, effectiveness, appropriateness, emotional effect, clarity, and other aspects of the functions of illustrations were analyzed more completely. The discussion format allows for the sharing of insights and encourages the more active participation of each person in the group.

Facilitators found the discussion of the sermon helpful as a way of thinking about their own preaching. The insights of the participants and their constructive comments helped the facilitators to think more carefully about the communication challenges inherent in the proclamation of God's Word. This particular kind of feedback to sermons would be helpful to any preacher, particularly when the discussion is carefully guided and there is clear purpose for gathering such a group together.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PROJECT EVALUATED

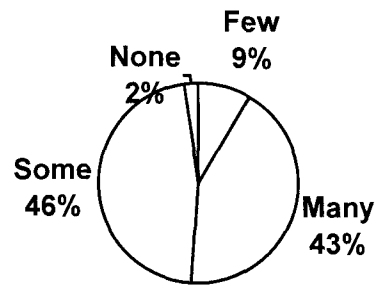
Field Research Data

The study involved three distinct phases: the general survey, the personal interviews, and the sermon evaluation group feedback. The data for this study will therefore be presented in three parts in an objective format and then the data will be analyzed in light of the project hypothesis.

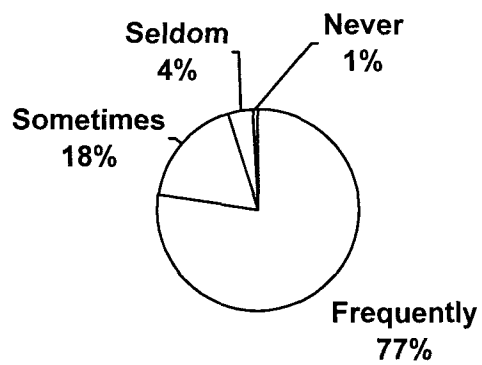
General Congregational Survey Results

There were 129 responses to this survey. Most respondents addressed all of the questions, though a few respondents left some questions blank. Therefore the total number of responses to each question is, in some cases, less than 129. Circle graphs are provided to highlight the nature of the response to each question. Respondents were asked to respond to the questions on the basis of sermons that they heard the researcher preach.

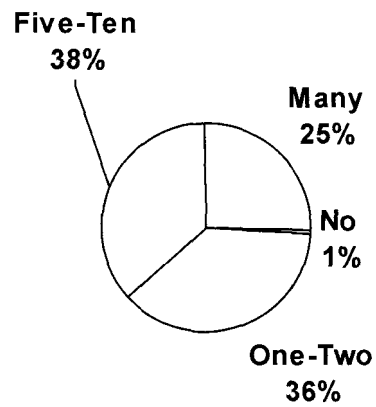
1. Do you recall illustrations that really helped you understand the Bible's message?



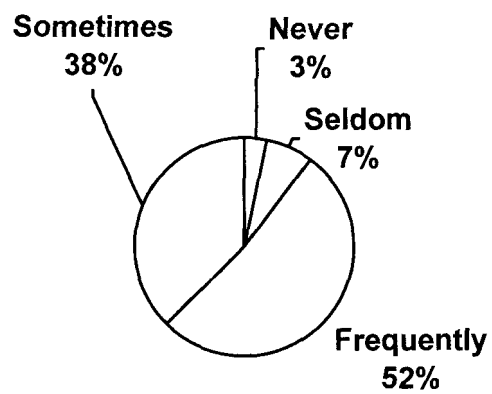
2. Do you think illustrations play an important role in the sermon?



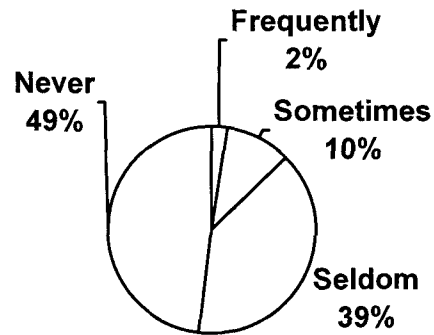
3. Can you recall an illustration from a sermon that you heard?



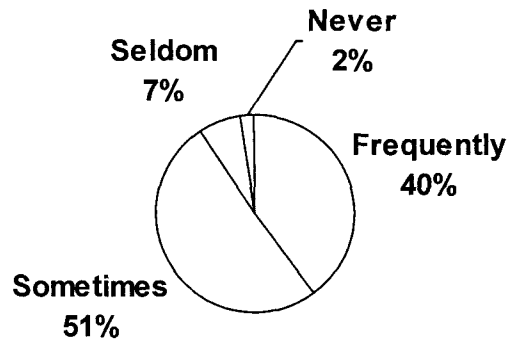
4. If you remember an illustration that was used in a sermon, do you also remember the point that was being made?



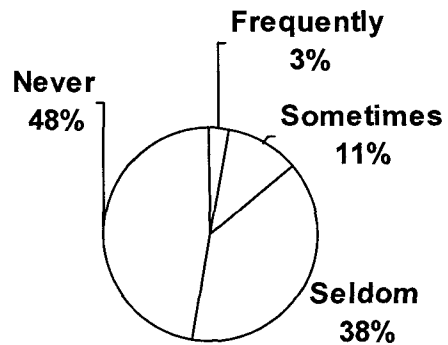
5. Do you find that illustrations distract you from the message?



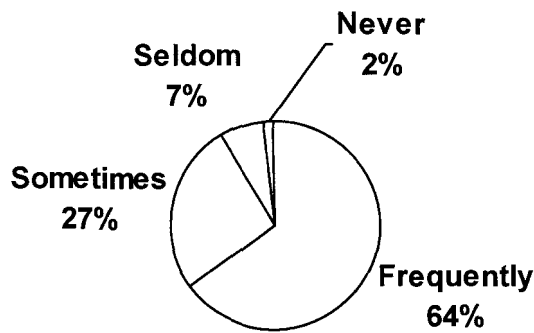
6. Do you ever remember and think about an illustration used in a sermon as a way of remembering the sermon?



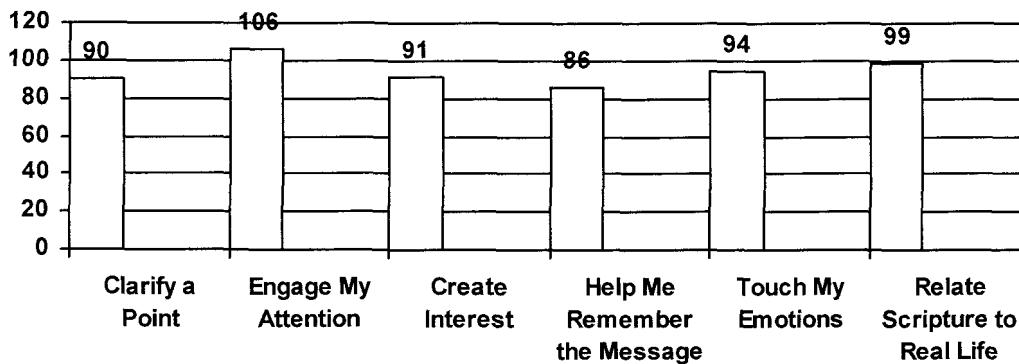
7. Do you have a hard time connecting the illustrations used to the point being made in the sermon?



8. Are illustrations helpful to you in remembering the message of a sermon?



9. Illustrations are helpful to me because they:



Analysis of Survey Results

This survey provides primarily quantitative data without any attempt to use a scientific statistical procedure. The data was intended to provide some very general feedback that would guide the researcher in developing the questions for the personal interviews. At the same time this data provides a helpful sketch of how illustrations are perceived by the congregational members. Of particular note was the response to question #2. Ninety-five percent (95%) of the respondents said that illustrations frequently (77%) or sometimes (18%) play an important role in the sermon. When asked later to indicate some of the ways that illustrations are helpful to them, each of the six functions they were invited to check received at least 70% responses. While many might not have been able to articulate clearly the

function or role that illustrations play in sermons, they were readily able to identify a number of roles that are usually assigned to illustrations as being helpful to them.

Those questions related to the ability of hearers to remember or recall an illustration (questions #1, #3) were particularly helpful in preparing questions for the personal interviews. A key point of the problem addressed by the researcher is the retention of Biblical truths which is related to the issue of recalling or remembering sermon illustrations. It was hypothesized that illustrations that were very powerful and created vivid images would be more likely to be remembered along with the point that was being illustrated. It is apparent from the responses that a significant number of respondents are not able to recall more than one or two illustrations. Simply because an illustration was not remembered does not mean the illustration did not accomplish its purpose. The nighttime hiker will not remember the flashlight beam that exposed an important marker or object, but he will probably remember the marker or object that it illuminated.

Despite the high numbers of respondents who find illustrations beneficial and can easily connect them to the point of the message, there are some people who find illustrations sometimes distracting (12%). This raises a point of caution for the preacher who must realize that not everyone relates well to or appreciates the functional value of illustrations. It reinforces the conviction that illustrations must be used with discernment, focused carefully on the point to be clarified, and applied with great care. The survey clearly indicates that illustrations are quite effective for many people in engaging their attention, clarifying the message, creating interest in the sermon, and relating God's Word to everyday life. They also touch people at the emotional level, engaging more than just the mind. Illustrations help a majority of hearers to remember the message and thus ensure that the Word will continue to work in the lives of many hearers beyond the hour of its hearing.

Personal Interview Results

In many respects, the personal interviews were the heart of the research for this project. Although a conscious attempt was made in choosing those to be interviewed from various categories by gender, age, and length of membership in the congregation, it was difficult to correlate the response to the questions in the personal interviews to these categories. Obviously, those with longer membership in the congregation had heard more sermons preached by the researcher, but this did not significantly affect their responses to the interview questions. Those chosen provided a good sample and a healthy cross-section of the congregation and allowed the results of the interviews to reflect a fairly representative picture of the researcher's sermons. The interviews provided qualitative data related directly to the problem being addressed in this project—how illustrations enable people to understand and retain Biblical truths. The questions prepared for the interviews were shaped in part by information obtained through the general survey. However, the personal interviews enabled the researcher to probe more deeply for the unique insights of those who have been listening to his sermons. The instrument (see Appendix B) used for the personal interviews included specific questions to be asked, but allowed opportunity for deeper exploration of the question in light of the responses generated.

The interview began with the researcher asking the interviewee to describe his sermons. They were encouraged to use adjectives or phrases that would characterize the sermons and how they functioned in their lives. The responses are listed below and are grouped primarily in functional categories according to how the messages worked in their lives. If responses were given by more than one person, the total number for that particular response is noted in parenthesis.

The first category of responses includes those that describe the general character of the researcher's sermons:

- Textual/Biblical (6)
- Excellent
- Sincere
- Spirit-filled
- Christ-centered
- Always found reinforcement of my faith
- Gospel oriented (2)
- Law and Gospel balanced
- Full of illustrations
- Always know it is God's Word

These descriptions do not necessarily relate to the use of illustrations, but rather provide a general context for how the messages are perceived by those who hear the sermons on a regular basis.

The remaining responses are grouped in categories that describe how the sermons function rhetorically in relationship to the text or the hearers.

Engage Attention:

- Interesting
- Personal
- Appeals to the whole person
- Keeps my attention
- Grabs my attention

Create Interest:

- Visual
- Creative
- As though I'm hearing it for the first time
- Hangs together in a way I didn't expect
- Often surprises me
- Conversational

Touch Emotions:

- Compelling
- Powerful
- Both intellectual and emotional (3)
- Strong element of emotion
- Moving
- Passionate

Relate Scripture to Real Life:

- Insightful
- Human
- Down to earth
- Brings concepts home
- Positive
- Direct
- Brings Scripture to life

Assist in Understanding:

- Precise
- To the point
- Understandable (4)
- Comes back to main principles
- Clear
- Coherent (3)
- Having a lot of meat

While these responses to the initial question do not specifically detail the role that illustrations play in the sermon, the responses listed below make that connection more explicit. Respondents were asked if the illustrations that were used in the sermons contributed to making the sermons have the impact that they had described. The responses to this question were:

- Yes (14)
- Absolutely
- A little...but even if there were no stories, the sermons would be the same...but I find them moving and not detracting from the message.
- I think so, but others could use the same stories and not connect...sincerity and delivery are important.
- In almost every case, the illustrations played a significant role in the rhetorical character of the sermons, that is, in shaping how what was said was said.
- Yes, if there aren't too many (illustrations).
- Definitely (7)
- Very much so.

Respondents were asked to describe how they thought illustrations functioned in the researcher's sermons. While they offered a wide array of responses, it was possible to group them into several key functional categories. The respondents said, "Illustrations...

- help create mental images (3)
- are a doorway for understanding
- make people think about the message
- help drive home the point of the text (2)
- help me understand and apply the text (5)
- help me get more out of the message (2)
- help people visualize (5)
- provide depth perception

From these responses it is clear that illustrations function for many people to help in understanding the message. Almost every interviewee mentioned this particular function in one way or another. Clearly illustrations function to illumine or cast light on that which otherwise might be more difficult to grasp.

“Illustrations...

- keep me focused (4)
- help engage my attention (8)
- stir people up from the inside
- take me to a different time and place
- provide reentry
- help me reconnect

These responses demonstrate the value of illustrations in creating interest in the message or helping to engage the attention of the hearers. Pastors who use illustrations in their sermons will readily agree that when a story is told the interest of the hearers is immediately heightened, and people whose attention had waned or whose minds had drifted are reengaged. In an age when holding the attention of hearers is a real challenge, illustrations are able to provide a real benefit in this area.

“Illustrations...

- make the message real (3)
- bring Jesus to a personal level
- make a connection on a personal level (3)
- relate the text to contemporary situations (7)
- cut right to the things that matter

These responses provide more insight into how illustrations function to facilitate better understanding. Helping people relate the text to their own lives or contemporary situations makes application more real. It allows the text to come alive in the mind of the hearer. This promotes understanding and ensures that the hearers see the message as functionally relevant to their lives.

“Illustrations...

- evoke memories
- allow an associative link
- help me continue to think about the message later (2)
- allow additional ways of evoking the text

While not many respondents recognized the value of illustrations to assist in retaining the truths of the message, there were a few who noted this function. Clearly this function is not as important as some of the other functions, especially that of helping people to understand the message.

“Illustrations...

- relate to the main focus (4)
- validate and support the main point
- bring rest or relief to the listener

Illustrations play some role for the hearers in providing structure and movement to the sermons. They also function to provide some respite to the hearers from the intensity of more propositional language. The interactions between exposition of the text, propositional application, and the use of illustrations is probably more evident to the preacher than the hearer, because it is intentional in purpose. But the hearer may be able to discern the satisfying effect of that interaction when effective communication takes place.

One respondent described in a unique way how illustrations functioned for him in the sermon. He said, “An illustration is like a catalyst... needed to create, but not part of the product.” He valued illustrations greatly but admitted that he was unable to recall a single illustration. He used the term “catalyst” in a metaphorical sense to describe how they functioned for him in the sermon. A catalyst in a chemical reaction precipitates a process without being involved in the consequences of that process. For him, the illustration was a

catalyst to understanding and application, but once those had occurred, no longer necessary because their purpose had been accomplished. This was an extremely important insight to me, because a number of other respondents admitted that they were unable to recall more than one or two illustrations even though they recognized their impact and rhetorical value. The preacher desires above all to bring understanding and clarity to the text, relate it to peoples' lives, and help it to touch both their hearts and minds. He does not use illustrations so they will be remembered, but that God's Word might touch and transform the lives of his hearers through the power of the Holy Spirit. As a catalyst, the illustration facilitates communication, even speeds it up, without being involved in the consequences of that process. If the illustration functions as a "doorway for understanding," it is not important if the doorway is remembered. It is all-important that understanding took place.

Two other questions were used to come at this point (the function of illustrations) from slightly different perspectives. One question was, "What are the most important benefits you receive from the illustrations used in my sermon?" and the other, "What are some of the ways my illustrations are helpful to you?" The responses to these two questions mirrored those of the previous list in many ways, but in addition to those mentioned earlier, respondents said that illustrations helped them:

- keep the message fresh
- become more forgiving
- in the sense of conviction
- to share the message with others (4)
- become more aware of other cultures
- bring the message down to my level
- understand the message in new ways
- grasp the point of the message
- recall the message (2)

Obviously, there are a multitude of ways in which illustrations can function to benefit the hearer. Their potential and their power must be noted and appraised well by the preacher, if he is to use them with discernment in the rhetorical dimension of preaching.

