

## **Sunday Preaching that Impacts Monday Living**

A Seminar at the LCI Conference on Worship

First UMC

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Welcome to the workshop, “Sunday Preaching that Impacts Monday Living.” My name is Don Cummings. I am the senior pastor of Mayfield United Methodist Church in Chesterland, Ohio which is in the greater Cleveland area. I am in my 21<sup>st</sup> year as the pastor of this congregation which will celebrate its 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2010. In many ways, we are a typical small, rural congregation that Cleveland grew out to. The church had been at its third location for many years when, in 1947, it burned completely to the ground. In the shadow of the Second World War, and on the cusp of the post war economic boom no one at that time knew how to anticipate, the congregation had no greater vision than to exactly replicate the building they had lost in the fire. Yes, there was talk of relocating a fourth time, but it was quickly dismissed as unnecessary. So, even though they were surrounded at that time by acres and acres of vacant land, they stayed put on an acre and a half lot and proudly opened their new one room building in 1949. It was composed of a sanctuary on the ground level, and a fellowship hall and two classrooms in the basement. It was a decision that would literally haunt them for fifty years.

Within just a couple of years of reconstruction, the expansion of Cleveland toward the rapidly developing eastern suburbs was in full sway and Mayfield Village, which is where the church was located, mushroomed overnight. During the growth boom of the 1950’s and 60’s they must have had people hanging from the rafters because I cannot for the life of me picture where they put all the people in worship and Sunday School that were reported in the year-end conference report. I’ve been told that in the 50’s and 60’s there was some creative accounting going on in those year-end reports, but there is no denying that the community was growing by leaps and bounds, and so was the congregation. By the early 1970’s the church finally got serious about an addition that created an imposing façade but only gained four new children’s classrooms, two youth rooms, and one adult classroom. It was too little too late. By the early 1980’s they were struggling again with a building decision. They contemplated building a new sanctuary, but instead remodeled the old one and added a new fellowship hall and office suite. I was appointed to the church in 1985 and by 1990 the talk in the hallways and parking lot about our too-crowded building was bubbling to the surface again.

I mention all this because I want you to understand where I am coming from in this workshop. I want you to understand that the bulk of my ministry at Mayfield has been dominated by infrastructure issues. In 1991 Loren Mead rudely announced to the world that Christendom was dead. The religious infrastructure that had dominated the western world since the time of Constantine was in the final stages of its demise. It was also in 1991 that I met Bill Easum, and church could never be the same again. The comfortable spiritual infrastructure of a church by itself, of itself, and for itself died a terrible and ugly death. In 1994 we did a self study that only poured more fuel on the facilities fire that still lay smoldering in the fifteen minutes between three Sunday morning worship

services and six Christmas Eve services. We reluctantly concluded that our physical infrastructure was obsolete and beyond rescuing at least for the ministry we felt called to as a congregation. The next ten years were consumed by planning meetings, architectural design discussions, church conference votes, building and zoning conflicts, hostile political processes, internal dissension and strife, two capital stewardship campaigns and a partridge in a pear tree. Well, not really. There was a lot of grieving over leaving a community that had been the only geographic home every living member the church had ever known. During this time I had to learn how to be things seminary never trained me to be. I had to retool to do ministry in a different way than it had ever been done in the mainline church in America. But two years ago this Easter we moved into a brand new center for ministry on a thirty acre campus five miles and across a county line from where we had been. We had the privilege of designing the building from the ground up in ways that would help us accomplish our mission as a congregation. Completely redesigning our physical infrastructure is having a powerful and positive affect on everything else we do. Every part of the building supports every aspect of our ministry and our mission. Our worship center is state of the art with all the bells and whistles that we think are necessary to communicate the Gospel today: rear projection screens, theatrical lighting, a great sound system, a completely flexible platform that allows for maximum variety in how we present worship, the capacity to do drama, liturgical dance, video clips, have a 185 Vacation Bible School kids on the platform all at one time with room to spare—the whole nine yards. We've got it.

