Prairie Pastors Conference Session 3

So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. 1 Thess. 2:8

This morning let’s focus on preaching as caring for the congregation. In one sense, of course, we’ve been doing this all along. The great preacher George Buttrick said preaching should always be focused on Mr. and Mrs. Jones in pew number 3, and he’s exactly right. The question is how do you and I guard what we say and shape it so that we actually do some good? Five areas to consider.

First, do no harm. The first rule of preaching as caring draws on the first rule of medicine. The devil Screwtape was right about this one. These people are our patients. Unlike Screwtape, though, our job is to deliver them to eternity safe, sound, and healthy. Part of what that means is that you and I have to be as aware as we can be not only of the meaning of our words, but also of the ways our words might be misunderstood. In my third congregation, I decided to preach a series on the Ten Commandments. Nice, safe topic. With Charlton Heston on my side, what could possibly go wrong? It was fine, at least as far as I knew, until I got to my sermon on not bearing false witness. It happened that that year there was a great story out of the Chicago area about a woman who when she was in her late teens had served as the primary accuser in a rape case. The man she had identified as her rapist had been convicted and given a long sentence. Several years later the young woman became a Christian. Not long after her conversion, she went back to the authorities and confessed she had lied. The man she testified against was not the man who raped her. With her new testimony, he was released. I used it in my sermon because I thought it was a great story about how Christians tell the truth. On one level it was. But then one of the most involved families in the church who we also considered good friends of ours let me know they were furious with me because I told that story. It turned out their own daughter had been sexually abused by a family member. And when they found out and told their family, no one believed them. The relationship with one branch of their family was shattered. Their daughter suffered long-term emotional damage both from the abuse and from failing to be believed. Two completely unrelated stories. One had nothing to do with other. I knew nothing about the tragedy for my church members. But somehow they felt as though I was siding with their daughter’s abuser. At first I was just mad. I couldn’t for the life of me see how I had done anything wrong. Over time though, I slowly began to realize my mistake was failing to realize that sexual abuse is far more common in our churches than any of us have ever imagined unless we have been victims ourselves. Our bias should always be toward encouraging victims to speak out and protecting them when they do. At the least, I should have included a statement encouraging people who’d been abused to speak up. Or, perhaps, to be sure I was doing no harm, I could have found a different illustration, just as the missionary in last night’s story should have thought before he told such a graphic story about injury to a child.

Do no harm has at least one other application to what we say, though. And that’s we should always be careful our preaching does no harm to our own families. (See Youtube video “Before he speaks”, It is
sexist, but apropos and funny!) Fortunately for my education on this point I am married to a woman who is not the least bit shy about letting me know what she doesn’t like. I learned very early on that if I was going to illustrate a sermon with a story about our family or mention her in any way, I'd better check with her first and she got a veto over whether I said anything, what I said and how I said it. And when our son came along the same rule applied to him. Your family deserves a private life. Anything less is in itself a kind of abuse. When Paul writes to the Thessalonians about his love for them, he compares himself to a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. Not children you’re paid for keeping. Your own children. My sisters and brothers, this is not just hyperbole. This is quite literally the care you and I are called to bring to bear every time we speak. Anything else amounts to a betrayal of the call of God for our lives. First, do no harm.

Second, know your people. I went to my first church when Sheryl and I had barely been married a year and I was getting ready to write my doctoral dissertation. She was Colorado raised and never intended to stay in Kentucky after seminary. I was an academic and a townie. I knew absolutely nothing about rural life, especially rural life in Kentucky tobacco, distillery and thoroughbred country. Even worse, I was not a basketball fan. The first time we had people over to supper we were looking forward to an evening of conversation around the table, enjoying a good meal, getting to know the church leaders. That lasted less than five minutes. The first people there handed us the dishes they’d brought, let it be known they’d be eating with the TV on and tuned in the University of Kentucky Wildcats game. Clearly I had failed in my sociological research.

