

The Elusive Illustration: Letting the Text Win!

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Abstract:

Teachers of preachers rightfully insist the text “wins” when the sermon says and does what the text says and does. In recent years, allowing the text to provide the structure has received needed emphasis. It’s time homiletics took another step forward: letting the text win illustratively. Sermons are strengthened when the text provides, suggests, or stimulates the image that carries the message and/or the supporting material used to enhance, validate and illustrate that message.

It’s just a few minutes before I’m to speak. I’m preaching for a friend’s congregation where I’ve spoken on a number of occasions. The only element of liturgy left is the Lord’s Supper. Flashing through my mind is every preacher’s nightmare—I’ve already preached this sermon, here. Foraging through cobwebs I’m trying to recall something, anything, that will tell me I’m wrong. Suddenly I remember Dr. White’s response to a story in the sermon. I have preached this here before.

Somehow stories stick...and the sermon will be remembered for the story even if not for the message. That being the case, how can the stories (a.k.a., illustrations, metaphors, images) be so textually-driven, that when listeners remember the story, they are drawn back to the text?

Every preacher knows the chorus—“no one remembers my sermons—but I can’t use the same illustration twice.” Our experience is that people tend to remember the images and stories we use to illustrate our “points,” but rarely remember the point itself. We have argued for the past several years that we should “let the text win” in the dominant thought (big idea, point) and structure—at least then people can come back to something of substance, even when they don’t remember our sermon per se.

I’m arguing that if the very images, metaphors and illustrations we use are driven by the text, what people remember will draw them closer to that substantive message than if they simply remember our stories. Nothing benefits the listener more than having their hearts and minds anchored in a Biblical text.

Every preacher knows the challenge of finding the right image or illustration. Most have made friends with 10,000 Illustrations for Every Occasion (at least us old guys) or preachingonline.com or preachingtoday.com (this list is nearly endless). But is there a better way? At least a way that makes those tools as potent as possible?

I'm suggesting there is. I'm suggesting that inherent in our study of the text (the exegetical process itself) there are clues to effective images and illustrations that will anchor the text (and not merely the story) in the hearts and memories of our listeners.

I envision a series of concentric circles (inner most—the text/explanation; then, reflections on words, grammar, background, etc.; followed by stories/illustrations stimulated by the text; concluding with the material found in secondary sources related to the text) showing a progression of effectiveness—the closer to the middle (the text) the greater the effectiveness of the material.

The practice of creative reflection and observation (as well as the sleuth's determination) will provide a wealth of useful material for every sermon. Thus our study will not only assure us (as much as can be expected) of accuracy in interpretation/application, but also adequate and effective supporting material to help that truth be seen, felt and grasped.

Homileticians have reinforced for us the tri-part approach to “supporting material.” Every sermon addresses explanation, application and illustration. Explanation attempts to tell us what the text said. Application helps us comprehend what it says. Illustration allows us to see what it looks like.

Sometimes dashed lines separate those three categories. Explanation sometimes comes in the form of an illustration. Application occurs in the simple explanation. Illustration is often application disguised or explanation made interesting.

Given this introduction, the following examples are attempts to “explain/apply/illustrate” what I'm driving at.

Revelation 1:4-6 shows us how attention to background information and context can create an image to carry the sermon. The simplified version: John is exiled on the island of Patmos; the church has lost her preacher and the preacher has lost his church. Random reports of scattered persecution are circulating. Reports are that there has actually been martyrdom. On the other hand, churches are facing the challenge of compromise with the culture. It's a recipe for discouragement, despair. Yet John breaks into doxology. Instead of being discouraged, he responds with an outburst of praise. How does despair become doxology? How does self-pity become sacrificial praise?

Here context provides not only the answer, but the imagery to carry the answer. First, the answer. Revelation begins as any epistle does, admittedly with some additional flare, yet horizontal in nature: “John to the seven churches in Asia, grace and peace...” It's nothing we haven't read before in the letters of the New Testament. But something happens.

As John describes the Trinitarian author (some of the flare) he highlights the concerns faced by the church. He describes God as eternal (“who was and is and is to come”) and the Spirit as omnipresent (“seven spirits before His throne” parallels “seven churches”). Then He turns to Jesus. Jesus is the “faithful witness”; in contrast to those who have fled the faith in the face of

opposition. He is the “firstborn from among the dead”; giving hope to those who have lost loved ones to the persecution. He is the “ruler of the kings of the earth”; contrary to the Romans and their egotistical emperors.