But now, here's the deal, having done all of these things, having moved through all these trials and tribulations, transitions and transformations, having had to learn to do church and be church in a 21<sup>st</sup> century New Testament Acts 2 kind of way, you know what it's still all about? It's still all about the story. I think it really matters that our infrastructures are up to date. It really does. In my part of the country most of our Methodist churches were built before the invention of the automobile and they still conduct themselves as if that revolution in transportation had never happened.

But if our infrastructures don't help us do a better job of telling the story, our infrastructures aren't worth crap. And that's biblical. Paul says in Philip. 3:8 (MsgB)"

Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life.  
Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand,  
everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've  
dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ

If our infrastructures don't help us do a better job of telling the story, they're meaningless. Because in the end, the Christian church exists to tell the story. We've got to tell it in ways that people in our culture can hear it so they can respond to it, but the point is we've got to tell it. That's what we're in business to do.

Andy Stanley says that our greatest challenge in today's culture is to make church irresistible. Why? Because Jesus is irresistible. Look at the people in his own time. They either loved him or hated him, but they couldn't be neutral about him. Church

needs to be THE place to be on Sunday mornings. When people leave church they ought to be saying, “Man, I can hardly wait to come back next week! This place is so exciting. It is so . . . revolutionary. I learn and experience things here that I can’t find anywhere else . . . things that change my life.”

And that brings us to “Sunday Preaching that Impacts Monday Living.” If there is no connection for people between what they hear and experience on Sunday morning and how they face life on Monday morning, then honestly we ought to give them their money back and deeply apologize to them for wasting their time. But we didn’t come here to learn how to make better apologies to people for wasting their time on Sunday morning. We came here to strengthen our ability to help people make the connection between the living Christ and their way of living.

Every Sunday people need to hear in some way or another that God created us for himself, that we decided to move out on God, that he continues to seek us until we “find” him, and when we do find him, we begin to live the fullness of life God created us for. And he does this for us through his son Jesus Christ who came to prove God’s love for us and save us from the path we are on. As we begin to change the path we are on, life begins to change. Family gets better. Work gets better. Love gets better. Fun gets better. I get better. Life gets better.

In a nutshell that’s our story. How do we tell it on Sunday morning in ways that will impact people’s lives on Monday morning?

Church becomes irresistible when you and I as preachers and worship planners consistently hit a double off the wall Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. Jim Griffiths, who was one of the original team members with Bill Hybels and Nancy Beach when they started out in the youth ministry that became Willow Creek, says the most important contribution that a senior must make to his staff and congregation is to be able to do that—to hit a double off the wall every Sunday. Doesn’t have to be a home run. Home runs are great. We ought to strive for them. Every senior pastor needs to preach a home run a couple times a year at least. But every Sunday the senior pastor has got to be able to hit a double off the wall. Preaching that is consistently high quality. Jim says none of this hopping on the internet and downloading a sermon on Saturday night. And he says you can’t be about the business of preaching sermonettes for Christianettes. That just won’t cut it.

Now, what makes high quality preaching? It isn’t the preparation, although preparation is very important, and most of us don’t do enough of it. It isn’t the delivery, although delivery is also very important. But we all know that we can prepare well, and we can have a great delivery and still strike out. Here’s what makes consistent high quality preaching. It’s preaching that connects. We can have been at every practice during the week. We can have a perfect stance at the batter’s box. We can have perfect form when we swing the bat, but if we don’t connect with the ball we’ve just stirred up a bunch of air. But if we consistently hit a double off the wall, week after week we’ll just keep driving runs in to home.

Now how do we connect? Some one said years ago that to be effective in our preaching we have to answer the questions people are asking. A lot of preaching may be theologically and historically correct, even interesting, but it is irrelevant if it doesn't address the questions people are actually struggling with. What we say on Sunday has to help people on Monday.

I'm not saying anything new. We know this. Yet most of us entered the ministry trained to fail in communicating the gospel to normal folks. Most of us came out of seminary better prepared to be a professor of theology than to be a preacher to business people or harried parents. And our preaching has often provided too much evidence of this.