A couple of months later, I got my next graphic lesson in knowing your people. On a Sunday in late February, just as Kentucky began to see the first faint early signs of spring, none of the farmers came with their families to church. The women and kids were there. But not the men. Like any pastor would, I asked where the guys were that morning. And the answer came back, “Oh they’re home gassing the beds.” My life flashed in front of my eyes. What kind of den of grossness had I fallen into? Fortunately the wives I was talking with saw the panic in my expression and explained. Tobacco seedlings are started in long seedbeds under polyethylene sheets. Gas is injected under the polyethylene early on to kill the weeds and give the seedlings a chance to flourish. If you’re going to talk intelligently with your people, you’d better learn to speak their language.

The lesson, though, was priceless. If you want to speak effectively into your people’s lives, you have to, as Paul writes, share with them your own self. You have to give yourself to that community, and you have to figure out what makes that community tick. One of my best friends in South Dakota spent thirty years as a bivocational pastor in the little town of Venturia, just over the North Dakota line. Venturia, like so many towns on the prairie, was dying on the vine. But he’d grown up on a Dakota farm himself and he almost instinctively seemed to know what to do. He became a school bus driver part time, partly to help pay the bills, of course. But also because the school in a rural community, like the church, is an important part of the glue that holds things together. And he’d put on his boots and go out in the fields with the farmers, not just sit in his study and think about sermons in the abstract. When he needed an image to explain a concept in a sermon he could often glean it from his own experience of the wind and the sky and the land. He shared his people’s world.
He shared their world not just physically but also politically in the broadest sense of that word. He learned from his own experience of life in their midst what was important to them and what was not. That experience helped him begin to learn what he could say in his particular context and what he could not. When Paul writes that he has become all things to all people, he means that he’s learned what he must do in order to be able to communicate the gospel. The homiletician Leonora Tubbs Tisdale writes “Preachers need to become amateur ethnographers—skilled in observing and ...describing the subcultural signs and symbols of the congregations they serve.” Part of what that means, of course, is don’t assume they’re all like you. If you’re an extrovert, don’t always ask them to do extroverting things just because they sound like fun to you. As a card-carrying introvert myself, I can tell you a substantial chunk of your congregation won’t like it. Whether you preach in inner city Minneapolis among Somali refugees or out along the Platte in corn country you act as a kind of bridge between your people and gospel truth. If you don’t know them well you will have no idea how to speak into their world. In his novel Hawaii, James Michener wrote about how the early missionaries went about translating the Bible into the Hawaiian language. When they came to the commandment on adultery they encountered a conundrum. English had the single word adultery. Hawaiian had about a dozen words, each one different depending on who was doing the adultery and whom they were doing it with. The prim New England missionaries were completely out of their depth. They had no idea that kind of sexual creativity even existed. So how should they say what the scripture meant? They finally settled on “Thou shalt not sleep mischievously.” Michener doesn’t say how well it served the purpose, but then we preachers often never find out whether they really hear what we say or not. Still we keep trying. Second, know your people.

Third, whatever you say, be sure you’re communicating love not judgment. I know we’ve talked about this already but I’m circling back around it one more time because it’s so important. Notice I did not say never get angry with the church. That’s not possible. Some of you came here this week precisely to keep from killing somebody back home. My advice is don’t. We’re going to get angry with them. We’re only human and so are they. Sometimes we get impatient. Sometimes they do stupid things. Sometimes we do stupid things and they have the unmitigated gall to call us on it. But anger from the pulpit never helps anybody.

Again we’re back to the idea I tried to communicate last night of taking the long view. One of my heroes in the ministry was my home pastor back in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, when I was a young adult, a guy named John McClanahan. For about a quarter century during and after the civil rights era of the 60s and early 70s, John pastored the leading white Baptist congregation in a mixed neighborhood in a town that was highly resistant to integration. He always made it clear he believed in racial justice and reconciliation. He was called the usual names. He had crosses burned on his lawn. Lots of people would have given up, shaken the dust of that town off their feet and gone somewhere else. But John stayed. He raised his children in that town. He sent them to public schools. He made friends with the black ministers and did everything he could to get people to talk with one another about their dreams for their community. Along the way he married and buried and baptized. They realized over time that he genuinely loved them. And in the process he earned the right to be heard. I asked him once how he
decided how much to confront, what to say and when to say it. He answered “We’ve already had one savior. Before you crawl up on a cross, make sure it’s for the salvation of the world.” At the time I thought he was making excuses. Looking back I realize he was taking the long view. Once toward the end of his ministry the woman who’d been his secretary all those years told him “Pastor, I’ve decided you’re right about this,” meaning his stand on racial reconciliation. When he told me that I realized how that one sentence told him with her at least he’d done what he set out to do.

