

The Other Side of Sermon Illustration

John McClure

Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

Most preachers have a list of “dos” and “don’ts: for illustrating sermons, things like:

Never use illustrations that swallow up sermons.

Never use illustrations simply because they are so good they just have to be used.

Never exegete illustrations.

Avoid sentimental, “Reader’s Digest” illustrations.

Save “dress rehearsal” illustrations until the end of sermons.

The list goes on and on.

Sermon illustrations function in three important ways.

First, illustrations function *semantically*. They illustrate what we “mean” and help the congregation to understand and interpret what we are saying. We correlate an illustration with an idea, point, “move” or theme in the sermon which needs to be better understood by our hearers. Used in this way, the illustration becomes an *example* of a particular thought.

In the second place, illustrations function *imaginatively*. We know that the mind of the listener is not only a classroom where meanings are shared and information disseminated, it is also a picture gallery of images and symbols. Illustrations can enable the congregation to *see* (image) invisible theological truths embedded in the concrete realities of their own experience. And so we craft illustrations not only as examples, but as images which enable our listeners to see, or to imagine what cannot be described or exemplified.

The third way that illustrations function is *culturally*. In each illustration the congregation hears their own common experience “referred to.” They hear of grocery stores and political debates and garage sales and mowing lawns. We use illustrations to add verisimilitude and cultural particularity to our message. We are convinced that “if I’m going to communicate I’ve got to make it relevant.” Used in this way, illustrations become a way of legitimating what is said by rooting it in a culture that is common to the congregation.

But sermon illustrations don’t simply legitimate our message for the day. They also legitimate the culture to which they refer. If we turn “the illustration” over and look at its underside, we begin to see that illustrations are part of a larger, often unconscious cultural strategy in preaching in which they serve the purpose of both generating and legitimating an entire message-system or *culture* within the community of sermon-hearers.

Over time, what people hear through sermon illustrations is a culture being generated, validated, legitimized, and made into a norm. Through the repetition of various pieces of human experience, usually rendered in the same way, illustrations contribute to a cultural image which our preaching cultivates in

group consciousness - and thus in the community as a whole.

Let me "illustrate" what I mean. A few years ago, I asked a friend and his wife why they had not chosen to attend a church nearby, which they had attended for about a year before we moved to town. They said, in effect, that the preacher's sermons were too authoritarian, conservative, and impersonal. Since my wife and I had just moved to town and were looking for a church to attend we went to this church for about a month. We both found his preaching manner to be dialogic, his theological and political themes to be liberal, and his sense of personal and pastoral concerns from the pulpit to be very sound.

After worshipping there for two more months, however, we too began to feel the same way about this preacher's sermons. I decided, therefore, to pay closer attention to his illustrations. I found that many of his illustrations were taken from the cultures of the military, sports, and the career ladder (thus accounting for the perception that he was authoritarian), or from his past profession as a lawyer and successful businessman (thus accounting for the "conservative" perception). He generally avoided the cultures of family life, psychology, interpersonal relationships, and personal self-disclosure entirely (thus, perhaps, accounting for the perception that he was impersonal). Unconsciously, the "culture" in which he was rooting his equalitarian, liberal, and relational ideas was creating a message-system of its own which worked at cross-purposes to his theology, his style, and the thematic content of his preaching.

Every sermon is culturally "coded." It is not only through illustrations that the cultural "code" of a sermon is produced. Any time a sermon draws on authorities, appeals to certain norms of behavior or attitude, or introduces a brief image or cliché from common cultural parlance, it is building up this code in preaching. For instance, whenever one of my seminary students launches into an exegetical flourish in preaching, appealing to "John's theology of the Cross" or the "passion narratives and ethical discourses" the whole culture of Seminary life drifts into my mind's eye and hovers around the thematic content with which he or she is wrestling. In the same way, when I heard a preacher in a small rural church recently say "the woman spoke to me out of the blue, like the Coke machine over at the Convenience Store does," an image of the culture of those who in such towns frequent convenience stores came vividly to mind. Each of these references has two-way legitimating power. On the one hand, they legitimate the preacher's message. On the other hand, they legitimate the culture to which they refer, and through synonymic repetition they generate a culture-in-consciousness which defines and delimits the culture of the hearer.

Over a period of time, if you train your ear to listen carefully enough for this larger cultural dimension in preaching, you will begin to hear a *cultural stereotype* in the making. You will hear a limited and often stifling mixture of common opinions which it is tacitly assumed we all share. You will find yourself weekly wading into a tiny pool of received ideas and attitudes, in which you are being asked to set afloat your faith.

At the heart of this stereotype is an *ideology*. Within this cultural stereotype is a set of social, class, intellectual, and political assumptions. This is, indeed, the *far side* of the illustration. Hidden within the illustrative program

of any preaching ministry is an ideological agenda - one which may be working contrary to the preacher's own personal views. Culture is that powerful.

To train yourself to hear stereotype and ideology in illustrations try this exercise. Take one of those "1001 Illustrations" books, most of which contain famous illustrations from the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Read a few of them out loud on cassette tape. Then go back and listen to them. You will find it easy from this distance to hear the unique cultural "code" which they produce. You should be able to list cultural stereotypes and to enumerate the class assumptions, and the intellectual, theological, sociological, and political assumptions that were roughly common to that cultural and historical epoch.

There is substantial legitimating power in this stereotypical and ideological "culture" in preaching. There is something subtle and almost hypnotic about it. It is a powerful message-system that could and should be analyzed and utilized more self-consciously in preaching.

I suggest that we need to do a "cultural inventory" of our preaching about once every two years, in much the same way that J.R. Nichols suggests that we do an "idea inventory."¹ It may be very revealing to see if our "ideas" and the "culture" in which we seek to root those ideas are in any way commensurate or even complimentary.

Once we have isolated the dominant cultural messages we are sending in our illustrations we can subject them to theological critique. We may discover the need to reshape the cultural "code" in our preaching altogether - to strategize ways to reshape the entire "culture" *in*, and ultimately *for* our preaching. Part of this strategy may include the occasional use of irony or even satire in how we render certain illustrations. This is one way to reveal or unmask ideological perspectives and work to relativize or neutralize cultural assumptions or stereotypes that are contrary to our theological agenda.

The important thing to remember is that sermon illustrations are serious business. They are not just harmless tactical devices to help us "communicate" ideas. They generate a large part of the cultural "code" in our preaching. Over time, they produce and legitimate a culture-in-consciousness which may be as theologically significant as the ideas and images we seek to promote. For this reason, our illustrations should be critically examined from time to time, and used consciously and carefully.

NOTE

¹ J. Randall Nichols, *Building the Word* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 135.