As long ago as 1967 Reuel Howe in his book *Partners in Preaching* reported on a study he conducted with lay people asking them for their response to sermons they had just heard. Their complaints are all too familiar:

1. Sermons often contain too many ideas that come too fast and are so complex that it is impossible to hold them in mind long enough to relate them to the meaning of their lives.
2. Sermons have too much analysis and too little answer. A common response was, "Why do you preachers give 18 minutes of analysis on human needs and only two minutes on the gospel in relation to the need?"
3. Sermons are too formal and impersonal. The lack of personal urgency in preaching conveys the impression that the minister is not dealing with life-and-death issues. There is a longing on the part of laity for the preacher to give an honest, intelligent, passionate, personal presentation of Christian conviction rather than the coldly rational, dispassionate presentation of objective truth.
4. Preachers assume that laity have a greater knowledge and understanding of biblical and theological lore and language than they actually do. Laity complained that many of the words and concepts used in preaching were meaningless to them.
5. Sermons are too propositional; they contain too few illustrations and too often the illustrations that are used are too literary and not helpful. The laity Howe interviewed said they would like preachers to use more illustrations from life, the kind that would really light up for them aspects of their daily life. Preachers are too occupied with the past, with theories of life, and with the traditional. One layman said, "I'm sick and tired of being talked to as if I were a Corinthian."
6. Too many sermons simply reach a dead end and give no guidance to commitment and action. It's preaching that goes nowhere and relates to nothing in life. Some of the comments by laity on this issue were: "You talk about love as if there were no people hating each other." "You talk about justice as if the world wasn't

tearing itself apart.” It’s all very well to tell us that God is love, but what does that mean to me, living as I do in the tangle of hostility that is part of my work.”

Less than one third of the laity who participated in Reuel Howe’s study were able to make a clear statement of the sermon’s central question and the “answer” that it offered.

Whish. Strike one.

Whish. Strike two.

Whish. Strike three.

You’re out preacher.

How do we connect? How do we hit a double off the wall? Every sermon has a central question that arises out of real life, stays focused on that question, communicates the gospel’s answer in terms that are understandable, memorable, and persuasive, and concludes with clear, achievable action steps for people to put into practice in their life.

If we give them real help, if we give them real hope, if we give them a real hand in how to live their faith, they’ll be back. And we can do this if we know how to pitch the gospel so that it hits within people’s strike zone. See in the end, we preachers aren’t the batters. We’re the pitchers. And we want to pitch pitches that our laity can hit. Our aim is not to strike them out. We want to get them on base. And we want to move them around the bases and get them home just as many times as we possible can. But we won’t do this if we’re throwing too wide or too high or too low. We want to get them on base, so we want to throw them balls they can connect with and hit.

But there’ll be some people who will never take a swing. They’ll stand at the plate Sunday after Sunday, and you’ll throw them one great pitch after another and they’ll never take a swing. But even for these kind of folks there is a sure fire way to get them on base. You know what it is? You hit them with the ball. You just knock them on the noggin and the umpire makes them go to first base.

Jesus did that to people a lot. He did it by telling parables. Someone has described a parable as a smart bomb that harmlessly penetrates a person’s psych before it explodes. Sometimes we’ve got to preach like that too.

Here’s what I mean. Reuel Howe puts it this way. On every preaching occasion the preacher brings to the congregation both the traditions of the faith and his or her experiences of contemporary life. Every preacher has discovered certain meanings . . .

The aim of preaching is to achieve a meeting of the meanings. A dialogue between the meanings of the listener and the meanings of the preacher in such a way as the meanings of the laity are enlightened by the meanings of the faith tradition and contemporary life.

Relate pg. 53 marked para to the jewel of the worship service. The first half needs to accomplish what the preacher can't: to provoke the listener to reflect on his or her own tradition and contemporary life so that he or she is an active listener, an active participant in the sermon when the preacher preaches.