Having so clearly identified the author of the message, suddenly John turns his attention vertical. His words are no longer aimed at his readers, but instead, pointed toward heaven. He reaches upward with a powerfully Christological doxology, “to Him who...” Something has turned his attention from his circumstances and their power to degenerate into despair, to heaven and its power to elate and encourage. He’s seen a fresh vision of Jesus.

So, what does one do when “life tumbles in,” becomes more than we can bear? We look at Jesus. We see Him again, for who He is. And a sermon is born. And an image to carry it develops. The possible images include *seeing, vision, fresh look, double take, imagine/imagination, picture, transformation, turning the corner* or something similar.

The text also provides the “what” we are to see. Three verbs surface in our study to clarify what we should look for. Here are the attributes of Jesus which produce doxology. He is one who “loves, forgives and trusts (my interpretation of “makes us”).”

In seeking to “explain, apply and illustrate” the text, our research provides the fodder for feeding our creative thoughts. In looking at the grammar we realize we have participles (not something we would necessarily share with the audience). We realize we are not dealing with simple acts, but with characteristics. In other words, Jesus doesn’t just “love” under certain circumstances, He is characterized by love. You can’t stop Him from loving.

We also note that it’s present and active. He loves now, in an ongoing fashion. The question then becomes, how do we capture the implication of the grammar (explanation) in a way that will impact the audience (application) and enable them to experience the wonder of this truth (illustration)? We let the text, and our work with the text, win.

Our temptation is to turn to the immediate—go with the song. After all, “Jesus Loves Me” is a good expression of this verse. With some historical detail we can create a good illustration. We may yet use it. But it’s too early to go there. The text still has much more to offer.

Because we always compare translations of the text as part of our study, we realize the King James Version translated this as past tense, “loved us.” Here is an opportunity to teach a valuable study method (comparing versions) while highlighting the text (explanation) and showing its implications creatively (application/illustration). It might sound something like this:

I’m not a grammarian, nor the son of a grammarian, but I recognize an “s” when I see one. This text says Jesus “loves” us, not “loved” us. For some reason the translators of the King James Version chose a past tense form for this verb. But when we look at several more recent translations we see they all reveal the present tense. But isn’t it still just an “s”?

Frankly, some of you would prefer it was a “d,” past tense. You believe Jesus “loved” you. Back when you were more innocent; before life took those unexpected, undesirable turns. You know life isn’t what you’d hoped. Jesus couldn’t possibly love you now, not in these conditions, not under these circumstances, not after what you have done.

Others of you are convinced it should be “will love us,” future tense. You have high hopes and big plans. You’re going to straighten out your life. Or, life is going to get better. You’ll get through the divorce, past the cancer, over the affair, beyond the sin. Then, after life is more like it should be, you may believe Jesus loves you. But not now, not yet.

But look at the text. Look carefully. It’s an “s”. No doubt about it. John says Jesus loves me, now. He loves me in spite of my decisions, in spite of my circumstances, in spite of the condition of my life. In fact, I can’t stop Jesus from loving me. It’s in his nature. It reminds you of a Bible verse, doesn’t it? “Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ...” (Romans 8:37-39). Or a song you heard in Sunday School, “Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.”

Believe it. Jesus loves you. And nothing you can do will stop Him. Now, if you’re tempted to be discouraged, that should help. When life seems unbearable, take a look at Jesus. Look into His face and note there, love. Jesus’ love. He loves you right here, right now.

The second verb might be handled in a similar fashion. It too, is an attribute of Jesus. He is one who forgives. Except this is past tense. He has forgiven (loosed) us “from our sins by His own blood.” In this case, the explanation/application might come through concentrating on the connecting words. Here we not only help people experience the impact of this text, but we again teach them hermeneutics. It isn’t always the big words that matter. Sometimes it’s the little ones, like “our” and “His.” Possibly something like this:

You’ll notice in the text two really critical words. But don’t look for the big, seminary-sounding words. Look for the little ones. Sometimes they make all the difference. See them? They’re in the phrase “loosed us from our sins by His own blood.”

The two words are “our” and “His”. There are others, too. For example, the word “by.” It’s a word of agency, telling us how something was done. Forgiveness (loosing us from our sins) was accomplished “by” His blood.

But that’s what’s so unusual. It was “our” sin. Shouldn’t it have been “our” blood? Or, if it was “His” blood, shouldn’t it have been “His” sin? That’s what’s so amazing about Jesus. He looses us from our sin, but He does it by His blood. Amazing.

