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The Art of Illustrating the Sermon

(A Conference Paper)

Introduction: The sermon's the thing—more than anything else in our ministry. "Nothing contributes so much to keeping the people with the church as a good sermon," declares the Apology of our Augsburg Confession. If those were right who say that a pastor ought to devote one hour of preparation for every minute of preaching, it would follow that at least one half of his working hours are to be spent upon it. This is an exaggeration, which, nevertheless, serves a good purpose in emphasizing that none of us devotes too much time to his sermon preparation and many too little. The sermon should in every week be the masterpiece of our labors; it must be our chief concern, and yield not to a prize-winning garden nor to a book on how to play bridge nor even to some of the other good and necessary works of a successful ministry, such as well-planned visits and meetings or a successful campaign to pay off the church debt. On Sunday mornings and also at the time of other services the people come to us heavy laden, in need of, and ready for, instruction and exhortation, eager for an uplifting, inspiring, and comforting message, and we must not fail them.

Nor is it enough that the sermon is indeed a diamond, setting forth precious truth alone. It ought not to be a lack-luster diamond, consisting in the main of trite phrases and religious platitudes; but one of many facets cut with skill, perseverance, patience, and love in the workshop of study and prayer. The sermon should sparkle. And illustrations well used will help to make it sparkle. Our subject is

The Art of Illustrating the Sermon

It has seemed good to me to give also to the treatment of this subject many facets, to set it forth in the form of a number of theses.

I

The illustration is not the sermon, nor ought it in any degree take its place. It should serve to show forth its truths more effectively.

The sermon is that which we wish to teach. It is the truth as set forth in that portion of the Word of God which is our text. First of all the good preacher gathers his array of precious truths. He does not tell the story for the sake of telling a story. The preacher first of all gets together the dry bones and arranges them in the form of a finely articulated skeleton. And once he has carefully gotten it together, he does not readily depart from it,

add to it, or take from it, certainly also not for the sake of telling a good story or using any other illustration. The sermon's the thing, and the illustration may be its hat, but not its head; its coat, not its body. Like an excellently tailored suit on a well-proportioned man, the illustration shows forth truth most effectively, but may not obscure or disguise it. As Jeffs writes in his book entitled *The Art of Sermon Illustration*: "We make no plea for anecdotal preaching, the stringing together of ear-tickling stories for their own sake."

II

All human speech is more or less illustrative, but by sermon illustrations we here mean examples, concrete examples, whether in the form of a story or not, taken from the Bible or some other source, whether prosaic or poetic in form, intended to make abstract truth more interesting and clear.

I found it difficult to define satisfactorily just what is meant when we speak of sermon illustrations. If we look up the word "illustration," what do we find? 1. The act of illustrating is the act of making clear and distinct; an elucidation. 2. An illustration is that which so illustrates, a comparison or example intended to make clear or apprehensible, or to remove obscurity. — All human speech is, of course, more or less illustrative. The noun is illustrated by the adjective, and in its actions by the verb. Fearfully and wonderfully have we been made in distinction from the noblest beast also in our power to illustrate our speech. Everybody's preaching is illustrative. But at this time we mean by sermon illustrations the use of concrete examples intended to make abstract truth more interesting and clear, whether the illustration be in the form of a story or not, whether poetic or prosaic, whether taken from the Bible or another source. Maybe this is a pedantic and elephantine effort to be exact. Let me merely add as of possible value that *concrete* is defined in logic as "standing for an object as it exists in nature." So a good illustration is taken from nature.

III

No other preacher so consistently and effectively made use of illustrations as our dear Master, the Preacher-Teacher come from God, who also is in this respect our Model.

This is one thesis which scarcely needs to be maintained by argument. Our Lord told many stories. Yes, the time came when, as St. Matthew puts it, "Jesus spake all these things unto the multitude in parables, and without a parable spake He not unto them." And Jesus' parables are the sermon illustrations *par excellence* and represent the art of illustrating the sermon in its

highest form. The parables of our Lord, these "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning," made the common people prick up their ears as nothing else which even He told them. And though it be true that some were not helped thereby but merely deluded, for those who had learned truth in the abstract, the parables became as nails that drove such lessons home. And this is the very purpose which our sermon illustrations should serve: to drive home the abstract truths presented in our sermons.—Jesus' parables are something better than legends and fables. What actually happens becomes for our Lord an illustration of divine truth as it is in the kingdom of God.—However, also legends and fables may serve as good sermon illustrations. Luther did not hesitate to use them.