Respondents were asked to evaluate potential dangers or weaknesses associated with the use of illustrations in preaching. In general, responses were somewhat muted because there did not seem to be great concern about any dangers that might occur, assuming that illustrations were appropriate, and were crafted to illuminate the point of the message. With some encouragement the respondents did mention the following potential pitfalls that should be noted. Illustrations could adversely affect the message if:

- they are unrealistic
- they are obscure
- they distort the point
- they consume too much time
- they don't fit
- they involve too much emotion/are too emotionally charged
- there are too many illustrations that cover up the message (4)
- they are merely entertaining but not helpful
- they consume too much attention (don't want to use it all up)
- people remember only the "cute" story
- they get people off track or distract them (2)

Even if respondents recognize the value of illustrations and generally are quite positive about them, they realize the need for the preacher to use them carefully and with appropriate caution, lest they become a liability for the preacher.

The respondents were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of various types of illustrations. The categories that they were asked to evaluate were simply the researcher's own way of classifying the majority of illustrations that he uses. Some determine the source

(Biblical, historical, contemporary news) while others define the functional character of the illustration (analogical, participatory). Obviously some illustrations may fit into more than one category. The researcher believed that these categories would be easier for the interviewees to understand and relate to rather than a more technical categorization that might be difficult for the average hearer to grasp. The categories were as follows:

Biblical illustrations—using an event or story in Scripture to illumine the message

Story of participation—a story that develops characters, conflict, and leads to resolution; generally longer, invites hearers to identify with a character in the story (such as Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son).

Story of analogy—a short, concise story that is used analogically to assist in understanding (such as Jesus parable of the wise and foolish housebuilders)

Examples—short, informational lists that expand understanding (the symptoms of spiritual thirst or dehydration are anxiety, fear, guilt, loneliness, emptiness, hopelessness, etc.)

Statistics—use of numbers that may call attention in a special way to a fact or trend related to the message.

Historical Illustration—relating an event from history that can be applied to the message in a helpful way.

Contemporary News Illustration—relating an event from recent reports in media that will likely be familiar to most hearers as a way of drawing attention to a point in the sermon

Because of the subjective nature of this question, the respondents were asked to rate each type of illustration on a scale of 1 to 10 (one being least effective and ten being most effective for them). The average rating for these types of illustrations was:

Biblical Illustrations	7.8
Stories of Participation	7.9
Stories of Analogy	8.0
Examples	6.7
Statistics	5.5
Historical Illustrations	7.8
Contemporary News Illustrations	7.6

It is difficult to draw significant conclusions from the responses to this particular question, except to say that stories are helpful for most everyone. Stories, even very concise, simple ones, have a great capacity to engage attention, elevate participation, and encourage reflection. All of the types of illustrations that involve the use of story (all except examples and statistics) were rated higher than 7.5 on average.

There are certainly other types of illustrations which could have been evaluated, such as quotations, excerpts from movies, and references to literature, but the researcher chose the seven categories above because they are the ones he uses most frequently. When excerpts or clips from popular movies are referenced, they most commonly occur in the format of a story of analogy or participation.

The data from the personal interviews confirmed part of the hypothesis of the research project—namely, that illustrations function powerfully to assist people in understanding Biblical truths. They open windows that allow the light to shine more clearly upon concepts or precepts that might otherwise be obscure. They enhance the hearers' ability to apply truth to their own lives and make the abstract more concrete and real.

Sermon Evaluation Group Results

The evaluation group, made up of those who participated in the personal interviews and indicated a willingness to be a part of a small group sermon evaluation group met six times over a period of ten weeks. They met on the Wednesday evening following the six Sundays that the researcher preached. Although there were 12 people who were invited to participate, several were unable to be present for any of the evaluation sessions and the average number of participants was about 6. Associate Pastor Bill Wilson and Assistant Pastor Erik Herrmann took turns facilitating the evaluation sessions. This evaluation group was helpful to the researcher in providing feedback on the purpose and functions of illustrations used in the sermons while that Sunday's sermon was still fresh in their minds.

The illustrations that were chosen for these six sermons were carefully chosen with the ultimate intention of enhancing the effective communication of the message. With these sermons, as with almost every sermon the researcher preaches, the introduction of the sermon is usually an illustration designed to engage the interest of the hearers and direct them to the primary purpose of the message – to introduce the goal of the message. This illustration has to serve two purposes – grabbing attention and giving direction to the sermon. A clear example of this is the fourth sermon in the series, the sermon preached on August 28, 2005 entitled “Gifts to Be Used.” The opening story is short, compact, engaging and introduces the concept of sacrifice which is the main theme of the text and the sermon.

Generally, the interviews demonstrated that many types of illustrations can be used effectively when they are presented in an engaging manner and fit clearly into the purpose and movement of the sermon. This means that when a powerful illustration that relates clearly to the point of the message is discovered it can be incorporated into the sermon in an effective way if care is taken to place it properly, offer clear transitions into the illustration and back to the main part of the message, and provide clear, not artificial connections to the

point of the sermon. Any flashlight will provide light, but if you want a light to clearly illumine a vague object, the flashlight must be both chosen and used with care.

Generally, the evaluations agreed that effective illustrations contribute to the impact of the message. But illustrations are not uniformly effective. Some illustrations do not connect easily to the message for every hearer. When that connection is not made, the illustration can become a distraction.¹⁷⁶ While the mind is busy trying to discover the connection the hearer loses the thread of the message and may end up confused. It is incumbent upon the preacher to make the connection explicit and clear. This requires even more careful attention to the transition into the illustration and especially the transition back to the message itself. That transition ought to be deliberate and intentional in its effort to clarify that connection without stating what is obvious.¹⁷⁷ When Jesus taught in parables, He often had to explain the meaning to His own disciples. Even today we continue to mine from these rich metaphors new truths and applications to our lives. Using illustrations that function metaphorically ought to also encourage us to be clear and distinct in helping our hearers make the essential connections between the story and the truths that it is intended to illuminate.

The evaluators noted frequently that delivery is very important in the use of illustrations. The preacher's use of pitch, volume, pace, emotion, and the very intensity or passion with which the story is related play a very important part in helping the hearers to appreciate and

¹⁷⁶ Some of the sermon evaluators thought that the illustration about the failed wedding reception (Appendix H, p 55) did not connect to the goal of the sermon. Consequently it had the effect of cluttering the movement of the sermon and distracting them from the overall purpose of the message. That was also noted with respect to the illustration about the Swedish masseur (Appendix H, p 61). One evaluator felt that the illustration's relationship to the overall point of the sermon was not very clear.

¹⁷⁷ The Wynton Marsalis illustration (Appendix H, p 67) was unclear to some people until the unexpected conclusion was clarified by an intentional transition that helped people connect to the idea of "turning evil into good." Many noted that it was a very strong illustration that grabbed peoples' attention, so it was even more important to have an explicit connection to the point of the message.

understand the illustration.¹⁷⁸ Emotions have a great ability to enhance the illustration when they are genuine. They help encourage the participation of the hearers in the story which is often crucial to the effectiveness of the illustration. When emotional involvement of the preacher is genuine and appropriate, the illustration can become even more forceful and helpful to the hearer.¹⁷⁹

One evaluator noted that illustrations may not be remembered by the hearer, but they contribute greatly to the overall impact of the message.¹⁸⁰ An effective illustration enhances comprehension and allows the primary message of the sermon to “soak in” to one’s mind and heart. When there is a good balance between textual exposition and illustration, there is time for the hearers to connect the two together. Too many illustrations are counter-productive because they crowd out adequate textual exposition and limit comprehension.¹⁸¹ The length of illustrations is also important. When an illustration is too long¹⁸² there is a danger that it

¹⁷⁸ Some evaluators noted that the Wynton Marsalis (Appendix H, p 67) illustration was delivered with distinct emphasis upon the cadence of the song, that helped to dramatize the story and make it more appealing to the listeners. Evaluators noted that the illustration about Paul and William (Appendix H, p 75) was told in a very dramatic, but effective manner. This made the story quite emotionally striking and gave it greater impact. They also mentioned that the illustration of the homeless man (Appendix H, p 53f) was told with a great deal of emotion, but the conviction evident in the delivery of the story made it personal and meaningful and enhanced its contribution to the sermon’s message.

¹⁷⁹ Evaluators mentioned that the emotional impact of the Jamie Scott illustration (Appendix H, p 58) was heightened for those who had children. The emotional connection to other family experiences was quite powerful, serving especially to draw mothers into the story and the message. An evaluator recalled that the story of the pastor dating his future wife (Appendix H, p 74) appeared to move the preacher in its telling and enhanced the point of God’s overwhelming love for us.

¹⁸⁰ One evaluator commented that “illustrations go to the recycle bin. They contribute to the overall impact of the message and then leave, while we recollect the sermon and its general point.”

¹⁸¹ One evaluator noted that the illustration of the pastor dating his future wife (Appendix H, p 74) and the story of Paul and his friend, William, (Appendix H, p 75) were too close together. He was still thinking about the meaning of the first when the next one started. The effect was to clutter the sermon and make it seem “heavy” on illustrations and that made that part of the sermon “not hold together well.”

¹⁸² The C.S. Lewis story from *The Silver Chair* (Appendix H, p 46) was judged to be too long by some evaluators, although some acknowledged that because of its clear connection to the point of the sermon it was still effective. It appears that whenever the evaluators discussed the length of the illustrations they were more concerned about their effectiveness. Longer stories do not detract if they fulfill their purpose in the sermon.

will dominate the attention of the hearers and detract from the text. Illustrations need to be concise, focused, and carefully crafted to prevent that kind of problem.

In one sermon that the group evaluated the researcher used a very short illustration about a young child, named Jamie Scott¹⁸³, who was anxiously awaiting the announcement of parts for a school play. His mother was concerned that he might be very disappointed if he didn't get a leading part. When she picked him up at school, he was happy and excited. "Guess what, Mom, I was chosen to clap and cheer." The researcher did not expect this illustration to have very much impact, but surprisingly it was mentioned frequently by the evaluators as a very powerful illustration. It was especially important for parents who had younger children, because it related to real family experiences.

Several evaluators noted that when illustrations are particularly vivid and closely connected to the text; they have the potential to color future devotional reading of Scripture.¹⁸⁴ This is particularly true if the illustration helps create an image in the mind of the hearer that had never been connected to the text before. Such "new" images create a challenge for the mind to process and contribute to a deeper appreciation of the text.

The responses provided by the evaluators were particularly helpful in assessing the value of individual illustrations. This kind of feedback seldom is provided unless people are asked directly. Hearing people's reactions encourages the preacher to anticipate the various kinds of responses hearers might have and make adjustments in the telling of the story, the transition back to the message, and how the message is structured that will enhance its effectiveness. This type of evaluation assists the preacher in his sermon preparation, particularly as he chooses appropriate illustrations to use and crafts them into his message for

¹⁸³ See Appendix H, p 58.

¹⁸⁴ This point was made in particular during the evaluation of the sermon, "Come and Get It" which contained a number of short illustrations.

maximum impact. Being sensitive to the hearers and how they might be affected by various illustrations affords the preacher considerable direction in his preparation.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Illustrations exegete Scripture in the terms of human experience to create a whole-person understanding of God's Word. By framing biblical truths in the world in which we live and move and have our being, illustrations unite our personalities, our pasts, our present, our affections, our fears, our frustrations, our hopes, our hearts, our minds, and our souls in the understanding of that which is divine. They are integral to effective preaching, not merely because they may entertain or clarify, but because they expand and deepen the applications the heart and mind can make.¹⁸⁵

Contributions to Ministry

This research project focused on the effectiveness of illustrations in preaching to foster understanding and retention of biblical truths. By listening in a more intentional way to people react to sermons, in-depth interviews with regular worshippers, and analyzing the small-group dissection of the previous Sunday's sermon, the researcher has gained a renewed appreciation for and awareness of the dynamics of communicating God's Word effectively today. Preaching and teaching, which are certainly part of the core of pastoral ministry, rely heavily upon effective communication. Without disregarding the efficacy and power of God's Word, it is critical that God's Word be "heard," and gaining that hearing requires the best communication effort we can muster.

The project research has demonstrated clearly the value of illustrations in preaching, which has been the primary focus of the research. Illustrations have the capacity to make the abstract more concrete, to engage the attention of the hearers, to foster interest, to clarify and illumine, to touch the emotions and will of the hearers, to anchor truth in a memorable image or story that can assist in retention, and to apply Scripture and its truths to everyday, ordinary life. But the degree to which these things happen depends heavily upon how illustrations are

¹⁸⁵ Bryan Chapell, 14.

used within the context of the sermon. Great care must be exercised in choosing illustrations appropriate to the text and its exposition. Once illustrations have been chosen, they must be told imaginatively and effectively in such a way that real illumination takes place and hearers are not distracted or left puzzled by stories that do not connect with the message.

Illustrations have great potential to enhance the message, but also the potential to overpower or overshadow the message so proper hearing of the Word does not happen.

The primary beneficiary of this research project is obviously the researcher himself. He has benefited in better understanding how illustrations function in sermons, how to maximize their effectiveness, and how to avoid the pitfalls, which their use in preaching entails. If the researcher has become more adept at communicating the message, then the congregation benefits by better understanding the proclaimed Word. More effective communication that breaks open the message in new and fresh ways enhances the likelihood of an intelligible hearing of the Word. When that “hearing” takes place, then the Word is unhindered in accomplishing its purpose. Donald Smith defines the aim of communication as “to gain access to the mind through the gate of understanding” and he acknowledges at the same time that “the Holy Spirit brings a response that (the human communicator) can never produce by artful communication.”¹⁸⁶ But it is in knowing the importance of gaining a hearing for the Word that the preacher realizes his obligation to make every effort to drive home the message using every resource at his disposal that engages the hearers and facilitates understanding.

The research has also exposed some potential problems that should concern the preacher who wants to make use of illustrations and avoid their pitfalls. Illustrations must serve a clear purpose, and it is not to entertain. Those that generate too much emotion run the risk of

¹⁸⁶ Donald K. Smith, Creating Understanding: A Handbook for Christian Communication across Cultural Landscapes (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 21.

overpowering the message. The field research demonstrated that illustrations should not be too long, consume too much attention, distract the hearer, or crowd out the message. Having become more aware of the limitations of illustrations in preaching has caused the researcher to exercise even greater care in choosing and making use of them.

The research carried out in this project has convinced the researcher that personal evaluations are important in understanding the effectiveness of ministry. It is important to create in the congregation the climate of openness that welcomes constructive criticism, responds to it without defensiveness, and listens carefully so that positive change can be implemented. People have opinions and concerns about vital areas of ministry like the preaching of the Word, but they are not always comfortable sharing those opinions. It is important to provide opportunities for congregational members to offer their evaluations with the assurance that their input is genuinely valued and desired. This would enhance the congregation's confidence that ministry is shared and that partnership in ministry is valued. This is of particular importance in the area of preaching. The congregation needs the assurance that their pastor digs into God's Word weekly for the explicit purpose of sharing the precious Gospel message with them in a way that connects meaningfully with their lives.

While preachers do not have the opportunity to receive evaluations regularly, there are opportunities during the preaching of the sermon to monitor the response of the hearers by watching their reactions carefully. This is especially true when illustrations are being used, because the attention of the congregation is usually heightened during the delivery of a story. The preacher is able to notice the responses of the hearers and determine to some extent if the illustration or application has been appreciated or understood. If the preacher should suspect that the proper connection has not been made, he then has the opportunity to clarify or elucidate the point being made in another way so that real comprehension takes place.

The recent literature related to homiletics makes consistent assumptions about the positive value of illustrations¹⁸⁷. The research carried out in this local congregation affirms these claims that have been made. While the research for this project was not intended to provide hard statistical evidence or meet quantitative, scientific standards, it nevertheless confirms the contentions made in the homiletical literature—illustrations can be used appropriately to engage hearers, facilitate better communication, and enhance understanding. Obviously, further research carried out in a variety of settings would be necessary in order to further document and establish what are, at this time, widely held assumptions.

It is not likely that there will be a serious effort in the Christian community to carry out the research necessary to establish the validity of assumptions about the effectiveness of illustrations in preaching. Those who make use of them with some regularity in their preaching are doing so because they are already convinced of their value in communication. With few exceptions,¹⁸⁸ those who are publishing books or articles that speak to the homiletical task are openly positive about the communication value that illustrations offer. Furthermore, establishing the data necessary to validate the assumptions of this researcher would require a quantitative study which would not only be difficult to develop, but virtually impossible to replicate from one place to another. It is hoped that those (primarily preachers) who might take the time to examine this study and its results, would be encouraged to undertake some simple surveys or perhaps develop sermon evaluation groups to provide feedback on their own preaching. Any such attempt to explore the effectiveness of their own preaching in terms of communication would be beneficial to them in advancing their rhetorical skills and helping them to become better preachers.

¹⁸⁷ Almost every major text on homiletics and every prominent author such as Buttrick, Lowry, Craddock, Wilson, Eslinger, Thielen, Willimon, Long, Jensen, and others note the importance of connecting with the hearers through the use of illustrations, images, and metaphors.

