

The Great Permission **Sermon Starter Template**

Congratulations!

You have the great privilege and honor to preach the Word of God to a gathered community of God's people! During a sermon or homily or conversation, you'll open up a biblical text so that its shimmering truth will gather attention, and will be held to be truthful and authoritative. What a calling! What an opportunity! What a God you serve!

What You Have Here

These few reprintable pages are a simple template of questions and tasks that will help you shape sermons that take seriously an "asset-based approach," in both their content and preparation. You can use this template on almost any text, and for almost any preaching occasion.

Before You Begin

If you haven't done so already, read the book, *The Great Permission: An Asset-Based Field Guide for Congregations*. That's a good place to ground yourself in this way of thinking, planning and approaching life in general. (For a shortcut version of the book, visit [With God's Permission](#), and browse through some of the background readings there.)

The basic ideas: [An "asset" is a gift that's useful, and } "asset-based thinking" starts with the premise, "Use what God already gave you to get done what God wants."

Asset-Based Questions to Start Sermon Preparation

1. What's "the acid" in the text? (What's eating away at God's people or God's purposes?)
2. How does the text help you find what's "not useful"? (What's negative, of no account, not helpful?)
3. What are the assets of the main characters -- or ideals and challenges -- in the text? (What is useful? What capabilities are evident or hidden? What's possible?) What are the characters good at doing, for what are they good? What are the passions embedded in the people, the ideals?
4. In this text, where/how does God's grace overcome "acidity" or transform assets into actions? How does the cross of Christ become an asset for preachers and hearers?
5. With what personal "acids" and "assets" do you approach this sermon's preparation? (Yes, BOTH can be useful!)

Asset-Based Sermon-Preparation Tasks

1. Start your sermon preparation with a prayer of thanks to God about all the useful assets you can collect together for this necessary and life-changing work. They are one part of your God-given context for the sermon's crafting.
2. From your general knowledge—or from news sources—glean "what's useful for preaching" from the context of the times, the day, the world. Make a list or map of what you find.
3. As you read and interpret the text(s) on which you will preach, think how "undeserved assets or good" is evident in the text. And yes, this is another way of looking for "God's grace" in the text(s)!
4. Look again at the "theology of the cross"—the place where Christ's pain and suffering intersects with and demonstrates God's grace—as the primary context from which you will derive the most basic asset: The reason to preach, to live, to serve in the first place!
5. Visualize the assets of the place in which you will preach, thinking about useful qualities that will be available to you at the time you will be preaching. Don't overlook the moods or ambiance that will come from lighting, sound, smells, visual cues or even the weather!
6. Talk with one or more of the people to whom the sermon will be preached, asking them "asset-based" or contextual questions about the text and how it meets the lives of hearers.
7. Imagine yourself into the hearts and minds of the people who will hear this sermon. What yearnings or hopes, fears or anxieties, sorrows or sins, joys or enthusiasms will they likely bring to their hearing? (Yes, these are useful assets because God is already working to prepare their hearts to receive your sermon!)
8. As you choose quotations, allusions, references or illustrative stories, screen their content to make sure that they are actually useful—for the wisdom you hope to share or the actions you hope are engendered in the minds and heart of listeners. (Ask yourself: How or why does this supportive material take an asset-based approach?)

Strange and Wonderful Ideas About Asset-Based Sermons

1. "What's useful here?" is a question that leaps into significance as a text gives meaning to people's lives throughout the coming days. Perhaps asset-based sermons might generate asset-based living!
2. For those who use screens, projectors, visual prompts or sermon outlines as part of your normal sermon delivery, how might "an asset map" become part of the content you visualize during a sermon?

3. Every problem can be an asset—St. Paul writes about God’s strength being “made perfect in weakness”. How could that truth be part of every sermon’s construction?
4. Asset-based approaches inevitably build capacity in individuals and groups. Because of the work of God’s Spirit, you and your hearers will be changed by your preaching and your hearing. The Gospel will add to your capabilities to do God’s will wherever you find yourself during the week. Count on it!

How asset-based sermon preparation might look

The story that follows tells how one preacher approached the texts for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost (Cycle C) with assets in mind. The Gospel, Luke 16:1-13, “The Dishonest Manager,” is one of the most exciting texts in the New Testament to interpret and connect with daily living.

The Sunday:
16th Sunday after Pentecost

The Lessons:
Amos 8:4-7
Psalm 113
I Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

The Devil’s in the Details

“The Devil’s in the details.” This aphorism had stuck in Pastor Felipe Garza’s mind for years. The phrase had often arisen as a subtle condemnation of his ministry – “Why do you pay more attention to the big picture than the details, Pastor?” It seemed as though his whole ministry of Word and Sacrament was regularly skewered by these few words. Sometimes he had felt as though the cross he was bearing as pastor was more than he could carry.