Anybody who would loftily say to us that he does not believe in telling stories in his pulpit, is faulting our blessed Lord, who also in this matter is to be our Model. Nor did our Lord use merely parables as sermon illustrations. He told many a story which was not exactly a parable and also made use of proverbs and comparisons to make things interesting and clear.

IV

The art of sermon illustrations is a fine art indeed and not everyone is or can become a master in its application. Nevertheless the preacher ought to seek to learn this art also, even if for him it means to stoop to conquer, for the common people respond to it eagerly.

We have stated that our Lord made copious use of what amounts to the fine art of sermon illustrating and that He is also in this our Model. It does not follow, however, that every preacher will do well to do his preaching in this form. If he could tell stories as Jesus did, then yes. But we know that this is a fine art indeed and that it cannot be mastered by all.—If a story is poorly chosen or told, if an illustration of any kind is crudely used, with poor judgment and taste, if it does not fit, it would be better not to have used it at all. It has been said that "nothing is more wearisome than a badly told story"; that "if the preacher is telling a story by way of illustration, he should be able to tell it in such a way as to excite the curiosity of the congregation and keep its attention until the story is completed. The story may not be much in itself, but may gain a great deal by the way in which it is told." One thing our Lord did not do was to tell the same story time and again. This is a good hint for us. Especially ministers who are getting old have been guilty of telling the same story too often, either forgetful of the fact that they had used it many times before or giving their people too little credit for

being able to remember it. Surely, if a story was good enough in the first place to compel attention, it will also be remembered by many. If they can finish the preacher's story for him as soon as he begins telling it, if he goes into it at greater length when they have done with it, or perhaps even gives it a new twist and contradicts what they remember, the result is bound to be fatal, boring instead of inspiring, perhaps even irritating. This is not saying that a good illustration is never to be repeated. Especially is any story harmful rather than helpful, merely distracting even when it interests, if it fails clearly to illustrate what our text and sermon set forth.

However much the words of caution are in order, the preacher may well seek to learn the fine art of using sermon illustrations also, even if for him this means stooping to conquer.—Some ministers are great intellectuals, or would like to appear to be such. Much sectarian preaching of our days, so it seems to me as I look at sermon topics and excerpts appearing in print, is couched in terms so transcendent that I don't know what they are talking about, and I am sure this is just as true of most of their hearers, for the common people are in the majority everywhere. Sometimes we, too, may in our preaching soar among the stars and get, to change the figure, so deep and withal so dry that the people lose all interest, even if they are politely keeping their eyes fixed on the preacher. Our Lord came down to earth, also figuratively speaking. He whose teaching could indeed have been true and yet beyond all understanding, stooped to conquer. This He did also in His use of sermon illustrations. Even so men found it hard enough to get at the truth, even such masters in Israel as Nicodemus. If they failed to understand the Lord when He gave them truth set forth in illustration, what would have happened, as our Lord observed to Nicodemus, had He told men of heavenly things in heavenly terms only? He stooped to conquer. He did not tell stories to please Himself, but to teach the people. And they heard Him gladly. Common people like stories. How often have I not observed how a congregation would prick up its collective ears when the minister told a story. Sometimes, I fear, it came too late. The congregation had ceased to listen long before and did not know what the story was supposed to illustrate. A good sermon illustration now and then is relished by the best of men, and the minister who spurns its use is weakening his pulpit powers.

V

Not every sermon to be effective needs story illustrations.