¹⁸⁸ See Robert Schaibley, *Concordia Journal*, 18.1(January 1992)

Contributions to Personal and Professional Growth

The Major Applied Project (MAP), which is summarized in this paper, is really the culmination of the researcher's involvement in the homiletics track of the Doctor of Ministry program at Concordia Seminary. This program, stretched out over a period of seven years, has been instrumental in helping the researcher rethink the whole homiletical task in the context of active parish ministry. The shifting context of ministry, new challenges from postmodernism, and increased expectations from those who hear the message have encouraged such reflection and evaluation. Exposure, during the D.Min. program, to new homiletical insights, exceptional and gifted professors, and a challenging academic curriculum have laid the foundation for a study such as this designed to analyze in depth a problem related to the field of emphasis for this program.

This MAP has made a significant contribution to the personal and professional growth of the researcher. He has a greater appreciation for the parallel challenges of proclamation and communication in preaching the Word. While the researcher has always used illustrations in preaching, he now has a much clearer understanding of the various functions they perform and how they can best be used for maximum impact. It was in the intentional efforts to solicit feedback from the congregation that a greater appreciation for the importance of preaching in the life of God's people developed. The congregation really does care about the preaching of God's Word. They long to hear both Law and Gospel applied to their lives. They want the preacher to help them understand what God has to say to the issues they must face. They want the proclaimed Word to be stimulating, engaging, and challenging. They want the preacher to have a passionate conviction about the message he shares and they hope that the message touches not only their minds, but also their hearts.

The researcher now approaches the preaching of God's Word with a renewed zeal to proclaim and communicate the grace of God in Jesus Christ. He finds fulfillment in the struggle to communicate God's Word in ways that are meaningful, memorable, and readily applicable to the lives of those he serves. The preparation for preaching not only involves exegesis of the text and its context, but the search for images, metaphors or stories that will help break open this message for people sitting in the pews today. Such "illustrations" shine the light on words, ideas, and doctrines that might otherwise be difficult to comprehend or beyond the reach of 21st century postmoderns. Illustrations help people find connections between God's holy Word and their own experiences of life. They help the message of the Scriptures, the very Word of life, "come to life" for people today. But God's people are fed by His Word, not by illustrations. The Holy Spirit works through the Word, so sermons are effective to the extent that the exposition of the text is the heart and center of the message. Illustrations are not a substitute for the exposition of God's Word. They have value to the extent that they further and enhance the exposition of the text.

Recommendations

Based on the literary research done and by the research conducted in the congregation, the following guidelines for the use of illustrations in preaching are offered.

1. Make sure that the illustration always moves the hearer in the same direction as the sermon intends and illuminates the point being made. When a powerful illustration does not help people connect to that point, it will divert the attention of the hearers and distract them from the communication goal. The illustration itself must not be allowed to overshadow the Word or become more important than the message. It is never an end in itself, rather a means to an end, always in service to the Gospel message being proclaimed.

2. Careful attention must be given to the crafting of the language of the illustration being used. Attentive listeners will expect the details in a story to matter, so those details unnecessary or extraneous should be omitted. Only those details which are essential to driving home the point should be included. It may be important to provide a few details that provide a sense of reality and probability to the story even if they do not affect the meaning of the story. For example, “On January 28, 2005, a man by the name of Marcel Trembly from a small town in Ontario, Canada hosted what he called a ‘living wake’ in a local hotel.”¹⁸⁹ These details in the first sentence of this illustration provide reality and believability to the story even if they are not essential to the point. Dialog, if used in an illustration, should be clear, concise, and contribute to the overall impact of the story. Fumbling for phrasing can be avoided by careful preparation so that every word serves its purpose.

3. Stories need to be carefully structured so that maximum impact will be felt by the hearers. Stories that introduce conflict and tension need resolution. Preachers must be careful of waiting until later in the sermon to resolve the conflict in an earlier illustration. If the resolution is to be given later, the preacher needs to use the intervening sermon time to explicate aspects of the conflict. He needs to make it work for him, not let it work against him by creating the conflict and then not dealing with it. The hearers may stay focused on the unresolved issues and find it difficult to move on in the sermon.

¹⁸⁹ Quote from an illustration used in the introduction to a sermon on Sanctity of Life Sunday – 2006.

4. Remember that some illustrations or stories do not really illustrate a point, they are the point.¹⁹⁰ That is, they convey the whole message. The parables which Jesus told are often the whole message, rather than His attempt to illuminate a message which might otherwise not have been understood. Such stories do not require discussion to proceed or follow, because they are adequate in themselves to carry the freight.

5. The transitional sentences, especially those that follow an illustration must be carefully thought out and crafted with precision. The transition must make the connection with the message clear and explicit. Stories often are ambiguous and can be taken in a variety of ways. The preacher needs to control how the stories function and what they mean in the sermon. The preacher must see the connection and significance clearly, and have a precise plan for helping others see it.¹⁹¹ The interpreting statement must mine the contents accurately and present the contents powerfully.¹⁹²

6. Illustrations ought to enable people to connect their lives to the story in some way. Therefore, stories should be real and human in their context. Illustrations that connect to current events or realities in the lives of the hearers have a distinct advantage, because there is a more natural connection to begin with. Stories about everyday people and the challenges they face in their lives resonate with the hearers.

¹⁹⁰ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*, 204.

¹⁹¹ Louis Paul Lehman, 39.

¹⁹² Bryan Chapel, 147.

7. Illustrations should not be pushed on the hearers. Usually they should be presented conversationally, in a storyteller mode that encourages listeners to drop their defenses and invites their attention. If the application of the sermon is controversial, illustrations are helpful because they shut down debate and encourage attentive listening. Preachers often fumble their way into an illustration instead of just allowing it to function as it should. A phrase like, “I’d like to tell you a story that illustrates this...” creates unnecessary problems like defensiveness on the part of some hearers. “Two weeks ago when I was returning from the hospital...” or “Jackie Robinson was the first...” are conversational-like introductions that provide immediate engagement for the hearers.
8. Illustrations can be “made up,” but then never presented as truth. Fables and fictional stories can often be very effective in conveying truth, but the listeners should not be confused about whether the stories themselves are or not. Careful introductions can clarify how the story should be heard. Introductory phrases like, “An ancient fable...” or, “Once upon a time...” or, “Let’s suppose...” alert everyone to the fact that what follows is not true, even if it conveys truth.
9. Humor can be used effectively to help people reflect on truth in a new way. The Peanuts cartoons are good examples of humor that often carry important truths. But humorous stories should be used with care. When humor in the sermon is merely decorative or designed to “loosen people up,” it is inappropriate. It should only be employed if it can help drive home the point. Preachers are not in the pulpit

to amuse, but to proclaim the saving message of life in Jesus Christ, and humor is only appropriate if it serves that purpose.

It is difficult to condense the learnings of a major study into ten brief recommendations for preachers to guide them in their use of sermon illustrations. Obviously much more can be learned about illustrations and preaching. The preacher must always be striving to enhance his preaching skills, from preparation through delivery. Illustrations have a purpose to serve, but like every other rhetorical device, must always serve the purpose of communicating the text in ways that enhance the hearing of the message. They never exist for themselves, but as means to accomplish a greater purpose—the communication of the Gospel. Bryan Chapell tells the story about a traveling preacher invited to a ministerial conference to talk about preaching.¹⁹³ He talked primarily about how Jesus used parables to teach truths about the kingdom. In the question and answer session after the presentation, a minister asked, “Why not simply state what Scripture teaches? Shouldn’t we just present truth as truth?” In response the preacher said, “Let me tell you a story.”

He began, “One day Bare Truth came walking into town. What he had to say was very important, but he looked very intimidating with bulging muscles and hard knuckles. Some people remembered when he had hurt them before. As a result, most people went into their houses to wait for Bare Truth to finish his business. Only the strongest of the townspeople did not mind Bare Truth’s visits.

“The next day Parable came to town. He looked just like most of the town’s people and dressed in ordinary clothes, but he told of all the places he had been and the sights he had seen. All the people loved to visit with Parable. They came out to greet him and invited him into their homes. “Come in and have a cup of coffee and a piece of pie,” many offered.

“Bare Truth was upset that Parable got a reception so unlike his own. He went to the other town visitor and said, “Tell me, Parable, why do people greet you with such warmth when I am Truth they should hear?”

“Instead of answering, Parable took off his hat and jacket and put them on Bare Truth. Truth was transformed. He was no less strong. He was no less Truth. But the people saw him in an entirely different light. When he put on Parable’s clothes, Truth showed he really was concerned that the people hear him. When the people recognized that Truth cared enough about them to find out what he needed to do to

¹⁹³ Ibid., 175.

have them listen to him, they listened all the more intently. The very people who had invited Parable for coffee and donuts, now invited Truth, too.

“To this day, when Truth has business in town, he puts on Parable’s clothes so that the people will hear him and deal with him.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ Bryan Chapell adapted this from a story told by Anette Harrison in “Tell Me a Story,” by Joseph Schuster in *St. Louis Home* (May 1989), 17-18.

APPENDIX A

CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY

Pastor Rall is now involved in the Major Applied Project for his Doctor of Ministry program. This research project will be conducted here at Timothy. The question being studied is: "Do illustrations used in preaching help people to understand and retain Biblical truths?" (By illustrations we mean stories, anecdotes, or images used in the sermon to help clarify a point being made.) Your attention to this survey will be very helpful in identifying some general observations related to this question. Please respond to these questions on the basis of sermons that you have heard Pastor Rall preach.

Do you recall illustrations that really helped you understand the Bible's message?

Many _____ Some _____ Few _____ None _____

Do you think illustrations play an important role in the sermons?

Frequently _____ Sometimes _____ Seldom _____ Never _____

Can you recall an illustration from a sermon that you heard?

No _____ One or Two _____ Five to Ten _____ Many _____

If you remember an illustration that was used to you, do you also remember the point that was being made?

Frequently _____ Sometimes _____ Seldom _____ Never _____

Do you find that illustrations distract you from the message?

Frequently _____ Sometimes _____ Seldom _____ Never _____

Do you ever remember and think about an illustration used in a sermon as a way of remembering the sermon?

Frequently _____ Sometimes _____ Seldom _____ Never _____

Do you have a hard time connecting the illustrations used to the point being made in the sermon?

Frequently _____ Sometimes _____ Seldom _____ Never _____

Are illustrations helpful to you in remembering the message of a sermon?

Frequently _____ Sometimes _____ Seldom _____ Never _____

Illustrations are helpful to me because they: (check all that apply)

Clarify a Point _____	Help Me Remember the Message _____
Engage My Attention _____	Touch My Emotions _____
Create Interest _____	Relate Scripture to Real Life _____

Would you be willing to be interviewed by Pastor Rall as a part of this research project (the interview would last 45-50 minutes)

Yes _____ No _____

If you answer yes, please write your name _____

APPENDIX B

LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE INTERVIEWEES

Dear Friend in Christ,

Thank you not only for completing the survey on preaching that I passed out two weeks ago, but also for indicating your willingness to be interviewed as part of the research for my Doctor of Ministry project.

There were so many who volunteered to be interviewed (more than 50) that I cannot interview everyone. I had planned to interview about 20-25 people in this stage of the project, so that means perhaps only $\frac{1}{2}$ of those who volunteered will actually be interviewed. I will choose from the whole group a representative sample and then send a follow-up letter to those who are selected for the interviews. This letter will provide a little more detail about the interviews themselves and my plans for setting up a schedule.

Again, thanks for your help, your interest, and your willingness to assist me in this project. May God grant you His blessings as we begin this Lenten season and follow our Lord on His journey to the cross.

In His service... and Yours,

Pastor Rall

APPENDIX C

LETTER TO THOSE BEING INTERVIEWED

Dear Friend in Christ,

Thank you once again for your willingness to play a crucial role in the research for my Doctor of Ministry Major Applied Project (MAP). I would like you to be one of the sample group to be interviewed during this next phase of my research.

The primary purpose of the interview will be to explore with you the role illustrations play in helping you understand the message of the sermon and the value they have for you personally. We will also explore the relationship between illustrations and the long-term retention of the message.

The interview will probably last from 45 minutes to one hour, to be scheduled at a time convenient for you. To ensure accuracy I would like your permission to tape the interview so that I can better evaluate your responses and perhaps refer to them in the evaluation of this research. I will strive to ensure confidentiality in any use of your responses during the interview. I will not use your name or identity in the research study and will destroy the tapes and any transcriptions that might be done.

I will be in contact with you to make arrangements for the interview. If you have any questions or reservations about the interview, you can share them with me at that time or contact me in advance. I want to thank you again for your willingness to participate in this phase of my research.

May God continue to grant us His rich blessings as we fix our eyes upon Jesus and the cross in this Lenten season.

In His service... and yours,

Pastor Rall

APPENDIX D

PERSONAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

How long have you been a member here at Timothy? _____

How would you describe my sermons? (What kind of adjectives or phrases would you use?)

Do illustrations contribute to making them that way? _____

How so? _____

How do you think illustrations function in my sermons? _____

What are the most important benefits you receive from the illustrations used in my sermons? _____

Do you think the illustrations usually connect to the point of the sermon? _____

In general, what are some weaknesses / dangers associated with the use of illustrations in

sermons? _____

How could that be prevented? _____

Do you ever think about a particular illustration in the days / weeks after hearing a sermon? _____

Are there any specific illustrations that you remember being used in one of my sermons?

Why did that one stick with you? _____

What point was it being used to illustrate? _____

Do you remember the point of the sermon because of the illustration? _____

Which type of illustration seems most effective to you:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Biblical Illustration | <input type="checkbox"/> Statistics |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Story of Participation | <input type="checkbox"/> Historical Illustration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Story of Analogy | <input type="checkbox"/> Contemporary News |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Examples | |

Would you be willing to be part of a small group that would convene after each sermon I preach to evaluate the sermon? _____

APPENDIX E

LETTER TO SERMON EVALUATION GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Dear Friends in Christ,

I want to thank you for taking time to meet with me for the interview about sermon illustrations. Your responses have been very helpful to me in understanding the role that illustrations play in making sermons effective means of communicating God's truth.

The final stage of my research for this project involves convening a group during the week following each Sunday that I preach to reflect upon, react to, and evaluate the Sunday sermon, particularly with respect to the effectiveness of illustrations used in the sermon. I want to thank you for being willing to participate in this group. Below I have listed a tentative schedule of the Sundays that I will be preaching during the upcoming months:

July 17	(July 20)
July 31	(August 3)
August 14	(August 17)
August 28	(August 31)
September 11	(September 14)
September 25	(September 28)

I would like to suggest that the group meet on the Wednesday evening, at 7:00 p.m. following each of those sermon dates to discuss in detail the sermon. Those Wednesday dates are listed in parenthesis next to the Sunday dates above. I realize that you might not be able to be present for all of those Wednesdays, but would appreciate it if you would let me know if those dates will generally work for you or not. If Wednesdays prove to be a bad time for too many in the group, we can look for a different evening. I would anticipate that the discussions would last about one hour.

Again, thanks for your help so far and for being willing to consider this additional participation. I will look forward to your response.

In His Service... and Yours,

Pastor Rall

APPENDIX F

SERMON EVALUATION GUIDELINES

Sermon Evaluation Group

The primary purpose of this evaluation group is to solicit feedback on the Sunday sermon preached by Pastor Rall. While any feedback is welcome and helpful, the responses related to the value and function of illustrations used in the sermon is related directly to my Major Applied Project. The suggested questions below are meant to initiate the discussion rather than be limiting in any way. Any fruitful discussion that takes place should be pursued fully, particularly if it is related to the illustrations used in the sermon.

What did you think was the goal of the sermon?

Did the illustrations used in the sermon foster or enable understanding of the message? How?

How do you think the illustrations functioned in the message?

- Engaged attention
- Related Scripture / text to real life
- Created interest
- Helped to make message memorable
- Clarified a point
- Moved the thought forward
- Drove home a point
- Helped provide structure to sermon

Did the illustrations involve the emotions? Did that contribute to or detract from the message?

Did the illustrations invite the hearer to participate in the message in some way?

Did the illustrations clutter the effect of the message or get in the way of the message?

Did the preacher's own emotions have any impact on the effectiveness of the illustrations?

Did the illustrations enhance the message or serve to detract attention from the message?

APPENDIX G
ILLUSTRATIONS REMEMBEED IN
PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

In the personal interviews the respondents were asked if there were any specific illustrations that they recalled being used in one of the researcher's sermons. At least 36 illustrations were cited, some in considerable detail. The researcher was able to locate some of these illustrations from past sermon outlines and has provided 25 of these illustrations, recalled in the interviews, as examples. The researcher does not have any sermon manuscripts, but rather a one-page outline of each sermon. The illustrations cited in this appendix are provided in as close to the original form as the researcher can reconstruct.