That said, clearly there are times when we must speak. Agape love is never being a doormat. It’s not about feelings or sentimentality. The way Jesus talked about it really means “to will and to work for the well being of the ones we love.” (repeat) But again, to do that so people can hear it, love has to be clear in the way we speak. If there’s something, anything, you feel compelled to say, even though you know they won’t want to hear it, try writing it out and asking your spouse or a church leader to give you feedback before you actually say it from the pulpit. And ask yourself some test questions about what you want to say. Does this congregation truly need to hear this word at this moment? What gospel purpose will saying this serve? Will their culture allow them “ears to hear” what needs to be said? Can I say this without thunder in my voice? Do I believe better or more harm will come from saying this now? Paul never held back from confrontation when he thought he needed to do it. He precipitated a crisis in his relationship with the Corinthians confronting sin in the church. He says in Second Corinthians 2:4, “For I wrote to you out of much distress and with anguish of heart and many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.” The preacher who doesn’t say what needs to be said simply because it isn’t easy forgets that preaching isn’t supposed to be easy. The preacher who says it angry forgets that preaching is always about God’s love. Third, preaching is never about our judgmentalism. It’s always about God’s love.

Fourth, preaching as caring finds a way to address the elephant in the room, whatever that elephant happens to be. For a lot of people across the country for good or ill the elephant in the room right now happens to be Donald Trump. That didn’t come out right, did it? Let me try again. It is no part of our job as preachers to get involved in partisan politics. Taking the long view means no matter how large or small your church is there will undoubtedly be people in your congregation on both sides of the political aisle. The call of God in your life is not to tell them how to vote, no matter how much you might want to do so. You are to be everybody’s pastor regardless of who wins a particular election. If you can’t do that, then you shouldn’t be a pastor at all. What you can do in a political season like the one we have coming up this next year, is make sure your people take seriously their obligations as citizens. Talk regularly about Christian values. Remind them the government we get is ultimately exactly the government we deserve. It’s the one we choose with our votes. And use your preaching to highlight enduring Biblical values: the way we treat the poor, the widow, the orphan, stranger in the land; the stewardship of creation; the health of our own families; the way we treat those incarcerated; the care of those who are sick. Remember in Matthew 25 those are the criteria Jesus uses to separate the sheep from the goats. You can spend a career preaching about just those things whether it happens to be a political season or not.

Often, though, the crisis on everybody’s minds may be something very different. It’s spring, so the floods are here again. Parts of some of your parishes have been under water. Lots of folks are exhausted
and stressed and worried about how and whether they can recover. Prom and graduation season are upon us. I pray God it doesn’t happen, but every year preachers across the Midwest have to deal with the aftermath of tragic death as young people drink too much or drive carelessly. And suddenly a celebrating community is plunged into mourning. The one thing you cannot do on a morning like that is pretend nothing happened. People don’t come to church that morning for the next episode in your riveting series on Nehemiah. It’s not a bad idea at all to have notes for a comfort sermon or two in your file just so you have something to start from when tragedy strikes and you need to switch gears on short notice. It’s also important to remember how personal these events can be for you and me. When it’s a kid we know, or the storm hits people in the church, you’re likely to just as upset as anybody else. But you’re the one who has to speak. It’s good to have a starter on the shelf for just such an event.

Twice in my pastoral career we were hit by big emergencies that no one could have predicted and that had to be addressed. In 1989 we were serving a church on the shores of San Francisco Bay when the big earthquake hit the city. And then in 2001 I was getting ready for Tuesday staff meeting at church when the first plane hit the World Trade Center. Obviously I can’t tell you exactly what to say in such a situation because every crisis by definition is different. But there are a few things I can say. First, never blame such a crisis on sin. That’s God’s prerogative not yours. God will let us know when it’s a judgment. The most serious mistake I made in my post-911 sermon was consigning the hijackers to hell. It was certainly an honest expression of how I felt that Sunday morning. My guess is most of America felt that way. But even when you and I are pretty sure we know what God would say about a given individual, judgment is for God alone. And then, along with that, never make the mistake of thinking people in crisis want to hear a long sermon. They don’t. They never do. What they want to hear, what in fact they desperately need to hear is comfort. Affirmation of the goodness of God and hope for a better future. And then give them something specific they can do. People want to help. That Sunday of 911, I suggested people who had a Muslim neighbor might call their neighbor up or drop by to let them know we Christians didn’t hold them accountable, that we didn’t believe it was their fault. After a crisis look for where good things are happening and find ways to help your people jump on board. Fourth, whatever it is, always look for a healthy way to address the elephant in the room.