Sermon illustrations, as we stated at the beginning, are of many kinds. When we think of them, we may, first of all, think of

stories. Some preachers, even though their sermons may in some way or another abound in apt illustrations, seldom use stories. In an Epistle sermon by the sainted Rev. C. C. Schmidt of Holy Cross Church, St. Louis, he told a story, after stating that, as his congregation well knew, it was not his custom to do so. The story was about a young man who one day took a kodak picture before a cave, which, when it had been developed, showed a snarling wolf within, whom the young man had not at all seen. It was an illustration for divine protection from evil and a most effective one.—Now, nobody who, as did the writer, heard Dr. Schmidt frequently, would say that he was not a great preacher. But he needed and used few stories to get his message across the pews into the ears and hearts of his hearers. Dr. Stoeckhardt, I judge, used illustrations more frequently, and yet very seldom in comparison with many Lutheran preachers of our time who would not be worthy to loosen the latchet of his shoes or to blacken them. Great preaching as the Lutheran Church has known it is not of the Methodist, story-telling kind. It excels in its searching presentation of the truth, in doing full justice to its text. It develops the truth from every side, presents it from every angle, and in this most excellent way becomes so truly eloquent, so beautiful, so fascinating, that a story suddenly injected would often be disturbing rather than a welcome illustration. One of the most inspiring sermons I ever heard was delivered on the occasion of a general convention of our Synod in St. Louis, by a pastor whose name I have forgotten, but whose message I shall ever cherish. It was a sermon about *Die Waechter auf den Toren Zions*. First part: *Sie sollen die Augen offen halten*; third part: *Darum duerfen sie auch nicht stilleschweigen*. The second part I have forgotten, but have tried to recall it ever since, the whole sermon charmed me so. There were no stories told. The sermon needed none. On the other hand, I have listened to other sermons which were put over by the judicious use of stories well told. So sermons that bored their hearers almost to tears might often have been rescued to a degree at least by their use.

VI

Usually the best sermon illustration is somewhere in the Bible, and the preacher who knows the Bible best will also be the best illustrator.

The man with the most books of sermon illustrations in his library is not to be called the best illustrator. I have of such books not a few. I counted more than a dozen such books as I wrote this essay. They have all been of some value. But all

contain illustrations that I shall never use. The best way to illustrate divine truth is with stories or other illustrations taken from the Bible itself. One of the most haunting stories to illustrate the duty of personal mission work is the story of the lepers in the time of Benhadad, king of Syria. He had laid siege to Samaria, so that the people in the sore famine boiled and ate their own children. Four lepers, unable to endure the pangs of their hunger longer, decided to go over to the enemy. But they find his army gone, dispersed by a noise as of a great host, which was made by the Lord to save His poor people. The lepers went into a tent to eat their fill. They carried away silver and gold and raiment. But then, conscience-smitten, they said to each other: "We do not well. This is a day of good tidings and we hold our peace." How well this story lends itself to the preacher's purpose mentioned before I need not point out. The Bible abounds in stories of equal value which are poorly, if at all, known to many of our hearers. The best illustrations are in the Bible. Seek, and ye shall find.

VII

In the case of other illustrations used it is best if they are taken from the preacher's own experience rather than from books.

Certainly, if the preacher speaks to his people using illustrations out of his own experience, they will be more effective than if taken from some book. This is so well known to preachers that some do not hesitate to identify themselves somehow with most of their stories, speaking as if these things had happened to them personally. Needless to say, if this is not so, they are prevaricators, and ought to be spanked, if not unfrocked.—Ian McLaren, pen name of Dr. John Watson, in his book *The Cure of Souls*, discusses also the art of illustrating the sermon. He says: "When the sentence of some loved writer occurs to one as he is thinking out his discourse and he uses it as the expression of his own mind, then it becomes part of the pattern and is more than justified. When he stops at intervals and goes in search of such passages, the quotation is then foreign to his thinking. It is a tag of embroidery stitched on the garment. It is said that there are certain ingenious books which contain extracts, very familiar as a rule, on every religious subject, so that the minister, having finished his sermon on Faith and Hope, has only to take down this pepper caster and flavor his somewhat bare sentences with literature. If this ignominious tale be founded on fact, and be not a scandal of the enemy, then the Protestant Church ought also to have an *Index Expurgatorius*, and its central authorities insert therein books which it is inexpedient for ministers to possess. In this class should be