The texts for 16 Pentecost didn’t help: Amos’s indictment of his contemporaries and Jesus’s strange praise for a clearly unjust steward both contrasted with the almost-glib praise of the psalm for the day and Paul’s self-revealings to the fledgling pastor, Timothy. The imagined voices of his parishioners grew into imagined newspaper headlines: “Weird Lectionary and Bad Hair Day Coming to A Church Near You!” “Garza Misses Point of Entire Bible” “Another Glib Garza Sermon.” “Secular Humanism Replete in Garza’s Preaching.”

Remembering both his insistence on textual preaching and connecting with his parishioners’ lives, Felipe was committed to preach the texts as they connected with each other and the world in which his parishioners lived. His integrity as exegete was at stake here -- as it was every Sunday -- but this time around he was determined to approach the texts with all of his personal and professional assets in mind. This was a new way to get at texts. It would be work, he knew!

For no apparent reason, Felipe took the mind-filling indictment, "The Devil's in the details," as the first asset he possessed. He recalled the asset-based mantra, "What's useful here?" and set to work. "Which 'devil' and which 'details'?" were his first questions. How has Christ defeated the Devil? With Christ's major "detail": the cross? Thoughts spun out of the texts:

- The unjust measurements in Amos's diatribe,
- The careful 'creative accounting' of the shrewd manager,
- Jesus' life as counter-balance to the story he told,
- The specific reasons Paul commended Timothy to specific kinds of prayer,
- The sources and directions for the psalmist's praise of God.

All of these ideas seemed to be "details" of one kind or the other. Perhaps even "devilish" because of the presence of Evil in the world, and because details always seem to skitter toward the edges of life's focus. Perhaps the phrase might be useful after all. Perhaps it might lead to other assets-for-sermons.

The more he thought about "details," the more the idea of "assets" came to mind: His own attitude, as self-condemning as it usually was, might even be useful! (Felipe wondered how many other people missed the details of the Christian life, the details of God's great and gracious presence, the detailed reasons for prayer; he was sure other members went through their life overwhelmed by devilish details.) Because the sermon was taking place during Lent, how could he contextualize the sermon around the theology of the cross?

Pastor Garza looked at the lessons again and thought about current events. Useful assets were all around, including some that first looked only like problems:

- Corruption and injustice everywhere,
- The pain and suffering members of this congregation were experiencing in their lives at home, school, work.
- People wanting to know how to be more prayerful,
- Folks in his congregation living with ethical dilemmas at work every day,
- Some people in his congregation wanting to understand how to be faithful with their financial blessings.

More assets popped up as he thought about the texts, more "useful stuff" already known and available to him:

- The proximity of Mexican Independence Day (September 16) to the calendar date for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost;
- Three people in his congregation who were managers (but lived differently than their dishonest Lucan colleague!);
- Ten members who were still out of work after six months looking for jobs; and
- The national denominational stewardship emphasis, "We Say Yes!"

Felipe looked again at the texts themselves and more asset-seeking tasks accumulated. He:

- Thought about the first hearers of Jesus' words – peasants, laborers, people on the outside of the economic system
- Read about the kind of Temple worship that would have included Psalm 113; looked up the Greek words for "dishonest", "manager" and "beg";

- Paged through his favorite commentary looking for any mention of “details”;
- Found an old prayer book, given to him by his grandmother at the occasion of his First Communion, that was written in plain, easy-to-understand language;
- Called a colleague who had recently completed a course that studied the Luke 16 text from the viewpoint of first century economics and injustices; and
- Realized suddenly the wonderful assets of his three school-age children, who could easily answer the question, “So, what does ‘the cross of Christ’ mean to you?”

Eventually Pastor Garza ran out of time, but not sermon-preparation ideas. The original asset, a condemning aphorism that wouldn’t go away, would be the core idea from which he would build the sermon. The sermon would look something like this:

Opening Story – Reflections on his children’s reactions to the “cross of Christ” question, and their missing some details. Perhaps sermon hearers had experienced the same thoughts.

Brief Recounting of Text from Luke – Retelling the story of the unjust steward with a special view of the details about shame/guilt, the unjust system of debt in those times, the shrewd accounting of the manager. Perhaps the missing details: the injustice and suffering embedded in this series of economic events.

Transition – Observations about the “devilish qualities of details,” but also their redemptive qualities (appreciation for important, small matters; gratitude for smallest gifts). Relating illustrative stories told by members.

The Good News About Small Matters Today – Proclamation of the gospel about “small matters” like: freedom from guilt/shame; readily available forgiveness; wisdom (from God) about life’s living; freedoms from oppression and injustice; the gift of meaningful work; and the hope-giving support of the fellowship of believers when life’s details are truly evil and destructive. The major “detail” that the Devil always misses: Christ overcame evil, destruction, death by the sacrifice of his own life. How that “detail” attaches to our lives as proof of God’s presence and love for us.

Ending – Introduction and reading of a prayer (perhaps more than one?) from Pastor Garza’s old prayer book, perhaps read in both Spanish and English.

Felipe knew the sermon would be helpful because by God’s grace he had found in a difficult text nuggets of hope and forgiveness that would encourage and embolden his hearers to follow Christ’s example and be grateful for God’s grace in their lives.

For the Rev. Felipe Garza, the 16th Sunday after Pentecost would be a very good day, indeed!