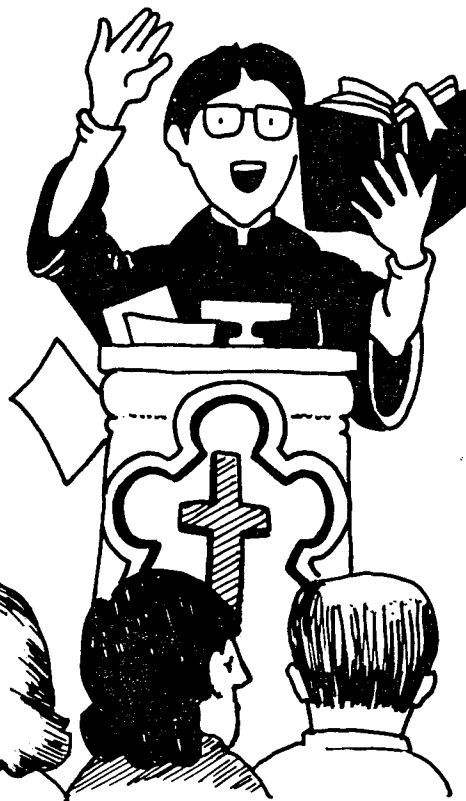


Getting the Message

By David Myers and John Shaughnessy



the maximum benefit from what we hear?

Effective communication is, of course, a composite of several things: a significant thought cast in a memorable form, skillful oration, and listeners who are ready to hear the word. Our concern here is neither with theological content nor with oratorical style but with how to create and receive a memorable, persuasive message. Recent research has revealed five keys to doing so.

1. Vivid Examples

Vivid, concrete examples are more potent than abstract information. Many recent experiments have found that our judgments and attitudes are more swayed by specific illustrations than by abstract assertions of general truth. Since this statement is itself an abstract assertion, let's look at some concrete examples.

Research studies show that a few good testimonials usually have more impact than statistically summarized data from dozens of people. Not surprisingly, then, the mastectomies performed on Betty Ford and Happy Rockefeller did more to increase visits to cancer detection clinics than all the reports of the National Institutes of Health. Likewise, viewing the movie *Jaws* gave many swimmers a fear of sharks which no factual data on actual shark attacks could eliminate.

Concrete examples are not only more compelling, they are also better remembered. Joanne Martin and her colleagues at Stanford University have observed that *concepts* are also better remembered when concrete details are included. They had Coast Guard recruits read one of the following paragraphs and then write everything they could recall from it. Those who read an abstract description of what happens when a Coast Guard regulation is broken recalled only 27 percent of the words afterwards:

If a new Seaman Apprentice breaks a Coast Guard regulation, and this frequently happens, then he usually gets caught. If he gives serious personal excuses for what he did, then the Executive Officer usually will not accept such excuses. Executive Officers usually refer the matter to mast. Usually in these cases the defendant is found guilty. If the new Seaman Apprentice is found guilty, then he will be sentenced with a variety of punishments.

mons sometimes have surprisingly little impact. Crawford and his associates went to the homes of people from 12 parishes shortly before and after they heard sermons opposing racial bigotry and injustice. When asked, during the second interview, whether they had heard or read anything about racial prejudice or discrimination since the previous interview, only 10 percent spontaneously recalled the sermon. When the remaining 90 percent were asked directly whether their priest "talked about prejudice or discrimination in the last couple of weeks," more than 30 percent denied hearing such a sermon. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the sermons had no impact on racial attitudes.

When you stop to think about it, the preacher has so many hurdles to surmount it's no wonder that preaching so often fails to affect our actions. As Figure 1 indicates, the preacher must deliver a message which not only gets our attention but is also understandable, persuasive, memorable, and likely to compel action. What factors make for memorable, effective communications? How might ministers and teachers apply these factors in the construction of more potent messages? What can we lay people do to receive

A young couple, Martha and Leon, happily file out from Sunday worship at the St. Andrews Church, congratulating the Rev. Jones for his fine message on Christian love. Later that week, Martha's friend Sally, who was ill on Sunday, asks her about the sermon. Martha is embarrassed to admit that while she remembers being impressed by the sermon, she can recall little of its content. Perhaps, she surmises, she is just upset and distracted by how unloving Leon has been lately.

Is this scene typical or atypical of the impact of sermons? Those of us who are teachers or preachers become so easily enamored of our spoken words that we are tempted to overestimate their power. Ask college students what aspect of their college experience has been most valuable or what they remember from their freshman year, and few will recall the brilliant lectures which we faculty members remember giving.