Fifth, and finally, (I hear those cheers in the back of the room) we go back to Barth and his point about the necessity of modesty in the preacher’s understanding. An essential part of building caring into our preaching is recognizing our limitations.

Most important here is the limitation of preaching itself. By its very nature preaching is one way communication. I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard a preacher, even this preacher, put into a sermon what they really wanted and needed to say to one specific family or member. That’s not good communication. That’s a passive aggressive attack. If it needs saying to that person at all, it probably needs saying to them one to one. They deserve the courtesy of your honesty. And they deserve the courtesy of you doing that without doing it in front of the whole church. An important byproduct of taking that communication out of the pulpit and putting it in the realm of a pastoral visit or a meeting over coffee is that in person you and I are likely to be much more careful about what we say and how we say it. It’s easy to convince ourselves we’re on the side of the angels when we’ve clothed our point in the piety of the pulpit. It’s much harder to do that when you or I have to face the person we want to
confront while we do it. If someone needs confronting and you have good reason to believe it won’t be heard or won’t be safe to confront that person one on one, then take an elder or deacon with you. But never do it in front of the whole church the guise of a sermon. They’ll know what you’re doing, and they’ll respect you less, not more.

Another reality of pastoral care in preaching is that we can never expect the church to do what we ask them to do if we’re not willing to put skin in the game by doing what we’re asking ourselves. Back when we went to that first little church in the Kentucky bluegrass I was, I think, somewhat stupider and a whole lot more agile than I am now. One of the things I realized fairly quickly was that the building was suffering from some benign neglect. Several maintenance things just weren’t being done. One particular item was that the church bell couldn’t be rung because no one had been willing to climb up on the church roof and grease it. The roof was steep and the bell was rusted. So of course one Saturday morning early on I found myself crab crawling up the roof toward the belfry with a can of grease, terrified, while Sheryl stood on the ground below holding a safety rope and muttering imprecations on the idiocy of males as a gender and me in particular. Somewhere about halfway up the roof I decided she was absolutely right. But somehow I managed to live through that. And they got the idea that caring for God’s house really was something I at least took seriously.

Whether it’s visiting prospects or taking time for your family or tithing to the church, whatever it is, even if it’s greasing the bell, if you plan to ask them to do it, make sure they first know you’re willing to do it yourself.

And the last thing might go without saying, but I’m going to say it anyway. Never make the mistake of thinking you know how to do this well enough you don’t need any feedback. My best friend in the ministry is a pastor in Knoxville, Tennessee. He’s almost my age, but he still sends me a sermon from time to time to see if I have any suggestions. I sent him these presentations to get his feedback before I inflicted them on you. My sisters and brothers, if you and I are called to preach the Word, we are also called always to be looking and listening for ways to do it better. I do not mean copying the TV preachers or trying to be somebody you’re not. You’re the one God sent to your church. God believes you can do it. But God also knows you’re not perfect. So get feedback any way you can. Ask your spouse. Ask your children. Let them know you’re always willing to hear any suggestion they have. Give feedback forms to your deacons and ask for their critiques. Video your sermon and send a copy to your kindly old preaching professor. He or she will be flattered that you still care what they think. And listen to what the congregation says on their way out of church. Mostly it’ll just be politeness. But every now and then you’ll learn something important about yourself, about the way your preaching is perceived, maybe even about the gospel itself.

And that my sisters and brothers is all I have for you. Before you jump in your cars though, let’s have one more brief discussion. Get in groups of three again and talk for just a couple of minutes about what you see as the most important pastoral care issue your church faces this spring. What is it, and how do you think you could address it?