

Preaching the Good News at Weddings and Funerals

1. Before preachers can determine what and how to preach at weddings and funerals, there are some fundamental questions preachers need to answer.
 - a. Why do we preach at weddings and funerals?
 - i. For some Christian traditions and for some pastors and preachers, preaching is not a part of weddings and funerals.
 - (1) The Word of God recorded in Scripture stands alone.
 - (2) The sermon is part of the service in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* but was not a required part of the Marriage Rite in LBW. Rather, there is a brief statement on Christian marriage.
 - ii. There is wisdom in allowing the liturgy to “carry the freight.” Yet, it is often the sermon that makes the occasion personal.
 - b. What is the theology operative in weddings and funerals?
 - i. There are many different understandings of weddings and funerals, usually all running consecutively.
 - ii. In the Church:
 - (1) Are weddings and funerals considered sacraments?
 - (a) Marriage in ELW has an inconsistent theology. “Name and Name, by their promises before God and in the presence of this assembly, have joined themselves to one another as husband and wife. Those whom God has joined together let no one separate.”
 - (b) Look at the Church’s history and teachings concerning marriage and death, weddings and funerals. Theological understandings of marriage and funerals determine who can receive Christian marriage and burial.
 - (2) What is the Church’s and the preacher’s role in this occasion--carrying out the transition, judging the participants, witnessing, asking God’s blessing, moving people toward salvation?
 - (a) By what authority does the Church “marry and bury?” Do people need to be members of the congregation to be married and buried in the Church? Do they need to be baptized? Do they need to be in

a faith relationship with Jesus Christ? If not, what are the Church's role, authority, and message on these occasions?

- (b) What is the relationship between Christian marriage and burial and the Church's mission?
- (3) Commendation and committal are the distinctive features of the Christian funeral. The funeral marks the completion or fulfillment of God's promise given in baptism.
- (4) Lutherans understand marriage as both God's gift that brings strength and joy to individuals and promotes the welfare of humanity, and a human estate that signifies a change in social status. The Christian community surrounds those who enter into marriages with the gifts of the presence and support of the Christian community, the promise of God's word proclaimed from Scripture, and prayers of blessing and intercession.
- iii. What are the "theologies" of weddings and funerals operative in the culture? Weddings are fairy tales and funerals denials of death.
- c. How do the participants understand the wedding or funeral?
 - i. Why are they being married/buried in the Church? How do they understand God's involvement?
 - ii. What theology or understanding of marriage or Christian burial is governing the choices desired or the decisions made about this wedding or funeral? How are those decisions being made?
 - iii. Whose day or service is this? Is it God's or the Church's or the couple's or the family's?
- d. What is the preacher's own theology of these occasions?
 - i. This theology is forged out of both the Church's theology and teachings and the preacher's own experience, and tends to change over time.
 - ii. Our theological understanding of weddings and funerals informs our theology of preaching at these events and is reflected in our sermons.
 - iii. What is the preacher's theology of preaching at weddings and funerals? There are many.
 - (1) For example, some argue that people don't hear or even listen on these

occasions, while others see them as our best opportunities for evangelism.

- (2) People have definite but often unspoken expectations of what sermons on these occasions “should be.” Preachers therefore need to have thought through their own theology of preaching at weddings and funerals.

2. My theological approach is that weddings and funerals are celebrations of God’s faithfulness and covenant relationship.
 - a. Understanding weddings and funerals as celebrations of God’s faithfulness, these occasions become the window through which the Good News of God’s grace is proclaimed.
 - b. We preach God’s grace in and through the transitions of individual lives.
 - c. The goal is that people experience God’s presence, grace, and power here and now so that they trust in, turn to, and rely upon God’s presence, grace, and power in the future as they make this significant life transition. This is the goal for everyone present, not merely the couple at a wedding or the family at a funeral.
 - d. Purposes of the Christian funeral sermon
 - i. Encounter the risen Christ, who transformed death into eternal life.
 - ii. Proclaim God’s faithfulness and covenant relationship (baptism) for all.
 - iii. Help the assembly to face death honestly.
 - iv. Provide a particular, relevant, even personal experience of grace for this assembly.
 - e. Purposes of the Christian wedding sermon
 - i. Proclaim the gospel as the foundation of Christian marriage. Proclamation is bold to compete with other values, clear that God delights in God’s children and blesses their life together, and relevant in that it aims at helping the assembly experience God in the marriage liturgy so they turn to God in marriage and other relationships.
 - ii. Ground marriage as a baptismal vocation; lifelong faithfulness and self-giving love in response to the love and faithfulness of Christ.

- iii. Proclaim the promise of the gospel into the lives of individuals and the assembly. Speak to both the shared experience of the assembly and the unique experience of the couple.