One of the most effective ways to achieve a meeting of the meanings is to use common metaphors that are readily understood by almost everyone. Let me give you five examples that I have used in the past few years:

The compass series (How do I find my way in life?)  
Surviving the Storms of Life (How do I survive life's hard places?)  
Monsters Inc (How do I overcome my fears and demons?)  
The Disciple (How do I win a place on God's team?)  
Faith in the City (How can I be an effective Christian in a secular world?)

Divide into groups of three and share with each other one double off the wall you have hit in the past six months.

Both the preacher and the listener bring meanings to the preaching event. Each of our meanings are shaped by the same two streams of influence, although these streams themselves are different for each person. Our meanings are shaped and formed by our tradition and our experience of contemporary life. Within each person, to one degree or another, there is an internal dialogue that takes place between whatever tradition we have received and our ongoing experience of life in the present. Our tradition causes us to reflect on life in certain ways and assign certain meanings to our experiences.

Howe diagrams this process this way: p.49

Sunday preaching that impacts Monday living happens when there is a true meeting of meanings. When my meanings as the preacher, formed by my careful study of the Bible and our faith tradition and my own experience and observation of contemporary life, intersect—even collide—with the meanings that my people bring with them, attitudes, behavior, lives are impacted and transformed.

This intersection, this meeting of meanings doesn't just happen. In fact there are a lot of barriers that work to prevent it from happening. Reuel Howe points to the natural ambivalence that exists in both the preacher and the listener about wanting to know and be known, hear and be heard, and yet not wanting know and be known or hear and be heard. And on top of our ambivalence there are also the emotive barriers of defensiveness, anxieties, and differences. And on top of those are the cognitive barriers of language and images.

Diagram, p. 58.

We can come to the plate on Sunday morning well prepared with respect to knowing our faith traditions and contemporary life, well sensitized to our people's faith tradition and contemporary life, but if we haven't also given careful thought to how to overcome the barriers to communication, to the meeting of our meanings, our Sunday preaching isn't going to impact our people's Monday living.

How do we overcome these barriers? We work constantly to translate and interpret biblical principles into language and images our people can connect with. We overcome cognitive barriers by using contemporary English, not King James, by employing thought forms that are relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture, not 18<sup>th</sup> century western European culture, and by using the heart language—the music—that our people relate to best. We overcome emotive barriers basically by disarming them. Someone has defined a parable as a spiritual truth that sneaks up behind you and makes its point before you have the chance to throw up your defenses. The classic example of this is Nathan and David. Nathan told David about how one of his subjects who had many sheep connived to steal the one ewe lamb from his poor neighbor. David burned with righteous indignation and condemned the thief. Then Nathan threw the switch: “You are that man, David. You are. You did this. You have condemned yourself.” This was the encounter that finally brought David to account before the Lord and led to his repentance and rehabilitation.

I'll tell you, when we can overcome the cognitive and emotive barriers to the meeting of meanings, people will not have any ambivalence about church. They will want to be there because church will be adding value to their life week after week.

Preaching that connects people with the gospel happens when there is a confluence between the meanings the listeners bring to the preaching event and the meanings the preacher brings.

Howe Quotes:

Partners in Preaching:

Preaching “is a two way give-and-take; it is a partnership. In dialogical preaching we need the question and the answer. The question awaits the answer, and the answer needs the guidance of the question. The preacher is, so to speak, master-of-ceremonies in the dialogue between the question and the answer.

“The responsibilities of the laity in this exchange are the same as those of the preacher. They, too, are to listen and observe as they live in order to formulate their questions and insights. The secrets and the powers of life become available to people who learn to live reflectively. They see meaning in the various issues that come up in their business and family life, in community relations, in civic and social responsibilities, even in leisure. People who live without discerning meaning in their lives contribute little, if anything, to the preaching encounter; they bring little conscious meaning to it, they receive little in

return—and there is nothing that a preacher can do in twenty minutes to change the situation. An unreflective and, therefore, unprepared people can have as disastrous effect on a preaching encounter as an unprepared preacher, because they are not able to take part in the church's preaching.” (p.53)