included *The Garland of Quotations* and *The Reservoir of Illustrations*, and it might be well if the chief of this important department should also give notice at fixed times that such and such anecdotes, having been worn threadbare, are now withdrawn from circulation. The cost of this office would be cheerfully defrayed by the laity." While the great doctor is in this harangue evidently a bit facetious, what he writes well agrees with our thesis that illustrations not taken from the Bible are best, if new and fresh and true, taken from our own experience. The ardent gardener and lover of nature will find many an illustration to garnish his thoughts; the minister who is at the same time a lawyer, likewise; also the man who understands machinery or who has knowledge of some art or science. But the good pastor, who is in daily contact with his people and others, at sickbeds, in the market place, as he makes mission calls, for whom religion is the all-absorbing topic all the time, will derive from his consecrated efforts also illustrations for his preaching in superabundance.— While we refuse to go so far as to condemn with McLaren the use of all reference books on sermon illustrations, we want to add that, better than any other book except the Bible itself are the mighty volumes of Dr. Luther's works. Nobody is more quotable than Luther. He is an inexhaustible source of illustrations that really sparkle. Dr. Stoeckhardt was quoting Luther all the time. Few Lutheran sermons would fail to be benefited by several apt quotations from him.

Coming back to our contention that it is best to use illustrations out of the preacher's own experience, also this word of caution is in order, that if the preacher quotes something he does not personally know to be true, he ought to check its accuracy. The preacher becomes ridiculous rather than forceful if, before men who know better, he makes statements they know to be untrue.

VIII

The illustration should, as a rule, be brief and hasten to its point.

Many stories told by preachers take up too much time. The time usually allotted to a sermon in our days is at best hardly sufficient for the proper development of the truths we wish to establish. What a difference between the length of our Lenten sermons and those of a Luther or a Stoeckhardt! If a great deal of this precious time is consumed by illustrative material and the truth itself is for this reason shorn of its wool, the sermon is quite sure to be superficial. It gives its hearers skim milk and not the cream. Moreover, if the illustration is too long, it may cause the minds of the hearers to wander from the truth it is supposed to drive home. They may like your story, find it very

interesting. But what does it teach them? Most stories lose when the preacher becomes garrulous, or *weitschweifig*. A good cartoonist, a good sign painter, with just a few, deft, sure strokes of the brush has shown you what he wants you to see. Let the preacher using illustrations learn from them. Get your point across and hasten on. Time is fleeting.

IX

The illustration should be timely.

If the whole sermon should be timely, this applies also to its illustrative material. It is most likely to prove timely if it does not talk of what happened in the remote past, although history repeats itself, and something in the past may well teach us what to expect at present, and the Bible itself can never in any sense become out of date. As a rule, however, what happened recently will prove most impressive. Surely a man speaking of the San Francisco earthquake at the time of the Lorain tornado* would be foolish. To get timely material for the Sunday sermon, read the papers, keep your eyes open to what is happening daily. Just now the material sent out by our Army and Navy Commission may be worth more than a dozen books on sermon illustrations. Who could imagine a congregation that will not listen breathlessly as the minister tells the story of the flier forced down on an island in the Pacific. He at once finds himself surrounded by natives scowling fiercely as they approach him, armed with spears. "He Jap! He Jap!" they are shouting in anger. But suddenly they discover that he is wearing a cross. And the cry changes to "He Jesus' man! He Jesus' man!" He was saved by a cross. The war will supply much illustrative material. There is little to be said for one who avoids all reference to it studiously and advertises, "No mention of Hitler on Sunday morning." No; one need not mention Hitler by name, nor any other man. But if all reference to the war and its lessons is shunned, this is not timely preaching. I read that the pulpits of Germany have referred to the bombing of its cities as the judgment of God. All war is just that, for ourselves as well as our opponents. The daily press and the radio do not in all respects give our people the proper, humble viewpoint. This the pulpit must supply.

X

The illustration should be simple.