In order to provide the context in the sermon in which the illustrations were used, a brief introduction and summary of the movement of the sermon is provided. In some cases the illustration cited was the introduction to the sermon. Where that was the case it is noted as such. In every instance, the text, theme and date of the sermon are noted. In addition to the illustration itself, the transition sentence is provided so that the direction the sermon was moving can be discerned.

Date: Lent 4, 1993

Text: Matthew 20.28

Theme: “Not to be Served, But to Serve”

Sermon Introduction:

During World War I, the men of the West Yorkshire Regiment were marching through a street in the village of Rheims, France. Suddenly a man dashed out of a house a short distance ahead. Rifles fired and he fell dead. He was a member of the Irish Regiment who had been taken prisoner by the Germans. He had broken free of his captors momentarily to warn the approaching troops of an ambush that was awaiting them. He gave his life for others. It is the ultimate sacrifice one can make and the greatest expression of love there is.

Date: Pentecost 9, 1996

Text: Exodus 20.13

Theme: “Protecting Life—God’s Precious Gift”

This sermon was part of a series on the Ten Commandments. In the first part of the sermon I looked at the context where we proclaim God’s Word on protecting life—a world where life has been devalued and abused. As Creator, God had endowed human life with great value and dignity, but God had also spoken another word, a word of salvation.

In His dying for us on the cross, Jesus raised the stakes even higher. He purchased us with His own blood. As Isaiah reminded the people of Israel (Is.43) “because you have been redeemed...you are precious in my sight.” **In Ernest Gordon’s book, *Miracle On the River Kwai*, Scottish prisoners of war were forced by their Japanese captors to build a jungle railroad. The brutal treatment they received from their captors had**

reduced the prisoners to barbarous behavior. One afternoon, when work ended, a shovel was missing. The Japanese officer demanded to know who had taken it and threatened to shoot 5 prisoners if the thief was not exposed. Finally, one man stepped forward to confess. The officer picked up a shovel and beat the man to death. The rest of the prisoners picked up his body and carried it back to their camp. When a second tool check was carried out, no shovel was missing. The word spread like wildfire—an innocent man had sacrificed his life. That had a profound effect on the prisoners. They began to treat each other like brothers. When the Allies finally swept in to free the prisoners, the survivors lined up in front of their former captors to protect them from being abused by the Allied troops. There was no more hatred and killing, now forgiveness had replaced anger. Sacrificial love had transformed everything. The sacrificial love of Jesus, demonstrated in His suffering and death on the cross won forgiveness for us, and enables us to love and forgive one another. It is that love that can make a difference in the lives of others and demonstrate the wonder of God's gift of life.

Date: Easter 1996

Text: John 20. 1-18

Theme: "Unexpected Joy"

In the early part of the sermon the expectations of the women and the disciples as they approached the tomb were discussed: a dead body, the smell of death, etc. The empty tomb left them puzzled, "they did not understand." The evidence did not produce faith, but confusion. Sometimes the gifts He gives are totally unexpected.

When Jesus called her name, “Mary,” He wiped away her tears, removed her doubt and confusion and gave her the gift of faith. Faith alone could transform the significance of “empty.” **Jeremy was born with a twisted body and a slow mind. At 12 years of age, he was still in the 2nd grade. He seemed unable to learn. Mrs. Miller, his teacher, was often exasperated. He would squirm, drool, and make strange noises, but there were a few times when he spoke clearly as if a spot of light had suddenly broken through. She had talked to his parents about putting Jeremy in a special school, but his mother cried and his father pleaded—there was no school near, it would be a terrible shock for him and he likes it here. Mrs. Miller prayed for patience and tried to ignore his noises. Spring came and the children were excited about Easter. The teacher told them the story of Jesus and gave each one a large plastic egg. Take it home and bring it back tomorrow with something inside that shows new life. They were all enthusiastic. Jeremy seemed to listen intently. Had he understood? Perhaps she would call his parents and explain it to them. That evening her sink got plugged, she graded papers, and forgot to call them. The next day, 19 children laughing with excitement placed their eggs in a basket on her desk. After math it was time to open them. In the first egg there was a flower, the second a plastic butterfly, the third a rock with moss on it. As she opened each egg, Mrs. Miller acknowledged the significance of each and thanked the child who had brought it. But when she opened the 4th egg, it was empty. She gasped to herself and started to go to the next, when Jeremy said, “Mr. Miller, aren’t you going to talk about my egg?” “But, Jeremy, your egg it empty,” she replied. “Yes,” said Jeremy, “but Jesus tomb was empty, too.” “Do you know why?” asked Mrs. Miller. “Yes,**

because Jesus was alive,” said Jeremy. When the children went out to recess later, Mrs. Miller broke down in tears. All the cold inside her melted. Three months later, Jeremy died. Those who paid their respects could not help but notice 19 plastic Easter eggs on top of his casket—each one empty. It was faith that made “empty” a thing of joy--for the disciples and for us, too.

Date: Timothy’s 70th Anniversary – November 1997

Text: John 12. 20-21

Theme: “People Meeting Jesus”

The first section of the sermon developed the idea of our longing to meet God. But we often look in the wrong places (in our feelings, experiences, efforts, etc.). God hides Himself, not because He doesn’t want to be known, but because we could never meet Him in His glory and majesty. “We would like to see Jesus,” the Greeks said, and so would we, but our own sinfulness makes that impossible. In the Gedarenes, the people had a glimpse of Jesus’ authority and power, but then pleaded with Him to leave their place.

It was 6 minutes to six by the clock in Grand Central Station as a tall, young army lieutenant named John Bradford, his heart pounding, stood watching carefully. He was meeting a woman who had filled a special place in his life for 13 months. He had never seen Hollis Meynell. He had gotten her name out of a library book that had been sent to an Army training camp in Florida. The book, *Of Human Bondage*, had notes in the margins that caught his attention. He had found her address in a New York City telephone book, written her a letter, and she had answered, but the

next day he had shipped out. He believed he was in love with her and that she loved him, but she had refused to send a photo. She had written, "If I'm beautiful, I'd be haunted thinking you loved me because I was pretty. And suppose I'm plain, then I'd fear you kept writing because you were lonely." They were to meet at 6:00 and she would be wearing a red rose. At 1 minute before 6:00, a young woman walking toward him made his heart leap—dressed in a green suit, tall, slim, blonde, blue eyes, but wearing no rose. With a provocative smile she leaned close and said, "Going my way, soldier?" He took a step closer to her and then saw Hollis Meynell, standing behind her. She looked past 40, more than plump with thick ankles. But she was wearing the rose. The beautiful one was walking away, and he felt pulled in two with a desire to follow the girl, but longing to talk to Hollis. As he looked at her now, he could see that her face was gentle, sensible, filled with a warm kindness. He didn't hesitate, gripped the book hard and stepped forward to say, "I'm Lt. John Bradford. Miss Meynell, may I take you to dinner." The lady responded, "I don't know what is going on, but that lady over there in the green suit gave me this rose and told me to walk toward you. She said she would be waiting over there for you, if you were still interested." God comes to us veiled in the ordinary, the weak, and the foolish—in the manger, the cross, in water and bread and wine. There He binds Himself with a promise to meet us so that we can see Him as He is.

Date: Pentecost 22, 1997

Text: Mark 10.45

Theme: "To Give His Life"

The model for this world's attitude is "serving self." James and John expressed that attitude in their request to Jesus, "Do for us whatever we ask." In sharp contrast to that are the words of Jesus, "The Son of man...came to serve and to give His life..." Jesus came into our world knowing His purpose was to offer His life for the world. Isaiah had prophesied it, promised it..." He poured His life unto death."

Robert Coleman, in his book, *Written in Blood*, tells the story about a little boy whose sister desperately needed a blood transfusion. She was suffering from the same disease from which he had recovered two years earlier. Both had the same blood type. "Would you give your blood to Mary?" the doctor asked. Johnny hesitated, his lips trembled and then he said, "Sure, for my sister." The two were wheeled into a hospital room, but neither one spoke. When the needle was inserted into Johnny's arm, his smile faded and he watched his blood flow into his sister's arm. When the ordeal was almost over, Johnny motioned for the doctor and whispered to him, "Doctor, when do I die?" Only then did the doctor realize that Johnny believed he had been asked to give up his life for his sister. For his sister, yes, perhaps we can understand that kind of love. But Jesus showed His love for us by giving His life while we were still sinners, enemies of God.

Date: All Saints Day, 2000

Text: Isaiah 26. 17-19

Theme: "Your Dead will Live"

Sermon Introduction:

In a cemetery in Indiana, there is a tombstone over 100 years old. The epitaph reads, “Pause, stranger, when you pass me by. As you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so you will be. So prepare for death and follow me.” Someone scratched underneath the following words: “To follow you, I’m not content; until I know which way you went.” All Saints Day gives us pause to think about those who have gone before us, those who died in faith trusting in Jesus Christ as their Savior. We can be content to follow them, for we know the way they went.”

Date: Pentecost 18, 2001

Text: I Timothy 2.1-18

Theme: “Pray...for Everyone”

Sermon Introduction:

Some years ago, in a baseball game between the Yankees and the Orioles, the score was tied with two outs in the bottom of the 9th inning. A batter for the Orioles stepped to the plate and made the sign of the cross with his bat on home plate. The catcher for the Yankees, Yogi Berra (also a Catholic) wiped the plate with his glove and said, “Why don’t we just let God watch this game!” Letting God watch is good theology when applied to the outcome of baseball games, but terrible theology when applied to the way we live our lives or carry out the work of the Church. Too often that is precisely what happens. We make God little more than a spectator as we go about the work which we have to do.

Date: Pentecost 17, 2004

Text: I Timothy 1.12-17

Theme: "Unlimited Patience...Incredible Grace"

The first part of the sermon establishes the truth that sinners are lost. Some are lost without even knowing it and others are lost and realize that they are. But whether one knows or not, all are powerless to do anything about their condition. They need rescue.

***Finding Nemo* is the Walt Disney animated movie of a little fish, captured by a dentist diving off the coast of Australia. He ended up in a fish tank in the dentist's office in Sydney. Nemo thinks that his father has forgotten about him and that he'll never see him again. But one day a pelican named Nigel lands in the window of the dentist's office and begins to tell Nemo an amazing story. "Nemo! Your father's been fighting the entire ocean looking for you!" reports Nigel. "My father?" Nemo incredulously asks. "Oh, yeah! He's been battling sharks and jellyfish," Nigel recounts. "It's my dad! He took on a shark!" proudly exclaims Nemo. Nigel says, "I heard he took on three." Nemo is dumbfounded. He repeats, "Three?" Nigel explains, "You see, kid. After you were taken, your dad started swimming like a maniac. He took on three sharks. He battled an entire jellyfish forest. Now he'd riding a bunch of sea turtles on the east Australian current, and the word is he's headed this way right now to Sydney." "What a great daddy!" Nemo says. Those who are lost need to be delivered. It is God our Father who seeks and saves those who are lost.**

Date: Pentecost 9, 1994

Text: Ephesians 2.13-22

Theme: “Breaking Down Walls...Making Peace”

The sermon began with a story about the Berlin Wall and the unrestrained joy that accompanied its demolition. Walls always separate, like the wall in the temple courts that separated Gentiles from Jews. But Christ came as One who breaks down walls. He came to destroy the barrier that separates us from God, to remove our sins and effect reconciliation. That is why He could come and preach peace. The Berlin Wall coming down did not mean instant unity, an end to problems. There were still bridges of reconciliation that needed to be built.

Jackie Robinson was the first black to break the color barrier in Major League Baseball. He faced jeering crowds in every stadium. Once, during a home game in Brooklyn stadium, he committed an error. His own fans began to boo and ridicule him. He stood at 2nd base humiliated, his head bowed, his shoulders slumped in disgrace. Then shortstop Pee Wee Reese came and stood next to him and put his arm around his shoulder. The fans grew quiet and the booing stopped. Robinson said later that that arm around his shoulder saved his career. Christ not only broke down the wall, He also reconciled us to the Father. He stands alongside of us—our Advocate, our Savior, the perfect bridge between us and the Father.

Date: Epiphany 3, 2003

Text: I Corinthians 7.29-31

Theme: “Living As If”

Life confronts us with a variety of situations where time becomes a major consideration. When the time is short we become more focused, more efficient, more productive. If the

time has been shortened, then God is the One who has done it; He is always in control.

Human nature is often unable to separate the important from the trivial.

A missionary family in China had been under house arrest. One day a soldier came and said, “You can all leave tomorrow, but you can only take 200 pounds with you.” They had been there for years, but they got out the scales—the father, mother and two children—and began weighing things. There was too much, decisions had to be made, many things left behind. Finally they got to 200 pounds. The next day, the soldiers returned. “Did you weigh everything?” “Yes,” they said, “everything.” “Did you weigh the kids?” “No!” “Weigh the kids!” And suddenly with no decisions at all, the vase, the typewriter, and some precious books went in the trash.

So God also in the brevity of human life, challenges us to sort out the important from the trivial and the most important from the important.

Date: Lent 5, 1994

Text: Jeremiah 31.31-34

Theme: “Making a New Covenant”

Sermon Introduction:

An engineer once operated a drawbridge over a large river. By operating a series of levers and switches, he could set in motion a monstrous set of gears to lift the bridge for ship traffic or close it for an oncoming train. One day, he took his young son with him to work. The son had lots of questions about how everything worked. The engineer opened the bridge for a ship to pass through and then heard the whistle of an approaching train; the train was early and the bridge needed to be closed

quickly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his young son playing on top of the massive gears. It was a horrible dilemma. There wasn't time to grab his son, the switches had to be set in motion immediately. The gears would crush his son, but if the bridge weren't closed, hundreds of passengers would plunge to their deaths. With the anguish of his predicament, he set the gears in motion and watched the passengers eating their breakfasts, reading their papers as the train whizzed by—totally oblivious to the incredible sacrifice he had made to preserve their lives.

While this true story is often used to describe the sacrifice God made of His Son, there is a major difference. This was an accident, never contemplated or planned, made unwillingly, for the sake of the passengers. But the sacrifice Christ made was a commitment, based on the set purpose and the foreknowledge of His Father. Jesus said, "It was for this very reason that I came."

Date: Epiphany 3, 1996

Text: Jonah 3.1-5, 10

Theme: "Go...Proclaim the Message"

Sermon Introduction:

Max Lucado tells the story about three men called into the mayor's office very early one morning. "There has been a catastrophe," he said. "Last night, the rain washed the bridge out. Some cars have already plunged into the river. I want you to stand along the road and warn the drivers. They must take a right turn on the one lane road to avoid the bridge." "But they drive so fast," said one man. The mayor gave them 3 sandwich board signs to carry and hurried them off. "They

should see my sign first,” said one man. It said, **Bridge Out**. They agreed that he should go farthest up the road so approaching drivers could see his sign first. They decided the next sign should be, **Reduce Speed**, and the final sign, **Take the Right Road Only** just before the detour. So all that morning they stood, waved, and pointed. Hundreds of people were saved. But the first man got sleepy, took off his sign, propped it up, fell asleep, and one arm covered up one of the words. All the people could see was the word **Bridge**. The second man got conceited, felt more important than the sign and stood in front of the sign, so all the people could see was the word **Reduce**. The third man was concerned about the message. It seemed so narrow and dogmatic. Shouldn’t people have a choice? So he crossed out the word **Only** and replaced it with the word **Preferred**. But that seemed *too strident*. He thought about **Suggested**, but thought that might offend some. To make it more neutral, he changed the sign to read, **Right Road – One of Two Equally Valid Alternatives**. So, as the first man slept, the second stood proudly and the third altered the message, one car after another crashed into the river. In some ways, the same kind of distortions of the message are offered today, and one by one, people are perishing.

Date: Pentecost 5, 1997

Text: Job 38.1-11

Theme: “A God Who Speaks in the Storms”

Sermon Introduction:

One day, a bird flew into our house. It was a bit of a circus as we tried to catch the bird so we could release it outside to freedom. It was frantic and frightened as it tried to elude three or four of us until I finally caught it and let it go. Now imagine how the bird might have reported this back in its nest. “Martha, it was a horrible day. I got stuck inside this room with fake exits. They looked like holes, but you couldn’t get through. People were trying to knock me down. They wanted to eat me. The biggest ugliest one finally knocked me down, almost crushed me. He grabbed me around the neck to choke me, but with a burst of energy I escaped.” It’s amazing what a difference a perspective can make in the way we experience difficulty.