It demonstrates so clearly how much He loves us. He loves us enough to give His own life for ours. If you arose this morning discouraged, if life wasn’t what you expected, this should help. Not only does He love you, He died for you.

We might now turn further from the center; i.e., less explanation and more pure illustration. Possibly there is a strong story that illustrates the shedding of blood or some other sacrifice for the sake of others. It could be the story from Iraq of a soldier tossing himself on a bomb inside their tank. He lost his life for the sake of others.

My story is about my daughter and her first accident. She fell off some playground equipment and split her scalp which bled profusely. It was our first major scare and trip to the local emergency room. I played the story off of wanting to see a doctor, an MD. I didn't want to see an EMT. After briefly recounting the story, I made this application.

A few days later I was reading my Bible. I ran across that text in 1 Peter. The one that says, "you were not saved by perishable things, like silver and gold. But by the precious blood of Jesus." And I remember thinking, there are four people in the world I think I'd be willing to die for; my wife and three daughters. But this I know for sure...there is not one person in the world I'd let my daughter die for.

Yet that's just what God did. He let Jesus die for us, in fact, sent Him to die for us. No wonder John, when he had a fresh look at Jesus, turned to heaven in praise instead of to earth in despair.

By "letting the text win" we create illustrations which apply and explain. They help the audience see what the text meant and means. We have an opportunity to teach (implicitly as well as explicitly) good study practices. We free ourselves from the need to scramble each week looking for a "good story." And, when the listener remembers the story, they just may remember the text.

The practice can be illustrated repeatedly. Every text has its images and its points of connection. Our concern, as teachers of preachers, is how to teach preachers to do this. The following may provide food for discussion.

Not necessarily first in order of importance, but probably first in order of accomplishment: get preachers to be patient. Too many preachers want to hasten to the application/illustration stage. If we can encourage them to keep away from sermon/illustration websites long enough to finish their study of the text, we will have accomplished a great deal. That means convincing many that sermon preparation (i.e., studying the text) has priority over administrivia and other worthwhile activities.

Once that is accomplished, the first in importance may occur. We must teach them to develop an effective method of study. Whether they adopt/adapt Gorman's process, work with Fee and Stuart, "cross the river" with Hayes, they must find something that is "theirs." They need a process they can rely on week after week. This procedure must become second nature to them.

Without belaboring the point, it must include context, background, words, grammar, discourse, genre, canon; i.e., the basics. But it must be more than mere "information gathering." The key word in all this study is "significance." It is never enough to merely parse a verb or discover a fact. The question must be asked, "Why does this matter?"

We should write that question in the margins of every set of notes a student submits. They should be forced to have a solid explanation of why something is important. It's one thing to note that Elijah "went 'east of Israel' and 'was fed by ravens'." It's quite another to recognize the truth that God has sent him out of the land to be fed by unclean birds as a statement of God's disengagement with His people.

First, we get them to slow down. Second, we get them to actually study. And, as a part of that, we encourage them to ask the question of "significance." Then we will have to help them see connections. How does this information lead to that application? Or, how does this word lead to that metaphor?¹

In some ways this can't be taught. But it can be demonstrated. Therefore requiring students to listen to sermons and analyze the inductive elements is an invaluable exercise. They should not only recognize them, but attempt to trace them back to their origin in the text. The challenge will be in finding good sermons to use as resources. We must also help them as we critique their sermons. We will need to point out the development as well as the placement of illustrative materials. We'll have to help them see why a particular metaphor might have been a great choice and why others might not have been so helpful.

At a more practical level, students need to learn to be selective in their searches. To use a "text-driven" search before using a "topic-driven" search will help. By looking for "Revelation 1:4-6" in the search the student discovers what others have seen as potential connections to this text. This practice will at least keep them thinking textually.

These steps will help students concentrate on the text. If the preacher concentrates on the text, chances are better that the sermon will reflect the text. If the sermon reflects the text, the odds are greater the listener will be drawn back to the text instead of to the preacher. If the listener remembers the text, the probability is they will begin to be shaped by the text. If the text is allowed to shape the listener, the possibility is enhanced that the listener will look more like the author of the text. For that reason, helping a listener see, feel, and grasp the text is worth while.

¹ For help in preventing mistakes in this practice, see Donald Carson, [Exegetical Fallacies](#) and Richard Eslinger, [Pitfalls in Preaching](#).

Concentric Circles
A Model for Developing Illustrations

