

Getting folks to Look at **This and That**

Pairing opposites sharpens your homilies and increases interest

by
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Simon, do you see this woman? I came to your house and you gave me no water to wash my feet, but this woman has washed them with her tears. You gave me no embrace, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since I entered. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with perfume.”

Luke 7:44-47

This parable is not only remarkable, it is eminently memorable. Why? It has to do with the way words and concepts are tightly paired: Embrace—Kiss; Water—Tears; Oil—Perfume. With each balanced sentence, the contrast between Simon and the woman grows sharper. The use of contrast, as a rhetorical device, accomplishes two things: 1) it highlights specific details, 2) it then etches them into vivid, memorable scenes.

Effective speakers employ contrasts the way movie directors shift camera angles. Without them, a speech turns dull as a one-camera shot.

Sharpen your text

The gospel writers packed their narratives with bold contrasts:

- Zechariah hesitates, Mary says yes
- Peter buckles to pressure, Paul bucks the tide
- a Pharisee raises his hands and prays at the front of the Temple, the sinner beats his breast in the shadow of a pillar
- Martha bangs pots and pans, her sister floats on the cadence of the Lord’s intonation.

If we wish to become as effective as possible in our preaching, we would do well to invest our energy in the time-tested, rhetorical practice of contrasts.

When homily content requires a sharp, concise presentation, you’ll discover that Contrast Charlie works time-and-a-half while Marty Monotony punches out early.

Contrasts leads to New Insights

Preachers who hearken to the use of contrasts soon uncover an added dividend in the preparation process: the search for oppositions pushes the preacher into realms of human experience otherwise left unexplored. Consider the following homily excerpt:

Some folks dress their best to come to church. But take a good look at the God we're here to worship. When you take note of his naked body on the cross, it doesn't take long to realize that we're all overdressed, every one of us.

- *You need to hold your head high? Take a look at his.*
- *You got a pair of new shoes? Jesus wants you to kick them off so he can wash your feet.*
- *You had your nails done this week? Ask him to show you his—the ones that pierced His hands.*
- *Worried if your hair is combed? Ask him how those thorns are fitting today.*

It's hard to look at him, isn't it? Almost as hard as taking a look—an honest look—at ourselves.

In *De Doctrina Christiana*, the first treatise on Christian preaching, St. Augustine urged preachers to note whatever pleasing aspects of public discourse happened to draw their attention. He then suggested they analyze the method and imitate the process. In other words, if opposites *attract*, give them attention they crave.

Wishing you the best, fellow preacher! --J.S.