Would the same be true of parishioners reflecting on their church experiences? A recent award-winning study by University of California psychologist Thomas Crawford indicates that ser-

Social psychologist David Myers and experimental psychologist John Shaughnessy are professors at Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

Other recruits read a concrete instance of this information:

Robert Christensen, a new Seaman Apprentice, reported for duty on the CG Cutter Seagull two days late. His excuse for being late was that his father had become seriously ill while he was visiting home. The Executive Officer did not accept his excuse. He referred the matter to mast. Seaman Apprentice Christensen was found guilty and sentenced to one month extra duty, a \$50 fine each month for two months, and one month restriction.

Those given this anecdotal paragraph not only recalled almost twice as many words as those given the abstract paragraph, they also were about twice as likely to recall concepts such as "found guilty."

No experienced writer will be surprised by this finding. As William Strunk and E. B. White assert in their classic, *The Elements of Style*,

If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point, it is on this: the surest way to arouse and hold the attention of the reader is by being specific, definite, and concrete. The greatest writers—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare—are effective largely because they deal in particulars. . . .

Preachers should do the same, and so should we listeners, by conjuring up our own examples when the preacher begins to get abstract.

A sermon is, however, never just a string of unrelated examples; the preacher aims to communicate a basic point. We might say that theological truth is to a good sermon what the base of an iceberg is to its tip. Jesus' vivid parables, for example, embodied basic truths in memorable pictures. What pastor has not received compliments from adults for a simple, but concrete, children's sermon? The children may have been unable to grasp the analogy being drawn, but the adults got it and remembered it. This illustrates the power of principle number one: vivid, concrete examples are more potent than abstract information.

2. Familiar Examples

Messages which relate to what people already know or have experienced are most easily remembered. Public speaking experts have long supposed this to be true—Aristotle urged speakers to adapt the message to their audiences. Experimental psychologists have confirmed the point; messages that are unrelated to people's existing ideas or experiences are difficult to comprehend and quickly forgotten. This paragraph, from an experiment by John Bransford and Marcia Johnson, is an example of such a message:

The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. . . . After the procedure is completed, one arranges the materials into different groups again. Then they can be put into their proper places. Eventually they will be used once more and the whole cycle will then have to be repeated. However, that is a part of life.

When Bransford and Johnson had

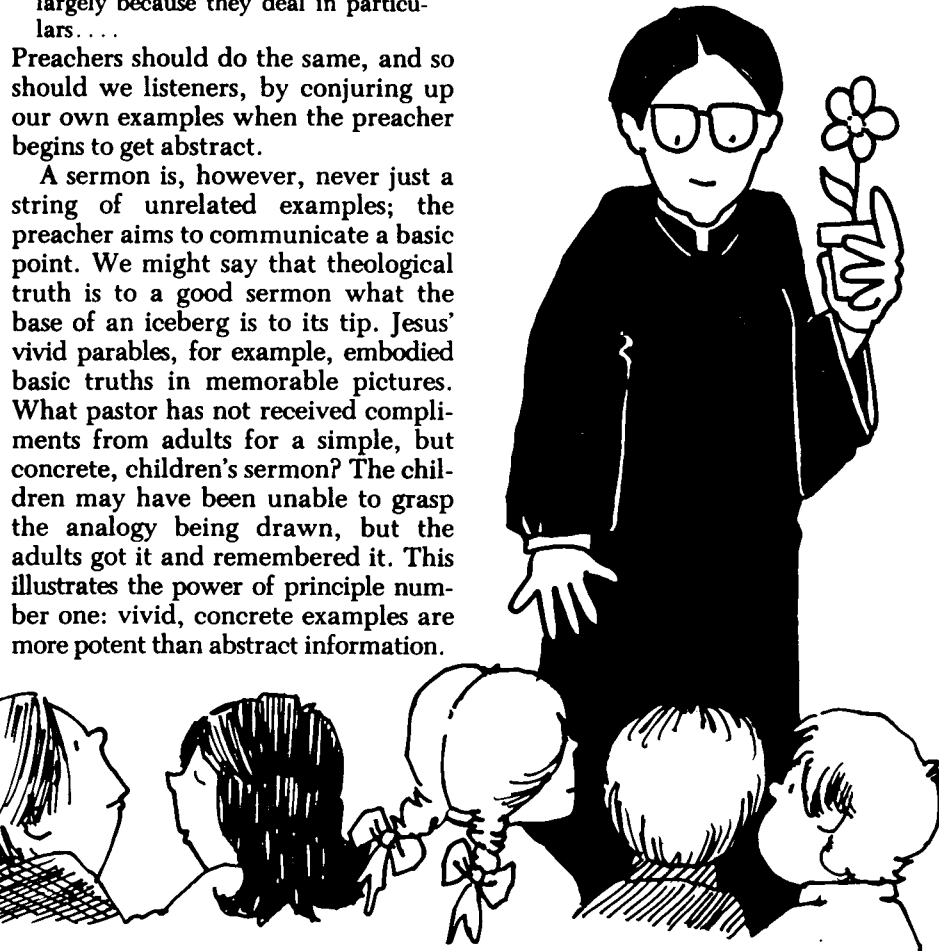
people read this paragraph as you just did—without connecting it to anything they already knew about—little of it was remembered. When people were told that the paragraph was about washing clothes (something familiar to them), they remembered much more of it—as you probably could now if you reread it.