3. Practical Advice

- a. David Schlafer provides four alternative strategies for addressing occasions in preaching—preaching around, preaching about, preaching at, and preaching through.
 - i. Preaching around can be both harmful and necessary. When we preach around, we ignore the change and transition, treating the unavoidable as though it simply were not there. Or, we deal with issues at the periphery of the transition, rather than at its heart.
 - ii. Preaching about is preaching that makes the transition the primary, if not exclusive, subject of the sermon. When the function of the sermon is to preach about, the hearing of the Gospel is diminished, if not lost. Often, this kind of preaching provides a single, seemingly airtight, theological framework for understanding the occasion, and lays out the appropriate way to respond. This preaching is very information laden. While people certainly need to give and receive information about the transition, this need is best met in venues other than the pulpit.
 - iii. Preaching at the transition occurs when the preacher makes the congregation's presumed concerns and feelings about the occasion the content of the sermon. At a funeral, the pastor delivers an overview of the stages of grief as the sermon. This approach confuses preaching with counseling that provides either comfort or correction. While giving comfort and correction may be the effects of a sermon, they result from the proclamation of the Gospel. Comfort and correction are ways we experience God's presence and purpose; they are not the explicit content of the sermon.
 - iv. Preaching through is sensitive to the history behind the occasion, and to the possible futures it opens up. This does not mean that the sermon retells the story from beginning to end. Nor does the sermon issue detailed maps of the road ahead. Rather, preaching through is mindful that the occasion is an open-ended journey. Preaching through approaches the occasion as a "window" that provides a fresh perspective on the grace of God, and the grace of God as a "window" that provides a new vision of and orientation in the occasion.
- b. All weddings and funerals are the same--and no two are alike.

- i. Everyone believes their wedding or funeral is unique, and they're right, sort of.
 - ii. Sermons must lift up both the shared and the singular experiences of those making these significant life transitions.
- c. The place of the couple and deceased in the sermon.
- i. The place of the couple and deceased in the sermon will be both guided by and reflective of the preacher's operative theology of weddings and funerals and the role of preaching at these occasions.
 - (1) Different preachers and different traditions hold different perspectives.
 - (2) All want the sermon to be personal and relevant. All want the Gospel to be heard.
 - ii. Communication Issue: Who of us can actually hear, let alone take in, private words delivered in a public forum?
 - (1) Giving personal information (eulogy at a funeral or premarital counseling revelations about the couple at a wedding) or moral exhortation (how to grieve or last-minute advice on a successful marriage) is inappropriate, embarrassing, and not helpful.
 - (2) These types of preaching both overwhelm and empty the hearers because these approaches either reflect upon the occasion instead of the life transition or single out those who have most at stake for public examination. The hearer's go away knowing too much and having experienced nothing of God's presence, grace, and power.
 - iii. An understanding of weddings and funerals as celebrations of God's faithfulness leads to incorporating the couple at a wedding or the life of the deceased at a funeral into the sermon in ways that lift up God's faithfulness.
 - iv. Say something truthful about the person or couple, and say something truthful about God.
- d. Be sensitive to the personal and family history behind the event being celebrated, and to the possible futures it opens up.
- i. While we don't publicly air things, neither do we deny or negate them in the sermon.
 - ii. We cannot talk about creating a new home to couples who have been living

together for two years!

- iii. Let's not paint the deceased as a saint if s/he wasn't one.
- e. Honor the strong emotions that charge these special days.
 - i. These are endings and beginnings, raw and tender times.
 - ii. Make these emotions the tone of the sermon and not the focus or content.
- f. Bring scripture, the couple or deceased, and the Church through its liturgy and teachings into mutual conversation/reflection. Do not apply one to another.
- g. Recognize that neither society nor our Church engage in serious conversation about either sex and intimacy or death and mortality.
- h. Theological "correctness" must be carefully weighed against pastoral sensitivity. "I know that my mother is walking heaven's golden streets with Jesus!"
- i. Audience Analysis
 - i. Is this a Christian audience? Are there other (or no) faith traditions represented?
 - ii. What's going on with the principal audience? With the secondary audience?
 - (1) While the couple at a wedding may be all excited about marriage, there are undoubtedly people in attendance whose marriages are troubled or have ended, or who are engaging in infidelity.
 - (2) Why are these people here today?
 - (3) Who is the primary audience for this sermon? What is this sermon saying to those who are "overhearing" it?
- j. Inasmuch as people aren't "thinking" on these occasions, use images and narratives (stories) to proclaim the message.
- k. Make a clear, bold, and meaningful (full of meaning for these hearers) proclamation of the Gospel.

Dennis L. Bushkofsky and Craig A. Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages*, Using *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Volume 2, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), Chapters 8 and 9.