Date: Easter 5 (Friendship Sunday), 2005

Text: Luke 14. 15-24

Theme: “The Great Invitation”

God’s invitation to us is to participate in the banquet of salvation He has prepared for us. Satan will do anything he can to keep us from accepting this invitation. But what often end up keeping us away are the very ordinary things of this life which God has given us—land, oxen, wife. Anything can become a deadly substitute for God: devotion to our wife, interest in our business, attention to our children’s sports activities—all good things in themselves unless they get between us and God. God is insistent, constant in His desire to see us join the banquet.

Ted Kidd was 5 years older than his girlfriend, Janet. He finished college before she did and started working in a city far away. They always seemed to be at different places in their lives, but they had dated for 7 years. Every Valentine’s Day, Ted

proposed to Janet and every time she said “No, not yet.” Finally, one year they were both living in Dallas, Texas. Ted had reached a decisive point in his life. He bought a ring, chose a romantic restaurant and decided this was it. He was prepared to end their relationship and move on if she said no. After their salad and entrée, before the dessert arrived, Ted got ready. Realizing Janet had a gift wrapped for him, he decided to let her go first. She handed him the package, about the size of a book, peeled away the tissue and saw a simple cross-stitch with one word in big letters, Yes. It is the Holy Spirit who continues issuing the invitation to us, creating in us the faith to respond joyfully to His invitation and receive the gift He has prepared for us.

Date: Easter 7, 2005

Text: Acts 1.8-14

Theme: “Why Are You Looking Up”

The day of Ascension found the disciples “looking up.” The angels broke the silence with the question, “Why?” Today a few days after we celebrated the Ascension, maybe the question should be, “Why aren’t you looking up?” What is it that we have lost?

What does the Ascension really mean for us? Ascension helps provide us with the big picture. Sometimes that is really important. It is so easy to get caught up in the mundane, everyday things of life...

On June 6, 1994 (the 50th anniversary of the Allied invasion of Normandy) there were a number of anniversary programs on the major TV networks. On one of these programs, they aired back-to-back interviews with two aging veterans of that invasion. The first was a Marine who had landed on Omaha Beach. He recalled

seeing the terrible devastation, loss of life, and untold casualties on the beach around him and remembered saying, “We are going to lose!” The next interview was with a U.S. Army Air Corps recon pilot who recalled flying over the whole battle area that day. He had also seen the terrible slaughter on the beaches and hills, but also saw the successes of the paratroopers, the advances of some marine units, the effective aerial bombardment and remembered saying, “We are going to win!” The Ascension of our Lord Jesus offers us a picture of our risen, triumphant King enthroned in power and majesty with all His enemies placed under His feet. That big picture offers the assurance and hope we need in the midst of an uncertain and confusing world, the assurance that in Christ we have already won.

Date: Pentecost 8, 1996

Text: Matthew 13.1-9

Theme: “Sowing in Hope”

Sermon Introduction:

Several years ago, before Helen Abel died, I could look out my office window and watch her every morning about 8:30 am, come out to scatter seed in her back yard. They were waiting—pigeons on the power lines, sparrows in the trees, blackbirds on the garage roofs, blue jays and cardinals and some others. Helen wasn’t sewing; she was feeding. But the lurking birds remind me of what I face when I get into the pulpit. The birds are lurking on the power lines in your brains. They are ready to snap up the scattered seeds, creating distractions, thoughts which make hearing difficult—just like

birds on the wire. Jesus was also concerned about people hearing. Three times in this chapter He said, “He who has ears, let Him hear.”

Several times throughout the sermon, the phrase, “birds sitting on the wire” provided a connecting link for the theme of the sermon.

Date: St. Stephen, First Martyr, 1999

Text: Acts 6.8-7.60

Theme: “The Cross in Christmas”

The world doesn't really want the cross in Christmas. They prefer the gentle story of a baby, easy to love, cuddly to embrace. But the story of Stephen is closely connected to Christmas by the remembrance of his faithful testimony to the cross of Jesus and his martyrdom that we remember on the day after the Church celebrates the Nativity of Our Lord. It is God's love for us in Christ that transforms the lives of ordinary people like Stephen into bold witnesses of Jesus.

One of the legions of Rome's army included a group of 40 wrestlers, all of whom were Christian. On a campaign in the mountains of Armenia in the dead of winter, they received word about an imperial edict the Emperor had issued. The generals commanded that on a certain day, the soldiers should march past a statue of Caesar, bow, pour out a libation of wine, and burn a pinch of incense acknowledging the divinity of Caesar. The 40 wrestlers refused as one man. They were well known and respected soldiers. The general pleaded with them. “For Rome we will fight, in the service of the emperor we will die, but we worship no one but Jesus,” they replied. They were stripped of their armor, driven out naked onto the frozen lake.

All night long they sang, “Forty wrestlers wrestling for Thee, O Christ, claim for Thee the victory and from Thee the crown.” As the night passed the song grew weaker. Finally, one capitulated. Naked and trembling he came to worship the emperor. But another guard, moved by their faith and witness said, “Since you have proved a coward, I will take your place. Once again the song went on until one by one they succumbed to the bitter cold.” The bold witness of Stephen inspired countless others to keep the cross in Christmas, and for it they, like Stephen, paid the ultimate price with their lives.

Date: Tre Ore – Good Friday, 2005

Text: John 19.30

Theme: “It Is Finished”

This sounds like something one would say when a project is completed. It suggests a sense of triumph or victory, but Jesus dying doesn't seem like a victory at all. Jesus may have been speaking these words to His Father. He knew everything that had been promised and planned. It was necessary for everything to be fulfilled and completed.

Jesus was aware—knowing that all was not completed! He was like a master painter stepping back from the canvas to see if any slight imperfection remained, any final brushstroke needed to be made--because the Scriptures could not be broken (10.35). Every detail had to be complete, so the cry “It is finished,” could be a cry of triumph and victory.

Date: Easter 7, 2003

Text: I John 4.13-21

Theme: "Love Made Complete"

There isn't anything missing in God's love...it is eternal, unfailing, great, wonderful, abounding...but several times in this letter, John speaks about this love being perfected, made complete as if something else were required. Even though God's love is perfect, it will reach its goal and be perfected in us when it is made visible in our lives.

Chush is a school that caters to learning disabled children in Brooklyn, New York. At a Chush fundraising dinner, the father of a Chush child delivered an unforgettable speech. After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he said, "Where is the perfection in my son Shaya? Everything God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. Where is God's perfection?" "I believe," the father answered, "that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that he seeks is in the way people react to this child."

He then told this story: One afternoon he and Shaya walked past a park where some boys Shaya knew were playing baseball. Shaya asked, "Do you think they will let me play?" Shaya's father knew most boys would not want him on their team, but he understood that if his son were chosen to play it would give him a comfortable sense of belonging. Shaya's father approached one of the boys in the field and asked if Shaya could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he said, "We are losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team, and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning." Shaya was told to put on a glove and go out to play center field.

In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team scored again. With two outs and the bases loaded, Shaya was scheduled to be up. Surprisingly, Shaya was given the bat. Everyone knew it was all but impossible, because Shaya didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it. However, as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved a few steps closer to lob the ball in softly. The first pitch came in, and Shaya swung clumsily and missed. One of Shaya's teammates came up to Shaya, and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Shaya. As the pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung the bat, and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and easily could have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Instead, the pitcher threw the ball on a high arc to right field, far beyond reach of the first baseman. Everyone started yelling, "Shaya, run to first. Run to first!" Never in his life had Shaya run to first. He scampered down the baseline wide-eyed and startled. By the time he reached the first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman. Instead, he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head. Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second!" Shaya ran towards second base as the runners ahead of him circled the bases towards home. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "Run to third!" As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya, run Home!" Shaya ran home, and all 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he

had just hit a “grand slam” and won the game for his team “That day,” said the father softly with tears rolling down his face, “those 18 boys reached their level of God’s perfection.”

Date: Life Sunday, 1995

Text: Acts 17.23-28

Theme: “Celebrating Life”

Sermon Introduction:

“Which do you think is the most valuable, an eagle’s egg or an unborn child?” The answer should be an easy one for us. But if you rephrase the question to, “ which does our society value most?” the answer may startle you. The penalty for destroying an eagle’s egg is \$5,000. But ending the life of an unborn child can be very profitable for abortion clinics and the doctors who perform them. It is illegal to kill elephants for tusks, seals for pelts, mink for furs, snail darters for a dam, spotted owls for lumber, and eagles for feathers, but babies? Does life’s value depend upon the value we place on it or is there something independent of us that is intrinsic to life itself that determines its value?

Date: Sanctity of Life Sunday, 2003

Text: Proverbs 31.8-9

Theme: “ A Time to Speak”

Sermon Introduction:

Pro-life speaker, Penny Lea, had finished her address when an old man approached her. With tears in his eyes, he told this story: I lived in Germany during the Nazi holocaust. We heard stories about the Jews, but like most people, we tried to distance ourselves from the reality. A railroad track ran behind our small church. Each Sunday morning there was a train whistle, then the clacking of the train wheels as it went past. One Sunday there were cries coming from the train. It was carrying Jews, packed like cattle. Week after week, the cries came from the trains. We dreaded the sound. We could do nothing. The only way to keep from being upset was to start singing our hymns. By the time the train came by, we were singing at the top of our voices. Years have passed, but I still hear that train whistle and the cries of those people in my sleep. God forgive all of us who called ourselves Christians yet did nothing to intervene. And now it is happening all over again.

There is a time to be silent and a time to speak, but in a world of darkness, distortions, and death, there is too much silence.

Date: Epiphany 5, 1995

Text: Isaiah 6.1-13

Theme: "Vision of Glory... Vision of Service"

Sermon Introduction:

For more than 600 years the Hapsburgs exercised political power in Europe. When Emperor Franz-Joseph I of Austria died in 1916, they held the last of the extravagant imperial funerals. There was a long procession of dignitaries, the coffin

draped, and the military band playing sober music. By the light of torches, they descended the steps of the Capuchin Monastery in Vienna. At the bottom was a great iron door that led to the Hapsburg family crypt. Behind that door stood the Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna. The officer in charge of the procession said, “Open the door!” “Who goes there?” responded the Cardinal. “We bear the remains of his Imperial and Apostolic Majesty, Franz-Josef I, by the grace of God Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Defender of the Faith, Prince of Bohemia-Moravia, Grand Duke of Lombardy, Venezia, Styrgia...” The officer continued to list the Emperor’s thirty-seven titles. “We know him not,” replied the Cardinal. “Who goes there?” The officer spoke again, this time using a much abbreviated and less ostentatious title reserved for times of expedience. “We know him not,” the Cardinal said again. “Who goes there?” The officer tried a third time, stripping the emperor of all but the humblest of titles: “We bear the body of Franz Josef, our brother, a sinner like us all!” At that, the doors swung open, and Franz-Josef was admitted. In death all are reduced to the same level.

Date: Life Sunday, 2005

Text: John 1.1-15

Theme: “In the Beginning...Life”

(Two illustrations were remembered from this sermon.)

The issue of when life begins has always been an important question in relation to the issue of the sanctity of life. But behind this question is an even more important one:

Who decides?...God's Word has a great deal to say about LIFE. He is the Creator...But into this world of light and life came SIN...and with sin came darkness and death...But God didn't abandon our dark world, instead He sent light in the person of His Son. In Him was Life—true, real, eternal. He came to die for us so He could impart His life to us. His life and the light that He brought into our dark world transforms the darkness and enables us to see His gift of life for what it really is.

Time magazine carried an interesting story about former President George Herbert Walker Bush. It described a trip he took back to the South Pacific. During World War II, Bush had been a bomber pilot, and was shot down by Japanese anti-aircraft fire. The article detailed Bush's return to the very spot where he was rescued from his downed aircraft. During his return visit, Bush met with a Japanese gentleman who claimed to have witnessed his rescue back in 1944. The man related that as he and others were watching the rescue take place, one of the man's friends remarked, "Surely America will win the war if they care so much for the life of one pilot."

When does life begin? In the beginning—when God breathes into us His Holy Spirit through the waters of Baptism. There He inputs a life that never ends. Christian music star Kathy Troccoli, in her book, *Falling in Love with Jesus*, shared how her ministry has filled an important place in her life.

Being single at 42, I'm realizing I may never have a child. But God has repeatedly brought me stories from women who have chosen life over an abortion as a result of hearing a song I wrote. At a concert in Dallas, I had just finished singing when a 21-year-old woman's voice came over the loudspeaker. She talked about when she was pregnant with her second child and was being encouraged to abort the baby.

**During that time, she had come to one of my concerts. I'd sung, "A Baby's Prayer":
But if I should die before I wake, I pray her soul you'll keep. "Forgive her, Lord;
she doesn't know that you gave life to me." The Holy Spirit used that song to clinch
her decision. She kept her baby. God has shown me that more children have been
born through that song than I could ever bear.**

Date: Baptism of Our Lord, 1996

Text: Matthew 3.13-17

Theme: "Do You Come to Me?"

John's question to Jesus reveals clearly that John recognized who he was—an undeserving sinner, unworthy to be in the presence of Jesus. Martin Luther in his explanation to the Third Article said, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength come to Him..." Yet it is so easy for us to think that we can come, to believe we have something to offer.

Bo Giertz, in his book, *The Hammer of God* tells about a young, Spirit-filled, revival oriented pastor who is somewhat taken aback to discover that his rector, who had many years experience as a pastor, seemed to delight in some vices like a drink of brandy. Fridfeldt, the young pastor, wants to subtly chastise his rector by affirming the strength of his own convictions. "I just want you to know from the beginning, sir, that I am a believer," Fridfeldt said. His voice was a bit harsh..."So you are a believer, I'm glad to hear that. What do you believe in?" Fridfeldt stared dumfounded at his superior. Was he jesting with him? "But, sir, I am simply saying that I am a believer." "Yes, I hear that, my boy. But what is it that you

believe in?” Fridfeldt was almost speechless. “But don’t you know, sir, what it means to be a believer?” “That is a word which can stand for things that differ greatly, my boy. I ask only what it is that you believe in.” “In Jesus, of course,” answered Fridfeldt, raising his voice. “I mean—I mean that I have given Him my heart.” The older man’s face became suddenly as solemn as the grave. “Do you consider that something to give Him?” By this time, Fridfeldt was almost in tears. “But sir, if you do not give your heart to Jesus, you cannot be saved.” “You are right, my boy. And it is just as true that, if you think you are saved because you give Jesus your heart, you will not be saved. You see, my boy,” he continued reassuringly, as he continued to look at the young pastor’s face, in which uncertainty and resentment were shown in a struggle for the upper hand, “it is one thing to choose Jesus as one’s Lord and Savior, to give Him one’s heart and commit oneself to Him, and that He now accepts one into His little flock; it is a very different thing to believe on Him as a Redeemer of sinners, of whom one is chief. One does not choose a Redeemer for oneself, you understand, nor give one’s heart to Him. The heart is a rusty old can on a junk heap. A fine birthday gift, indeed! But a wonderful Lord passes by, and has mercy on the wretched tin can, sticks His walking cane through it and rescues it from the junk pile and takes it home with Him. That is how it is.”

Indeed, what is my heart that I should offer it to a King, a Savior? A heart twisted, scarred, black with sin and failure is not much to offer.

APPENDIX H

SERMONS DISCUSSED BY THE EVALUATION GROUP

WEEDS AMONG THE WHEAT

Pentecost IX, July 17, 2005

Matthew 13.24-30

The text is the Gospel reading for this 9th Sunday of Pentecost. I call your attention again to these words, “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field and while his men were sleeping his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away.”

There’s a traditional Hebrew story about Abraham sitting by his tent one evening when he saw an elderly man weary from his journey coming slowly up the path leading to his tent and Abraham rushed out to welcome the stranger. He gave him a kiss and invited him into his tent, washed his feet, and prepared some food and sat it before him. Before he ate, he offered no blessing and Abraham said, “Don’t you worship God?” The stranger replied, “I worship fire only and reverence no other God.” Abraham was angry and grabbed the man and threw him out of his tent. Some time later, God said to Abraham, “Where is the stranger who came to you?” “I threw him out because he did not worship you”, said Abraham. God replied, “I’ve endured him for 80 years; could you not have endured him one night?”

The parables about the kingdom that we find in Matthew's gospel, especially in this 13th chapter are full of promise and hope. The sower goes out to sow his seed and at least some of his seed falls on good soil and brings forth an abundant harvest, some yielding a hundredfold. Then there is the mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds, which grows into a mighty plant and brings forth a tree large enough for all the birds of the air to find a place to nest. There is the tiny amount of yeast, which a woman mixes into her dough that changes the make-up of the whole lump of dough. A man finds a treasure hidden in a field that is so precious that he is willing to sell everything he has to buy that field. Another man looking for a fine jewel finds a pearl of such great price that he's willing to sacrifice everything to buy that one pearl.