When a message builds upon our knowledge and experience we not only more easily understand and remember it, we are also more likely to recall it when that knowledge or experience comes again into consciousness. In other words, a message that is "hooked" to some cue—something we will again think about or experience—is more likely to come to mind in the future. When the cue pops up, it may call to mind the message associated with it. For example, one preacher criticized much of American religion as like waiting-room Muzak—bland and soothing. A year after this "Sound of Muzak" sermon was preached, we found ourselves eating dinner in a room with music softly playing in the background. Someone noticed the music—and recalled the sermon.

If preachers are to build their messages upon their parishioners' knowledge and experience, then they must know their parishioners. One advantage which local pastors should have over mass-media preachers is a more intimate knowledge of the experiences of their people. When pastors systematically seek out their parishioners for deep conversation, they are engaging in sermon preparation as well as pastoral ministry. When we parishioners freely talk to our pastors about our concerns, we help the pastors to know what sermon themes will touch us. This is another implication of principle number two: messages which relate to what people already know or have experienced are most easily remembered.

3. Spaced Repetition

Spaced repetition aids memory. As every student of human learning knows well, we remember information much better if it is presented to us repeatedly, especially if the repetitions are spaced over time rather than grouped together. Experimental psychologist Lynn Hasher has found that repeated information is also more credible. When statements, such as "the largest museum in the world is the Louvre in Paris,"



were repeatedly presented to people, they were rated as more likely to be true than when the same statements had been shown infrequently. Social psychologists have uncovered a parallel phenomenon: repeated presentation of a stimulus—be it a human face, a Chinese character, or a piece of unfamiliar music—generally increases people’s liking of it.

Preachers can capitalize upon this finding that repetition, especially spaced repetition, makes messages more memorable and appealing. When preparing a sermon they might ask themselves, what do I most want people to remember from this? They can then repeat that *one* key idea numerous times throughout the sermon. (We suspect that a little informal testing of parishioners’ recall would reveal few people who can recall the main points of the last three-point sermon they heard. Given the limitations of human memory, the advice of Henry Grady Davis appears sound: A sermon should be “the embodiment of one vigorous idea.”) Perhaps this could even be taken a step further to say that the idea should be embodied in the whole worship service—the Scriptures, music, prayers, and closing charge to the congregation. As parishioners we should look for a unifying theme, or at least identify one idea in every service that is significant for us.

Sometimes the key idea can be captured in a single statement or pithy saying that becomes the trunk of a sermon, unifying the illustrative branches which grow from it. Who can forget the refrain in Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” sermon? Principle number three therefore bears repeating: spaced repetition aids retention.