By this we mean that it should be easily understood. If the illustration is so involved, so difficult to follow that the hearer is

* Lorain is in the neighborhood of Cleveland.

puzzled thereby, how can it well serve to illustrate the truth? On the other hand, the warning is in order that illustrations should not be too obvious either, or they will fail to arouse curiosity and interest.

XI

While the use of poetry is certainly not to be despised, for many a preacher its use will be limited because his memory will not permit him to quote even hymns with confidence, or because his prosaic nature brings with it a deplorable lack of appreciation for it and he could not use it effectively.

What is poetry? Has it not been well defined as "The art of idealizing in thought and in expression"? It is the most beautiful expression of truth. Coleridge, himself a great poet, once said, "Poetry is the bloom and the fragrance of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language." There is, therefore, no nobler illustration of the sermon than by the good use of poetry. Luther, who said that he could not highly regard a teacher who had not the gift of song, would probably have said the same thing about a preacher who cannot appreciate poetry. And yet we hear some pastors speak contemptuously of "poetic piffle" as having no place in the pulpit. Luther wanted to see all the arts in the service of Him who gave and created them. He despised the use of no art. And Coleridge called him a poet as great as any. Those who mean it when they say they do not appreciate poetry imply that they despise the form of those portions of the Bible which are known as the poetic books, and who knows how many sections of other books written as poetry. Schiller considered Ezekiel so great a poet that, no longer young, he wanted to study Hebrew, to be able to read him in the original. The Church as a whole has never despised poetry in the church, or it would have no hymnal. Much of the poetry of the Bible has, to be sure, lost its poetic value very largely in the translation. This is true also of some of our German chorales. But in our own English tongue countless men have written poetry which is also beautiful. The pastor who can quote it fluently and with understanding will enrich his people also in this way. Quoting the hymnal is, however, sometimes overdone, especially when the same hymn is quoted often. But when a hymn clinches a sermon point exceptionally well, it may serve the preacher's purpose well. One of the most effective quotations I have ever heard was given by a Lutheran pastor who recited, in a fervent, understanding, and loving way, the hymn of the Fountain filled with blood, from beginning to end. I could not help noticing, however, that the congregation did not appear to be impressed as I was and came to the conclusion that the pastor had probably quoted it too often. But could anything have

been more effective than when George Duffield quoted to his congregation at the end of his sermon a hymn he had written during the week, the hymn "Stand Up! — Stand Up for Jesus!" especially since this was his timely tribute to his friend, a prominent young preacher, who in that very week had lost his life after a corn sheller had literally torn out his arm by the roots? Yes, "the arm of flesh will fail you; ye dare not trust your own." Surely the aversion for the use of poetry, which some profess, would not have been felt by them on that occasion. It is not the use of poetry which is to be condemned, but its abuse by those who for some reason or another do not quote it with wisdom, skill, understanding, and discretion.

Cleveland, Ohio

KARL H. EHLERS

Outlines on the Standard Gospels

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Luke 17:11-19

Christ is on His last journey to Jerusalem, traveling along the borders of Samaria and Galilee, v. 11. He is still bent upon preaching the Gospel of salvation and proving Himself to be the Benefactor of mankind. But He meets with ingratitude. Also today He is moved to ask

Where are the Nine?

1. *At Christ's direction they have gone to the priests to be pronounced clean*
2. *They have failed to return to give thanks to their Benefactor*

1

V. 12. These men were afflicted with a disease too horrible to be described in detail. In advanced stages ears, nose, fingers, and toes would drop off. Contagious. Lepers were segregated, had to live in uninhabited regions, were not permitted to drink from a running stream from which others might drink, to sit upon a stone upon which others might sit. Required to avoid every contact with people not afflicted. "Stood afar off"—at the prescribed distance, yet near enough to make themselves heard by the Lord.—V. 13. This was a cry of faith. In some way they must have received tidings concerning Jesus which engendered faith in their hearts. Cried for mercy.—V. 14. Cp. Lev. 13:2; 14:2, 3. Cleansed by the omnipotent power of Jesus. What joy that must have brought them!—Have you experienced something similar? You were sick, perhaps desperately. Physicians gave no hope.