Those parables cause us to anticipate the hidden, yet irrepressible growth of God's kingdom, its incredible value, and its perfection. Then right in the middle of all of these parables of promise and hope we find this sobering sentence, "While they were sleeping the enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat." Not that we did not already know that, it's just that we don't want to be reminded. I don't have to tell you that there are weeds in the wheat, do I? You know that all too well. You have discovered them throughout your life. Weeds growing in places where you had planted only good seed; whether it was in your garden, or in your life, in your family, or in your relationships. Some parents have planted good seed and then they nurtured it and cultivated it, hoping that it would grow and produce a fine crop, only to discover that someone was also sowing weeds and that son or daughter was led astray and destroyed by the weeds. Throughout history people have been trying to create a perfect society, a kind of paradise,

but all too often have discovered that there are weeds growing even in those idyllic places.

It's important for us to remember how our Lord interprets this parable to His disciples. The field that we are talking about here is not the church, but the world. The field is the world. Jesus said that's where the Son of man sowed his good seed and while good seed produces the children of the kingdom, an enemy is at the same time sowing weeds among the wheat. We find that problem even inside the church, don't we? Dissention, conflict, hatred, false doctrine, and all kinds of things we never planted. There is a great danger in overreacting as we respond to those situations in our lives. We can be like the servants who said, "Why don't we just get rid of it, pull it out?" Remember James and John traveling with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem and some Samaritan villages would not welcome Jesus so James and John said, "Shall we call down fire from heaven and destroy them?" That's one way to get rid of the weeds, one possible solution to the weeds. But another danger associated with this is that we might question God. "Didn't you sow good seed, God? Where did these weeds come from? It's your fault, why don't you get rid of those weeds? Why don't you destroy evil?" I expect that you have heard someone say something like that. "Why doesn't God just get rid of that problem?" "Why does He allow that to happen?" Some question God's purpose, His will, His plan. It seems that whenever the good seed is sown, the enemy mounts a counter-offensive. The seed is powerful and he knows it all too well, so he is bound and determined to destroy and undo that work of God whether it involves snatching the seed away, as we heard in last week's parable, before it even has a chance to even sprout and grow or whether that seed gets

withered by the heat of the sun because there is no root or soil, or whether it is choked up by the cares and disappointments of this world. All of those things, you see work against that seed and its growth, its maturation. Even in the places where there is good soil and the seed sprouts and bears fruit, there the enemy sows weeds to counter-attack the work of God. He is always masquerading, pretending to be something that he is not. The seed that he sows is almost identical to the seed that the Son of man sows. In the words of Matthew's Gospel, these weeds are what we might call, "darnel", they look so much like wheat in its early stages that one can hardly tell the difference. It's only when they begin to head out, that one can see that there is a difference.

I remember growing up in Kansas. One year my dad was planning to harvest some seed wheat and it was really important that there be no foreign seed or weeds among that wheat. It was only a few weeks before the harvest when you could discern the difference between those good seeds and others that should not be there when we went out in the field with little knives and cut those heads off and dropped them to the ground so they would not end up mixed with the good seed.

It's important for us to remember, as Jesus is saying, that the owner and the Son of man have good seed to sow and locked in that seed is the very power of God to produce a great harvest. **In the book, "Ascent of a Leader" the author tells a story of a woman who had a dream. She entered a shop in a mall and there she found Jesus behind the counter and Jesus said to her, "You can have anything your heart desires." She looked around and said to Jesus, "I want to have peace, joy, happiness, wisdom, and**

freedom from fear. Not just for me, but for the whole world.” Jesus said to her, “I think you must have misunderstood me. We don’t sell fruit here, only seeds.” The good seed that He scatters is the children of the kingdom. This seed produces results and brings about faith in the hearts of people and they become children of God, not of their own will, but of the will of the Father and the power of His Spirit who works that miracle of faith in their hearts. But the enemy is always close behind, planting weeds among the wheat. It wasn’t any different in Jesus’ day either. The one who was the herald of that kingdom, John the Baptizer, the one who announced the coming of the Messiah, found himself in prison at the same time as Jesus was speaking the words of this parable. Yes, the enemy was at work even then, undermining God’s important work. In the chapter that precedes our text as Jesus was talking about the Pharisees and their unbelief, they went out to talk about how they might kill Him.

Missionary Karen Watson counted the cost of following Jesus. That’s why she left a letter with her pastor before going to Iraq. She went to provide humanitarian relief in the name of Jesus – but she was gunned down in the country she came to serve. The letter began, “You’re only reading this if I died.” It included gracious words to family and friends, and this simple summary of following Christ” “To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected, his glory my reward.” It seems that she understood clearly the implications of sowing the seed.

The counter attack of the enemy, the devil is carried out to undermine the work of the Son of Man who sows the good seed. There will be a harvest and He is the one who

produces it. The kingdom comes by itself without our efforts, without our trying, because God is the one who offers that kingdom and it is by His word and purpose that He brings it to fruition. Jesus himself said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains only a single seed”. That is what our sermon hymn was talking about when it said that God planted another seed. Because that perfect garden had been ruined by the ancient serpent the world had been flooded with weeds and the children of the evil one were everywhere. So God planted another seed, a perfect seed—a seed that would produce an amazing gift of life for all who put their trust in Him. A seed that was willing to die in order to bring forth new life. That seed was Christ Himself, who on the cross paid the price for us. He offered His life so that we could share in His, so that we could have His life in us.

His life continues to flow through us by the power of His word and sacrament. It flows to us who are heirs of that kingdom and all of the gifts God intends for us. So, as children of the kingdom, who are the harvest of the good seeds that God sows, we should live patiently and in confidence. In the early stages it is not easy to tell what is good and what is bad, but God will reveal this in His own time. As Lord of the harvest, He will send his angels to harvest first that which is bad so that it can be destroyed and then bring in the good grain. The kingdom of God is not built by force. As Peter wrote in his letter, God is patient; He does not want anyone to perish, but wants everyone to come to repentance. So we sow that seed confidently, recklessly, wastefully, you might say, in the reassurance that God will bring about a harvest, for we are His children, the children of the kingdom. We do not know what God can accomplish. Those Samaritans, that

James and John wanted to destroy with fire, later, after the Ascension of Jesus, responded to the preaching of the Gospel in their cities with joy and faith. They repented and believed in Jesus as the Christ. God can do surprising things beyond our expectations.

Remember Saul, the one who was an enemy of the church? He was once sowing weeds, creating all kinds of havoc in the church. God changed him into one of the sons of the kingdom. God has the power to change weeds into wheat. So we are patient, prayerful, and thankful for all that God gives us. Hoping and longing for his coming, a day when He will bring the harvest to fulfillment. He himself will make the judgments that we are not capable of making.

May God grant to us that hope and peace as His children in His kingdom. Amen

COME AND GET IT

Pentecost XI, July 31, 2005

Isaiah 55.1-5

The Old Testament reading is our text today from Isaiah 55:1-5. I call your attention to these words, “Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters and you who have no money come and eat; come buy wine and milk; without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.”

This is the time of the year when we have to pay careful attention to the warnings about dehydration. Surely you have heard doctors or medical personnel on the radio or TV, talking about some of the symptoms of which you need to be aware. People who work outside are especially vulnerable to dehydration. The symptoms are muscle cramps, dry sticky mouth, lethargy, weak, sunken eyes, and at later stages, lower blood pressure. When such symptoms occur, it is time to respond, because you need re-hydration therapy. You need fluids --you need water quickly in order to restore what your body is missing. Isaiah's invitation to the thirsty is about a different kind of dehydration. The dehydration of the heart, of the soul; a spiritual thirst that can be quenched only by what God himself has to offer us. Its symptoms are different: anxiety, fear, guilt, distress, desperation, hopelessness, loneliness, sleeplessness, restlessness, a longing for something to fill the vacuum in one's life that cannot be filled by the things of this world. The problem is that people don't know quite how to respond to these symptoms in their lives. Some people think that they are perfectly natural symptoms because if we live in this world we should expect to experience these kinds of things. I expect that all of us at one time or another have had to cope with such symptoms.

The physical symptoms we experience with dehydration are God's way of warning us so that we respond and react to correct the problem. Spiritual symptoms have a similar function. **C. S. Lewis once said that "creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. If a baby feels hunger there is such a thing as food. If a duckling wants to swim, there is such a thing as water to swim in. If I**

find in myself some desire which no experience in this world can satisfy...that does not mean that the universe is a fraud. Probably, worldly pleasures were never meant to satisfy that desire, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.”

What people do when they experience these spiritual symptoms is start striving in all kinds of ways to satisfy themselves. **William Langewiesche, in his book *Sahara Unveiled*, tells the story of an Algerian named LagLag. He and a companion were stranded in the desert when their truck broke down. They nearly died of thirst before being rescued. They dug a shallow trench under the truck to get its shade and waited there. In the very extremes of their thirst, they started drinking radiator water.** In order to survive they were willing to drink poison. People will take the same risk, go to great extremes to satisfy spiritual thirst. They will spend and expend great effort to slake that thirst with the things of this world. The problem, of course, is that the things that we think we want and need are not really satisfying. The problem is that our tastes have been so corrupted and distorted that we don't really know what we need.

In 1995, the Grand Canyon park rangers had to destroy about two dozen plus deer that had become addicted to junk food. They were eating things like potato chips, cheese curls, and candy that was given to them by tourists or that had been left behind in the park. Because of their addiction to this junk food, they had stopped eating the food they really needed and they had to be destroyed because they were in danger of starving. One park ranger called this junk food “the crack cocaine of the deer world.” When people develop a craving for the things of this world they lose their hunger for the things of God, too. Eugene Peterson once said that the biggest enemy of the church was the development and proliferation of programs to meet people's needs.

Because what people think they need is not always what they really need. What they really need is something only God himself can satisfy. Moses told the people of Israel in Deut. 8:3, “God humbled you causing you to hunger and feeding you with manna from heaven which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man should not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Seven years ago a missionary in Abijan, Cote d'Ivor was speaking with an African pastor from Chad. The pastor was passing through Abijan on his way back to his own country which had been torn apart by civil war. The missionary said, “What would you like to take back with you? You are allowed 44 pounds of luggage and I would be happy to provide whatever you might need – sugar, milk powder, or medicine. The African pastor replied that he would like Bibles and Christian literature. He said, “We lost everything in the war and we learned to place importance on things that last.” The things that last are the things that Isaiah is inviting God’s people to come and enjoy--real bread, that which sustains, that which gives life: water, wine, and milk which only God can provide. It’s available only in our Lord Jesus Christ. He’s the one who stood up at the feast at Jerusalem and said, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me,” because in Him alone is there satisfaction for those deepest needs that we all have experienced and will experience. Come, hear, and eat, and live. The invitation is extended to all – everyone who thirsts. It is designed to meet all of our needs. No one is excluded because everyone has this kind of thirst and this kind of need and all of us are pennilessness in terms of our ability to purchase what God alone only can provide. What He offers, you see, is the richest of gifts. Your soul will thrive in

what He has to give you. It's like water that revives the spirit and the body. It's like wine that gladdens the heart. It's like milk that nourishes and sustains life; wonderful gifts that only He can give.

These gifts are without cost to us, not because they are cheap, but because the price has already been paid. Because our Lord Jesus offered His life and gave His blood to pay the price so that those gifts would be ours in abundance. Gifts that truly satisfy: that quench our thirst, that drive away the hunger in our hearts and our minds. His Word is that true bread. That's what Moses was talking about when he said that He gave you manna to eat, to teach you that man does not live by bread alone but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God. His Word is that bread of life. Isaiah said, "Listen to me and you will live." Those who eat of this bread that He offers and those who drink of the water that He provides will live forever and be sustained by the power of His Spirit in them. The gifts that He offers are forgiveness and life – gifts that sustain the spirit and the soul and the body. Come, hear, eat, and live. Simple words, aren't they? But profound words. Powerful words. You can sense His love, urgency, and concern. It is the author of life, the architect of salvation Himself who is speaking this word of invitation. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for they will be fed". The only ones who are really satisfied are those who hunger and receive His gifts.

C. S. Lewis in his book *"The Silver Chair"* (part of *The Chronicles of Narnia*) tells the story of a young girl named Jill. She's in the land of Narnia, and she's thirsty. She sees a magnificent stream and a fearsome lion – who represents the Lord Jesus.

“If I run away, it’ll be after me in a moment,” thought Jill. “And if I go on, I shall run straight into its mouth. She couldn’t have moved if she tried, and she couldn’t take her eyes off that stream. How long this lasted, she could not be sure; it seemed like hours. The thirst became so bad that she almost felt that she would not mind being eaten by the lion if only she could be sure of getting a mouthful of water first.

“Are you not thirsty?” said the Lion. “I’m dying of thirst,” said Jill. “Then drink.” said the Lion. “May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?” said Jill. The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic. “Will you promise not to – do anything to me, if I do come?” said Jill. “I make no promise,” said the Lion. Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. “Do you eat girls?” she said. “I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the Lion. It didn’t say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it. “I daren’t come and drink,” said Jill. “Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion. “Oh dear!” said Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”

“There is no other stream,” said the Lion. It never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the Lion – no one who had seen his stern face could do that – and her mind suddenly made itself up. It was the worst thing she had ever had to do, but she went straight

to the stream, knelt down, and began scooping up water in her hand. It was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted. You didn't need to drink much of it, for it quenched your thirst at once. Before she tasted it she had been intending to make a dash away from the lion the moment she had finished. Now, she realized that this would be on the whole the most dangerous thing of all.

“Come, all you who are thirsty, drink,” says the Lord. For what He offers to us sustains, gives life, revives and refreshes, and nourishes our souls and His gifts are available here and now in His Word and here at this table where we are invited to receive His very body and blood. There is real food for your souls. Food to satisfy every desire. Food that sustains your life. Come and get it! Amen

TESTS OF FAITH

Pentecost XIII, August 14, 2005

Matthew 15:21-28

The text for our message is the Gospel reading, the story of the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus to ask Him for help for her daughter who was possessed by a demon.

There is a pattern in Jesus' ministry that seems to be unbroken--a consistency in His compassion for people's needs and his swift response. As you read through the Gospels, you can see that. In Matthew's Gospel for example, there is the leper who comes and says, “Lord if you are willing to make me clean, I am willing!” Jesus said, “I am willing” and He healed him right there on the spot.

- There was the Centurion, a Roman, a Gentile who came to Him and told Him that his servant was paralyzed and suffering greatly. Jesus said, “I will go and heal him.” Jesus did heal him, but this time only with His word.
- There were the disciples in the boat when the storm came up and they were overwhelmed with fear and they approached Jesus and said, “Lord, save us.” Jesus got up and rebuked the winds and the waves and the sea was calm.
- There was the demoniac who came out of the cave ranting and raving like a crazy man possessed by a multitude of demons. Jesus drove the demons out of him without even being asked to do so.
- There was the paralytic who was carried into a house in front of Jesus. Jesus said, “Take heart my son, your sins are forgiven,” and a few minutes later He healed him, directing him to walk home carrying his bed.
- There was the woman with the bleeding problem, who for 12 years found no help or relief from any doctor. She reached out to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment believing that she would be healed and she was restored and made whole.
- There was Jairus, the synagogue ruler, who came to Jesus begging Him to heal his daughter who was sick and dying. Jesus went with him and even when they were interrupted by the incident with the woman who touched Jesus garment, Jesus went to Jarius’ house and raised his daughter from death.

- There was Peter, who was walking on the water toward Jesus when he began to sink and cried out, “Jesus, save me.” Jesus immediately rescued him.
- There was the father who asked Jesus to rescue his son who was possessed by a demon and Jesus drove the demon out of his son.

There is a pattern there in Jesus’ response to the needs of people. That’s to say nothing about feeding the 5,000 and other miracles that Jesus performed. He is consistent in His compassion and caring. It’s not even a matter of faith when you think about it. The demonic didn’t have any faith. He didn’t come trusting that Jesus would heal him. He was so possessed by demons that he couldn’t even think straight, but Jesus still healed him. There doesn’t seem to be any limit to His compassion, to his mercies. No boundaries that His love will not pass. Demon possessed, unclean lepers, even the Roman Centurion. Anyone can come and ask and find that His response is quick and merciful.

Then this story of the Canaanite woman breaks the pattern. It challenges our premise, and therefore threatens our confidence in Jesus. This woman came crying out to Jesus, begging for help, and He didn’t even bother to answer her. He went on His way, walking along the path as if He didn’t even hear her! He was indifferent. Now admittedly, this woman was a Canaanite. She was a daughter of the ancient enemies of Israel. She came from an area between Israel and Sidon where Jesus seemed to be heading with His disciples. She came crying out for Him and Jesus didn’t seem to pay any mind to her.