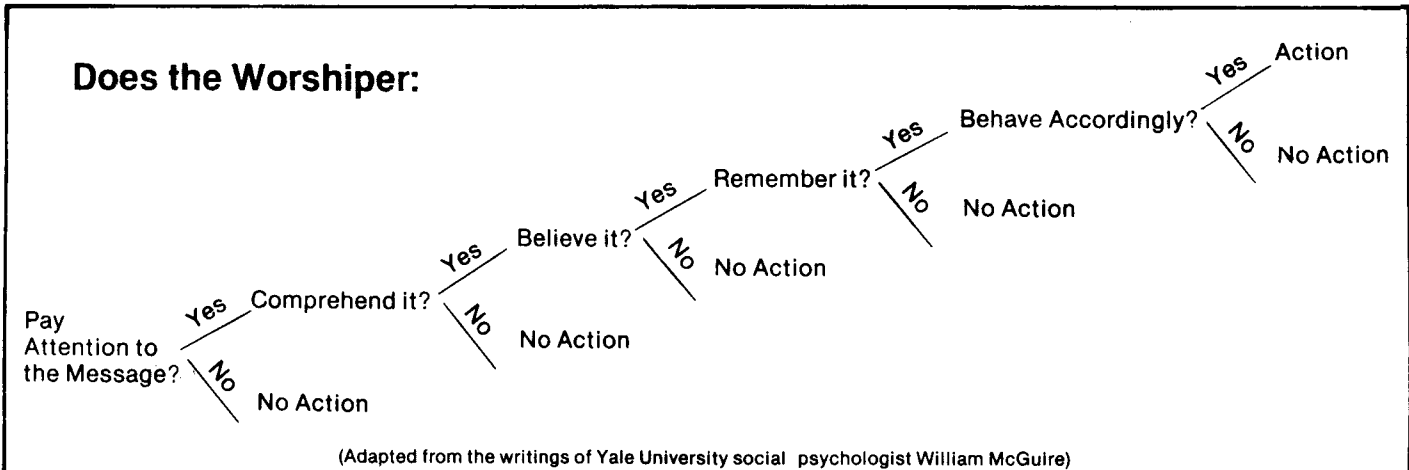


4. Active Listening

Active listening aids memory and facilitates attitude change. It is well established that people remember information best when they have actively processed it, that is, when they have put it in their own words. When we read or hear something that prompts a thought of our own, we will often more readily remember the thought than the information which prompted it. University of Toronto psychologists Norman Slamecka and Peter Graf recently found that people can more easily recall information they have produced than information they have been told to memorize. For example, people who were given the word “rapid” and were asked to produce a synonym beginning with the letter “f” later re-

membered the word “fast” better than did people asked directly to remember “fast.”

Not only do we better remember information we produce ourselves, our attitudes are also more likely to be changed by that information. For example, social psychologists have found that passive exposure to information, through reading or listening, has less effect on people’s attitudes than when they get the same information through active participation in a group discussion. Other research confirms that when we passively learn about something, our attitudes toward it usually do not change much. When we are stimulated into restating the information in our own terms, we are much more likely to remember it *and* to be persuaded by it.



Preachers, teachers, and even parents may fail to recognize that their spoken words are more prominent to them (as active speakers) than to their passive listeners. Parents are often amazed at their children's capacity to ignore them. If, instead of constant harping, the parent gently asks the child to restate the request ("Andy, what did I ask you to do?"), the child's act of verbalizing the request will often make him more aware of it. Mister Rogers, the television friend of preschoolers, applies this principle by asking a question and then saying nothing for a few moments — allowing children to answer for themselves. Preachers would be well advised to do likewise, by pausing after giving an instruction or raising a thought-provoking question.

People who run an idea through their minds are also more likely to act upon it. This is implied by research on the impact of participating in a public opinion poll, conducted by Michael Traugott and John Katosh of the University of Michigan. People who rehearse their political attitudes by participating in a pre-election survey more often act upon them by voting in the election than do people not selected for the survey. For this reason, too, sermon listeners should be provoked to repeat and restate what they hear.

We listeners can discipline ourselves to listen actively. Taking notes on the sermon, as any serious student does in class, forces us to remind ourselves of its main points. So does discussing it with someone else. William James made the point 80 years ago: "No reception without reaction, no impression without correlative expression — this is the great maxim which the teacher ought never to forget." James anticipated principle number four: active listening aids memory and facilitates attitude change.

5. Active Participation

Attitudes and beliefs are shaped by action. If social psychological research has established anything, it is that our actions influence our attitudes. Every time we act, we amplify the idea lying behind what we have done, especially when we feel some responsibility for having committed the act. In experiments, people who harm someone — by delivering electric shocks, for example

— tend to express disdain for their victim. Evil acts shape the self. So do moral acts. People who help another person often express increased liking for the one they have helped. Similarly, people who write essays advocating something they have real doubts about tend to become more sympathetic to what they have written. It seems that we are as likely to believe in what we have stood up for as to stand up for what we believe.

This principle is paralleled by the biblical idea that growth in faith is a *consequence* as well as a source of obedient action. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, we are told that full knowledge of God comes through actively *doing* the Word; faith is nurtured by discipleship. Jesus declared that whoever would *do* the will of God would know God; that he would come and dwell within those who heed what he said; and that we would find ourselves, not by passive contemplation, but by losing ourselves as we take up the cross. Over and again, the Bible teaches that the gospel power can be known only by living it.

One practical implication of this action-attitude principle is the desirability of engaging people as active participants in worship, not as mere spectators of religious theater. The public act of choosing to get out of one's seat and kneel publicly before the congregation is one clear example. When the people sing or speak responses; write their own confessions; contribute

prayer; read Scripture responsively; utter exclamations; bring their offerings forward; or sit, stand, and kneel, they have made the liturgy their own work.

The implication for preaching and teaching is clear: a message is most likely to stimulate faith development if it calls for a specific action. The effective sermon will therefore not leave people wondering what to do with it. It will suggest specific actions or it will stimulate listeners to form their own plan of action. "How will 'love your neighbor' affect you?" the preacher might ask. "Whom are you going to phone or visit this week?"

These five research-based principles for constructing a memorable and persuasive message can be wedded to a variety of preaching styles and theological orientations. Just remember:

1. Vivid, _____ examples are more potent than abstract information.
2. Messages which relate to what people already _____ and have _____ are most easily remembered.
3. Spaced _____ aids retention.
4. _____ aids memory and facilitates attitude change.
5. Attitudes and beliefs are shaped by _____.

If you really want to remember these principles, look away and repeat them in your own words. Better yet, tell someone else about them or pick out one or two and think about how you might apply them to the next message you prepare or hear. †