There is a good chance, I expect, that you can identify with this woman. There were probably times when it seemed as if Jesus was right there with an answer to your prayer. You might have

responded like David in Psalm 18: “I love you Lord, my strength; the cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress, I called to the Lord and cried to my God for help. He heard my voice. My call came before Him into his ears. He reached down from on high and took hold of me. He drew me out of the deep waters and rescued me from my enemies.” There have been times like those when God seemed to act quickly, decisively, and powerfully. He responded to our needs, He answered our prayers; and we can rejoice like David did there.

But again, you may have felt like David did in Psalm 13: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts? How long will my enemies triumph over me? Look on me and answer me, O Lord, My God! Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death!” There might have been times when you have wondered if God was there at all. He might have been silent in the face of your needs and seemed far away. If so, you know how this woman must have felt. Think about her—her daughter was possessed with a demon, Matthew says. She was a Canaanite; she had no merit; she had no right to come to Jesus, she had no advocate, she had no claim to Jesus. All she had was faith.

In the light of His disciples doubts, their wavering, I think Jesus is using this as an opportunity to show his disciples what faith really involves. In showing them what faith is really like, He is also showing us what faith is really like. In her desperation, this woman persevered in her faith and trust that Jesus was the Messiah. Because, you see, that’s what she said, “Lord, Son of David.” She doesn’t think that He is just some kind of miracle worker – no, she knows Him in a different way. She believes that He is the Messiah. And how she came to believe that, we can’t be sure because she was outside of the covenant of Israel. Surely she had heard about Jesus and His

miracles and some of the things that He taught, but she had come to faith by the power of God's Spirit and she believed that He was the Messiah.

God does test people, doesn't He? Maybe He was just testing her. After all He tested Abraham a number of times. And you remember that test in Chapter 22: "After a time God tested Abraham. Take your son; your only son and sacrifice him on a mountain." He tested Job with unimaginable anguish and sufferings. God allowed him to struggle to understand what He was doing in the darkness of his distress. The Psalmist knew such testing and said, "For you, O God, tested us, you refined us like silver." God is always using the circumstances in our lives for a purpose. He is trying to help us. St. Paul said, "We rejoice in our sufferings because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope."

We rejoice not just because we suffer, but because we know that in the midst of sufferings, God is doing something. Creating something important in us. Strengthening our faith – like he did with this woman. So, He tested her, with silence. He answered not a word. He kept on walking, indifferent to her cries. But she didn't give up. She kept crying after Him so much so that the disciples said, "Lord, why don't you do something? Send her away, if nothing else. She's embarrassing us." They wanted Jesus to do something for her just to get rid of her. But she doesn't stop crying out.

Then, Jesus tested her with doubt. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," He said. Now she has to confront her own doubts. Is she really a candidate for Him to help her? Is it really possible for Jesus to reach beyond the confines of Israel and show mercy to this young child – someone who is an enemy of Israel? Is there any hope for me? But that doesn't stop her! She comes right to Jesus; she kneels on the ground and takes hold of Him and says, "Lord, help me!" He tests her one more time with a question of her worthiness. "It's not a good thing" He

says, “to take the bread that belongs to the children and throw it to the dogs.” Ouch!! He calls her a dog. After all, that’s what the Israelites thought of the Canaanites and other Gentiles. They were just dogs, not worthy to be invited in, not worthy to have a place at the table with God’s people. But she’s not put off by this. In fact, she acknowledges this saying, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs from their master’s table!”

All she asked for was a crumb. What an amazing faith! Jesus calls it a “great faith,” not because she’s asking for something great, not because she’s persistent, but because she clings to someone great, Jesus himself. She believes He is the Messiah and she won’t let go of that no matter what. Her faith was more than a superficial hope for healing. It was more than just asking for a miracle that she knew Jesus could perform. It was more than asking Jesus to demonstrate His powers in some way. No, she believed He was the Messiah – the Promised One. She hoped for much more, but all she asked for was a crumb.

You see, the real standard for measuring God’s grace and compassion is not an answer to a prayer, not a healing, not even a miracle in someone’s life; it’s not safety in times of danger and tribulation. No, it’s none of those things. It’s not success in business, good health, or prosperity. It’s none of those things. The standard of God’s mercy and compassion is the cross. Jesus set it high enough so everyone could see it. That’s the standard to which you can appeal. That’s the standard we can rely on. You can measure everything against that. Everything else comes with the cross, because the cross is the real standard by which God shows his love. That’s where we understand what compassion really is. That’s where we discover grace – there at the cross. Faith clings stubbornly to that cross because the cross is the measure of God’s love for His people.

In A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café, Leonard Sweet tells the story of the making of a film by two Londoners. In 1971 they began to film street people. The film captured the daily

rituals of the homeless – their trials and joys. Some were drunk, some mentally disturbed. Some were articulate and others were unintelligible. One of England’s leading composers, Gavin Bryars, agreed to help with the audio aspects of the film. During his work, he became aware of a constant undercurrent of sound that appeared whenever one certain homeless man was filmed. At first, the sound seemed like muttered gibberish. But after removing the background noise, Bryar discovered the old man was singing. Bryars learned that this beggar did not drink or socialize with others. The old man was alone, filthy, homeless, but he also had a sunny demeanor. What distinguished him from the others was his quiet singing. For hours he would sing the same thing over and over. The man’s weak voice was untrained, but it never wavered from pitch. He repeated the simple phrases of the song over and over.

One day at the office the composer looped together the first 13 bars of the homeless man’s song, preparing to add orchestration to the piece. He left the loop running while he went downstairs for a cup of coffee. When he returned, he found his fellow workers listening in subdued silence, and a few of them even weeping. The old man’s quiet, trembling voice had leaked from the recording room and transformed the office floor. Here is what he sang:

Jesus’ blood never failed me yet

Never failed me yet

Jesus’ blood never failed me yet

There’s one thing I know

For He loves me so.

Though not a Christian, Bryars created and produced an accompaniment to this homeless person's song of trust in Jesus. The result was a CD entitled *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*. The old man died before he heard it.

This homeless man was clinging to something more than a healing, more than physical help for his life. He was clinging to the cross. That's where faith must always cling. It holds on stubbornly despite all other challenges of life. That's what this woman held on to – God's promise. She asked for a crumb, but Jesus gave her more than that. He validated her faith in Him. In a sense, He invited her into the company of Israel. He included her in the covenant that God had for all of those Gentiles or Jews, who put their faith in God's promise. That's what He does. He offers far more than a crumb. You might say, He offers a feast.

An article in the Boston Globe, June 1990, told about a woman and her fiancé who had gone to the Hyatt Hotel to make arrangements for their wedding reception. They decided on the menu, the china, the silver, and the flower arrangements—a total bill of \$13,000. They left a check for half that amount and went home to get the announcements out. The day the announcements were to be mailed, the groom got cold feet. The angry young lady went back to the Hyatt to cancel her reception. The Events Manager was very understanding, but the contract was binding and she could only get back 10% of her down payment. She could forfeit her deposit or go ahead with the reception. The jilted bride thought about it (she had been homeless herself 10 years earlier) and decided to go ahead with the reception. She changed the menu to boneless chicken (in honor of the groom) and sent out invitations to the homeless shelters and rescue missions of the city. That night, vagrants, drug addicts, bag ladies, and homeless people took the night off from searching through garbage cans and enjoyed a gourmet meal, champagne, wedding cake, and danced into the night.

God invites us in, too. He opens the door to include all of us. A few drops of water, just a little bit of bread, and a sip of wine. That's a feast. Therein is forgiveness, life and salvation. God's gifts for those who have faith, who trust, who believe that He is indeed the Son of David, God's Son, our Savior.

May God grant to us that kind of faith so that no matter what the circumstances of life, we cling to what is really important—the cross—and never let it go. Amen.

GIFTS TO BE USED

Pentecost XV, August 28, 2005

Romans 12.1-8

During college, Pastor Jim Dennison, a Texas preacher, spent the summer as a missionary in East Malaysia. He recalls that while he was there, he attended a small church. One Sunday during the service he baptized a teenage girl who had made a decision to trust Christ and to follow Him. During the service, Pastor Dennison noticed that there was a piece of luggage leaning up against the church wall and after the service he asked the Pastor about it and was told it belonged to the girl who was baptized. Her parents told her that if she became a Christian, she could never come home again. So, she brought her luggage to the church.

What does the word “sacrifice” mean to you? Everyone has a different idea of what sacrifice is really all about. To Paul's audience in this letter to the Romans, both Jewish and Gentile, sacrifice was something familiar. You would bring an animal of some kind to the priest in the

temple and the animal would be slaughtered, its blood poured out. Parts of the animal would be burned as an offering. That was a sacrifice. It was costly. It involved death.

In our text, St. Paul uses the language of sacrifice to talk about what we Christians offer to God, but he turns it in a new direction. He calls it a living sacrifice. Still costly, still total in its scope, still complete in what you offer, but distinguished from the sacrifices of the old covenant. In the first part of our text, St. Paul uses the language of worship, which would register well with the Jewish people. It's a spiritual worship with a new depth and a new scope that needed a new language—thus, living sacrifice. The old pattern of worship is worship under the law, a worship governed by regulations, by stipulations, by rituals that were demanded, by sacrifices that were specified. The new worship is not grounded in the law, but rather in the mercies of God. It's always a response to what God has done for us. God calls upon his people who were made new in Christ who have been raised to a new life through their baptism to live that life out in a spiritual act of worship.

“I urge you then in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice.” God’s mercy is the groundwork and the foundation for spiritual acts of worship which go on in our lives. St. Paul spent most of the first seven chapters of Romans trying to help us understand the fullness and scope of God’s mercy in our lives, His grace directed to people who are condemned by the law. Whether they are Jew or Gentile, they had been found short of God’s expectations and demands so that no one could claim any righteousness before God. God in His mercy has provided a way of salvation through Jesus Christ and in response what God has done for us in Christ, people offer spiritual sacrifices to Him. The word sacrifice is connected to the old but the old is transformed into the new because we are living in Christ.

St. Paul suggested that the worshiper give him or herself wholly and completely to God. Motivated by His mercy and empowered by God's Spirit working in us, worship then becomes the whole of one's life. It is the constant thing we do; not just something we do on Sunday mornings, but something we do constantly. Because all of us have a body, we can all offer sacrifices to God. And because we have a body, we can offer sacrifices constantly. It's kind of what Jesus meant when He was talking in the Gospel reading about following Him: "If anyone follows me; he should deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." The cross, of course, is needed because you have to sacrifice self in order to follow Jesus. Spiritual worship, because it involves our bodies, our lives, becomes a witness and a proclamation to the world in which we live that we are God's people.

Just this week, someone asked me about our sign out here on the corner of Ivanhoe and Fyler that says "Divine Service". Why do you call it "Divine Service"? I answered, "Because what happens here on Sunday mornings is primarily God doing something to us." It is the "Divine" serving us. Worship is what we do out there in the world every day as we offer spiritual sacrifices to God. It is our bodies, our lives that we offer as living sacrifices to Him. In our spiritual worship we anticipate the fact that God's new kingdom has broken into this world. A world filled with corruption and sin; a world under the power and influence of Satan's evil forces. Into that world God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ. Those He has called out of the darkness to live as His people become like a beachhead, an outpost in the dark world to show forth the light of Christ. That's a big challenge, because by nature we are individuals, we are soloists. We prefer to do our thing. It's hard to work together; we take pride in our own talents in what we can do and accomplish. As believers in Christ, we are called to function as one body to work together to build each other up and be a common witness to the world in which we live.

Jamie Scott was a little boy who was anxiously awaiting the tryouts for the elementary school play. He wanted very much to have one of the lead parts. He had been talking about

nothing else for several weeks. His mother was afraid that he was going to be very disappointed and was preparing him by telling him that he might not get the part he wanted. One day after one of the tryouts, she went to school to pick him up to bring him home because she thought he might be disappointed if he did not get a part in the play. But when she saw him, his face was beaming with joy as he came running up to her saying, “Guess what Mom? I’ve been chosen to clap and cheer.” Most of us want much more than that. We want the major part. We want that role which dignifies us; which exemplifies our talents. But in the body of Christ, it’s not so. God designed this body so that we might work together. There’s variety and uniqueness for each person in the gifts that God shares and measures out to each person. Each gift is necessary, valuable, and important.

Let me ask you to take a little quiz. You don’t need to write answers down, but in your mind, see how well you do:

1st question – Name the 5 wealthiest people in the world.

2nd question – Name the Heisman trophy winners for the past 5 years.

3rd question – Name the last 5 Miss Americas

4th question – Name the last 5 men/women to win Academy Award winners for best actor/actress.

Now in your mind imagine how well you did. How many names you could list.

Second part of the quiz:

1) Name 5 teachers who had an impact on your life.

- 2) Name 5 people who have encouraged you at a time in your life when you really needed some encouragement.
- 3) Name 5 people who have served you in some way demonstrating kindness, love, and support to you.
- 4) Name 5 people who have shown mercy to you at a time when you really needed comfort, prayer, and hope.

My guess is that you might have done better on the 2nd part of the quiz. The reason is simple. The wealthiest and most well known people and the people who make the headlines are not necessarily the people who influence our lives. Our lives are impacted and touched by those people who care for us, those people in the body of Christ who reach out to teach and serve, encourage, help, and to give when there is a need because they touch our lives in special ways. That's what St. Paul is talking about here in these words to the Romans when describing what this Christian life in the body of Christ looks like. It looks like people who offer themselves as living sacrifices. Your first question might be, "What do I have to offer? How do I offer up my body? What can I give?"

Remember the closing words in Chapter 11 in our Epistle of last Sunday: "Who has ever given to God that God should repay him?" After all, what do we have to offer God who is the creator of the whole universe, who owns the cattle on a thousand hills? What can we offer that would be pleasing to God? Well, St. Paul says that we know what is useful, good, acceptable, and pleasing to Him. We can know what God's perfect will is. We can understand that from His Word which enlightens us. What we have to give, you see, are the very things he's already given to us. Gifts that His Spirit provides. Gifts that the Scripture refers to as spiritual gifts. They may be gifts that involve interpreting the Scripture, serving the needs of people, teaching others the faith, encouraging or exhorting people who are in need, providing leadership to the body of Christ,

giving in response to the needs of others, or showing mercy to people who need mercy in their lives. These are the gifts God has given to us. We are to use them. That is the simple advice St. Paul has for us. If you have gifts, then use them, because those gifts benefit the body of Christ. It's in serving other people that we serve our Lord, that we glorify Him, and that we offer acceptable sacrifices to Him.

Now, today, on this Christian Education Sunday, we can focus on the gift of teaching. Because we know how important it is to teach the faith. It's an essential part of that mission that God has given to the people of His church. In order to make disciples of all people, we have to baptize and teach and without teachers how could this happen? It's a crucial ministry that must go on not only in our homes where parents become the primary teachers of their children, but in the congregation and in the school and wherever there is a possibility and opportunity to help people grow in their faith.

Gordon Johnson told the following story: Many years ago in the city of Minneapolis at Bethlehem Baptist Church they needed a Sunday school teacher for the junior boys. This class wasn't bad, just energetic. No teacher had been able to control them. Ewald Chaldberg, a Swedish masseur, was asked to teach, and he took the junior boys class. Ewald still had his Swedish accent. Buzzing all over the church was the word, "He'll never make it. Three weeks, and that will be the end." But somehow, Ewald Chaldberg believed God when he took the class, and he stayed with it through the years. He kept teaching boys. Some years ago, as Gordon tells it, he was asked to come to that church and share in a service. It was the tenth anniversary of the death of Ewald Chaldberg. How do you like that – a layman in the church, and they're celebrating the tenth anniversary of his death! During the service, they recounted that at least 40 men were in Christian service some place

in the world because Ewald Chaldberg taught boys, loved them, and watched over them as they grew.

That's the kind of impact the gifts of God have when used appropriately in His service. Christian education is something for all of us to be concerned about, not just in our homes but in our school, Sunday School classes, and Bible classes, so that all of God's people can grow in their faith, learning about gifts that He gives so that they in turn can take those gifts and use them in the building up of the body of Christ.

Whatever gift God may have given you, it is a precious gift offered to Him. It is a spiritual act of worship that doesn't happen here, but every day of your life as you offer your bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord. May God grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen

IN THE PLACE OF GOD

Pentecost XVIII, September 11, 2005

Genesis 50.15-21

If anyone stood in the place of God, Joseph might have thought that he did. After all, he was second in command of all Egypt, a powerful empire. The only authority higher than Joseph was Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh thought he was divine, so it might be that some of this rubbed off onto Joseph, and he could easily have thought he was God, too. When he was a child, he had some strange dreams. Dreams that one day his parents and brothers would bow down to him and adore him, as if he were a god. Now he had the power and authority that gods possess. He would ride through the streets of the cities of Egypt in his royal chariot and the people would fall down before him, almost in worship and praise.

Thousands were his servants. Yes, Joseph might have thought that he was in the place of God.

His ten brothers might have thought that, too. They had come down from Canaan to buy grain in a time of famine. They had heard that there was food to be had in Egypt and indeed there was. Joseph had been storing the food during the seven years of plenty, according to the dream of Pharaoh and now there was food, not only for the people of Egypt, but for nations around them as well. People from Canaan who were also suffering from this famine, came down to buy food. Jacob's ten sons, except for Benjamin, all came and stood before Joseph. Of course, they didn't recognize Joseph. They couldn't in their wildest dreams imagine that he was their brother sold into slavery by them many years earlier. He was dressed differently now and looked like an Egyptian. He spoke a different language and there was no way for them to know that it was Joseph. And he seemed like a god to them. He spoke to them harshly and accused them of being spies. "You're only here to spy out the land," he said, making them tremble with fear. He asked them questions about their family probing into intimate parts of their lives. Yes, it seemed that he could see everything. Perhaps he was a god. Their guilt over past misdeeds came surging back. They had mistreated Joseph by selling him into slavery and then deceived their father into thinking that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

That guilt, that deception, those lies that were long buried, now came surging back and they said to themselves, "Surely we are being punished for the distress that we brought on

Joseph.” Yes, for them Joseph might have seemed like a god, unrelenting and harsh, and bitter and vindictive in his judgment, and they were filled with fear and despair.

It’s not unusual to want to stand in the place of God, after all, that was the first temptation Adam and Eve faced in the Garden of Eden. The serpent said that they would be like God, if they ate the fruit of the tree. God had forbidden them to eat it but they wanted to be like God. That kind of hidden desire is lurking in all of us. That sin would make us into gods. It’s probably one of the reasons why some people get so horribly anxious and angry about the possibility that creationism or even intelligent design might be taught in our schools. The reason why they’re so upset about this is that would mean that there is a God, or at least a designer. And if there is a God, then we are creatures, not gods, and we would be accountable to Him and people don’t want that, because they want to be in control of their lives, to be God, if you will, to stand in God’s place, and they don’t want anyone to suggest that there’s any other God. All of this is what sin is all about--wanting to be like God, or to be God. Wanting to be in control. Wanting to stand in His place, to displace God, so that we can do exactly what we want.

The simple question that Joseph asked of his brothers was based upon the realization that they were thinking that very thing about him. “Am I in the place of God?” Joseph asked them. Joseph had something else to share with his brothers. He had already forgiven them when he had sent them back to Canaan after revealing who he was and embracing them with his love and his tears. He sent them back to Canaan to bring his father, Jacob

and all of their family, their flocks and their herds, down to Egypt where he could care for them. But forgiveness, like grace, is a difficult thing to get across.

Dr. Carl Menninger, a famous psychologist, once said that if he could convince the patients at a psychiatric hospital where he served, that they were forgiven, 75% of them could walk out the next day. It's hard for people to believe that they are forgiven. It's hard for them to accept the fact that their sins have been wiped away. That's why guilt continuously erupts in their hearts and minds. Because these brothers of Joseph could not accept with certainty that they had been forgiven, they were still enslaved by guilt and fear. They felt the need to resort to manipulation to get from Joseph what they wanted. They made up some story about their father pleading that Joseph would forgive them, when in fact, you see, he already had.

The story is told about Leonardo DaVinci that when he began to paint "The Last Supper" he had a violent quarrel with a fellow artist. He was so filled with anger and bitterness that he painted the face of this artist into the face of Judas in his painting. When it was done, everyone would be able to see who Judas was, and it would be there forever as a testimony to his bitterness and anger. Then, when he began to paint the face of Christ, he was befuddled and frustrated because he couldn't bring himself to paint the face of Christ. He finally realized that because of his own resentment, anger, and unwillingness to forgive, he couldn't paint Christ properly. So, he painted out the face of Judas and then he was able to paint the face of Christ that we know so well in "The Last Supper."

Bitterness, envy, hatred, and ideas of revenge will prevent us from painting the likeness of Christ into our lives unless we are willing to let go and forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven us. Forgiveness is only possible because of the grace and love of God who sent His Son into the world. This Son who was God and is God took our guilt upon Himself. He was willing to empty himself of His glory and majesty and take the place of a servant to become like us to share our condemnation under the law. He took upon Himself the burden of the punishment that we deserved and there on the cross He stood in our place to absorb in His own body the wrath of the terrible judgment and punishment that God should have given to us. So, you see, sin was not simply dismissed; it was destroyed. Sin is not taken lightly by God. It's not dismissed casually. God demands atonement and our Lord Jesus took our place so that we could be set free. We, who have experienced that forgiveness and grace of God are privileged, and even expected to share that same gift with others.

In the Gospel reading today, we hear of the unmerciful servant who was forgiven an enormous debt, a debt that in 1,000 life-times he could never hope to repay. Then he went out and mistreated one of his friends who owed him a small debt and demanded that he pay that little debt immediately. His friend was unable to pay and asked for time to make the repayment. The servant who had himself been forgiven was unwilling to show mercy to his friend. Instead, he had him thrown into prison. When the King heard what had happened, he had that servant brought before him, condemned him for his lack of mercy, and sentenced him to life in prison. .

One of the greatest privileges that a pastor has is announcing the forgiveness and grace of God to His people. Standing in God's place, he says, "In the name and in the stead of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins." That's an incredible privilege. The authority to offer God's forgiveness publicly to those who repent is a special function of the pastoral office. But God grants to each of His children the grace to extend His forgiveness to others—to assure them of His power to wash away even the most difficult of stains.

Journalist, David Hazard, told a memorable story about Wynton Marsalis, one of the most famous jazz musicians of our day and the premier jazz trumpeter of our time. One night Marsalis was playing with a combo in a New York basement club. A few songs into their repertoire, he stood in the front of the band and began a solo of a 1930 ballad; "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You." The journalist recalled that people were so wrapped up in his solo that his trumpet almost made them weep. They gasped at the pain in his music. The mood was taunt as Marsalis came to the final stage of his song, each note coming slower and slower with longer and longer pauses between each one – I... don't... stand... a... ghost... of... a... chance... Then someone's cell phone went off and it began to chirp with some absurd little tune, one of those tunes you can pull off the internet. The audience broke up into chitters of laughter as the man with the phone jumped up and ran into the hall to get his message. The journalist scribbled onto his note pad, "Magic ruined." Then Marsalis began to play the cell phone melody note for note. Several

times he played it, changing the key several times, spinning out a rhapsody on that little tune and the audience began to settle back down, realizing that they were witnessing something extraordinary. Around and around Marsalis played for several minutes weaving a sort of glory in the music out of the goofiness of that cell phone tune. Finally, in a master stroke, he wound down seamlessly to the last two notes of the previous song – “with you.”

God can do the same thing in our lives. He can take things that are intended for evil and make them into something good. That’s what Joseph said to his brothers, “You meant it for evil, but God intended it for good that many lives might be saved.” He takes the confusion and chaos and the despair of this world and turns it into a note of grace. He produces something incredibly beautiful, a gift offered back to us. A grace that seems astounding and hard to accept, the assurance that you and I have been forgiven for the sake of Jesus. Our sins have been washed away.

As Joseph recognized, God can work good out of evil. The story begins in Genesis 3 with Adam and Eve falling into sin and the consequences of that sin and the terrible disruption of the relationship between Cain and Abel. Cain kills his brother and sin begins to wreck its destructive power in the lives of all people. Genesis ends on this note of grace where God does His redemptive work in the lives of His people. He enables Joseph to offer forgiveness to his brothers. Out of their fear and despair God produces reconciliation and newness in life. Such is the power of God’s grace. Such is the gift of forgiveness that God has given each of us to hold and to cherish, and to share.

May God grant that to us all. Amen

GOING HIS WAY

Pentecost XIX, September 25, 2005

Matthew 21.28-32

Leslie Newbigin was a long-time missionary to India, who died just a few years ago. In his book, *“Mission in Christ’s Way”*, he tells about a visit he once made to a village in the district of Madras. The village had no road to it and you could reach it only by crossing the river at the north end of the village or crossing the river at the south end of the village. The village was anticipating this special visit from the missionary and they prepared an extravagant welcome at the south end of the village. They had music, fireworks, fruits, garlands of flowers and a special martial arts presentation reserved for special occasions. Unfortunately, Newbigin crossed the river by the northern route and the only things to greet him were a few chickens and goats. So he had to conveniently disappear for a time while word was sent to the rest of the village and the entire village did a u-turn so that they could welcome him properly at the north end of the village. That, in essence, is what repentance is all about. The message that John the Baptist and Jesus preached, “Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand” is not so much turning away from sin but turning to recognize God who is coming in His kingdom. He is drawing near but people can’t see Him because they are looking the wrong way, looking for the wrong thing. What they think is God is not really God at all.

Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the accolades and praises of many people who cut palm branches to welcome Him and sang, "Hosanna to the Son of David." He had entered the temple to discover that there were money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals there and He overturned their tables and drove them out. The next morning on the way back to Jerusalem, He had seen a fig tree luxurious in its growth yet without any fruit on it and he cursed it and immediately it withered and died. Then Jesus entered the temple courts and began to teach. The leader of the Jewish people, the chief priest and the scribes and the elders asked, "What authority do you have to teach these things?" Jesus said, "I'll answer your question if you answer mine? What authority did John's baptism have? Was it from people or was it from God?" They withdrew to consult with each other and they said, "If we say it was from men, the people will be angry at us because they believe John was a prophet. If we say it was from God, Jesus will say, "Then why didn't you submit to him and receive his baptism?" So, they said that they didn't have an answer, and Jesus said that He had no answer for them either.

Then Jesus told three parables, three parables designed to disclose the judgment of God upon those who sin and expose the difference between those who repent and those who simply put on a show without any true repentance in their hearts. The first of these parables is the Gospel reading for this Sunday the parable of the two sons. "Go and work in my vineyard," the father said to his son. It might sound like a demand, an imposition of the father upon his son. But really, it's not a demand at all. As Pastor Hermann reminded us in his sermon last week, to be invited to work in the vineyard is an invitation to share God's gracious blessings, to participate with Him in His kingdom. It's not a

burden at all, rather a joy and delight. Yet the two sons responded in different ways. Both of them are sinners. The first one said, "I will not." How rude, abusive, and blunt could you be? A son without regard for his father, rejecting and turning away from his father's will-- it's an evil answer flowing from an evil heart. Jesus said that son is like the tax collectors, prostitutes, and the sinners of this day, people who neither profess nor possess a practice of true religion. They were bold and careless in their defiance of God's will and neither feared God or pretended to fear God.

The second son says, "I'll go." Literally his answer is, "I, Lord, yes sir, I'm ready to go." Outwardly correct, righteous, speaking the right words but doing his own thing. He didn't have any intention of going. He turned away in disobedience. He ignored the will of his father. Jesus said, "This son's reaction is like that of religious leaders who can put on a good show, who can say all the right things, who appear at the temple at the proper time, probably offer the right sacrifices, and maybe even give a tithe of all they possess. But their hearts aren't engaged in a relationship with Me. So, they are like the second son who didn't want to have anything to do with his father's will.

It's much easier to recognize faults in other people than in ourselves. What might Jesus say to us today? We're here, aren't we? Well, certainly we're not like that first son; not abrupt, rude and abusive in our disobedience; not indifferent to God's will, we are here although we have to acknowledge that sometimes we may be just like that son. When God says, "Do this, do that", we turn away in indifference because we are going our own way. We have our own priorities in life. We pretend not to hear God's words, yet we

don't want to be identified with tax collectors and sinners. We're the ones who say, "Yes, Lord, I'll go," but then we don't always do it.

Where's the missionary zeal we are to have as God's people? Where's the passion to share the good news with those who are lost, those who live right next door to us or those who work with us. Where's the stewardship of life that is exemplified by a heart that's really dedicated to God? Where's the evidence of real faith? You see, it doesn't really make any difference who you identify with in this parable. Both sons need repentance. What's needed is a change of heart. A turning away from rebellion and a turning to the Father who is coming, inviting, and pleading to us to share in His life and in His blessings.

Pastor Craig Barnes remembered that as a child his father, a minister, had brought home a 12-year old boy, named Roger, whose parents had died of drug overdoses. Without his parents, he was left alone and Craig's parents decided to raise him as their own child. It was a difficult adjustment for this boy. Every day, several times a day, Pastor Barnes remembered his parents saying, "This is not how we behave in this family. You don't have to scream and fight and hurt other people to get what you want. No, you have to show respect in this family." He didn't have to make these changes to become a part of the family. He had become a part of the family at the invitation of the parents who had invited him in. It was grace that made him a part of the family. Being in the family required a transformation in his life and changes in his behavior. It was hard work and eventually he was motivated by the love that he had

experienced in that family and the grace that had made him a part of the family where drugs and violence were no longer there.

We don't have to change to become a part of God's family either. He invited us who were sinners into his vineyard. He embraced us in His love, and forgave our sins. He gave us the gift of His Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts, a new heart, a new spirit, to live as new people. But in the family of God, there is the need for repentance and change, whether our first response is outward rejection like the first son, or just indifference, or a superficial acting out of our religion. We still need repentance. We need an ongoing, continuing kind of repentance in our lives that acknowledges that our hearts are not always turned towards Him who is our Savior and Lord. We need repentance that is true and heartfelt. It's so easy to become indifferent or arrogant and to go our own way and do our own thing.

Jesus said to the leaders of the Jews, "John came showing the way of righteousness; but you rejected it." You see, the way of righteousness is not a righteousness that we achieve on our own; it's not something that we do by our own efforts. It's the righteousness of God Himself given to us in His Son, Jesus Christ. It is the righteousness secured for us, by what Jesus did on the cross where he poured out His life, His blood as an offering, a sacrifice for your sins and for mine. It's the work of God's Spirit in our hearts that brings us to the cross, who points us to Jesus, the Savior. The Spirit who helps us to experience the power of forgiveness, grace, and love so that we are moved to respond to a relationship with Jesus that changes everything.

Pastor Wayne Cordeiro tells about a time when he was dating his wife. He admired her because she liked sports and so did he. But there were two sports he did not like at all – skating and bowling. He had no patience for these sports. On their first date, when she opened the door, he asked her what she would like to do. She said, “Do you like bowling?” She had her own bowling ball and bag and was very excited about this sport. Because he was infatuated with her, he said, “I love bowling!” They went out that night and had a great time. The second date, he knocked on her door and again asked her what she would like to do. “How about roller-skating?” she answered. He said that he had been waiting for a long time for someone to ask him to go skating. So, they went skating and had a great time. Looking back on that experience he wondered why he had been able to change his attitude about those two things that he did not like at all. He said it didn’t have anything to do with working up his energy to change; it was because he loved her. Because of his relationship with her, he was willing to make that change in his life and to discover that there was something new to be enjoyed and experienced.

When God’s Holy Spirit brings us close to the cross and introduces us to Jesus and allows us to experience the power of His love, then we can change those things in our lives that are not in accordance with His will. It is grace, love, and forgiveness ultimately that make that change possible. It is not the power of the law beating upon us, but the power of His love surging within us to transform us into the likeness of Christ.

A new Christian named Paul had a serious problem with profanity. He had gotten to know another Christian in his church, named William. He and William got together to plan an aggressive accountability program to help him overcome this problem with profanity. They agreed that each week he would keep track of how many times he used profanity and he would put \$5.00 in the offering plate for each violation. The first week cursing cost him \$100.00. The second week didn't cost him quite as much but he still didn't feel right about it. He wasn't doing what he wanted. The third and fourth week he was still putting money in the collection plate and finally William changed the deal. He didn't tell Paul what the change was, but he said, "It's going to cost you both less and more." So, the following Sunday he put his hand on Paul's shoulder and handed him a check, already made out to the church, signed and dated, without any amount on it. He said to Paul, "You fill in the amount. It's grace for you. It doesn't cost you anything." So, he wrote out the check for \$55.00 for that week, the next week \$20.00, and the next week zero. You see, it cost Paul too much to keep writing that number on a check that was signed by his friend, William.

God's grace works like that in our lives. When we are drawn by the power of His Spirit closer to Christ, we can no longer be indifferent to His invitation to work in the vineyard, to be a part of the family. But to be a part of His family compels us to change our behavior to that which is befitting those who are His children. His invitation is a constant, ongoing gift of grace. "Come let's reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Come follow me; that you will not

walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” That invitation never ceases. His mercy never fails. The only way in is repentance and faith.

May God grant that to us for Jesus sake. Amen

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