

Good dog, bad dog

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [November 12, 2014](#) issue



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This year our seminary community includes two adorable black Labrador retrievers. They are guide dogs that quietly and tirelessly help students with vision disabilities navigate our curbs, steps, and a busy road that runs through campus. They go with the students to classes, the cafeteria, the library—and sometimes they roll over to scratch their backs on the grassy quad as their students sit talking with others.

The dogs also come to chapel and lie down next to each other under the first pew. They're long-legged, so they sprawl out a bit in front of the pew. Interestingly, they always face the pulpit.

I preach in this chapel every Monday. I'm very grateful that the dogs make it possible for two of our students to attend seminary and participate in the full life of our community. But it's an interesting experience to look down from the pulpit, halfway through the sermon's best sentence that was oh so carefully constructed, and see a couple of tired dogs looking up at me.

Even as I continue to preach I wonder what they're thinking. The rational side of my brain believes that the dogs are the only ones hoping that the sermon will go long so they can keep their heads on the floor for a few more minutes. But the other side of the preacher brain can't resist a metaphor.

These dogs have been trained not to chase squirrels, Frisbees, or other dogs. They spend most of their day in rigid leather harnesses. There's even a message on the blue wraps around their torsos that says, "I'm working. Don't pet me." I

understand—petting is distracting to the dog and dangerous to the person it is helping. And I'm sure the students they serve spend plenty of time scratching their dogs behind their ears.

But when the dogs come to worship they lie on the floor right in front of the pulpit as an obvious depiction of what we all feel.

By the time we get to church we've been in the harness a long time. Our squirrel-chasing days were long ago trained out of us, and when we see kids throwing a Frisbee the best we can do is to smile and remember. Burdened by the relentless demands of the workplace, the needs of small children, struggles with finances, broken relationships, and anxieties about bodies that don't work as well as they once did, we're so dog-tired when we trudge into worship that we're just looking up for a break.

Maybe something—a hymn, anthem, even the sermon—will feel like God's tender hand touching our drooping heads. Maybe. But the rest of our week has trained us not to expect it. "I'm working. Don't pet me."

What we expect from worship is that we'll be told to keep working. We'll confess the things we've done and left undone. The preacher will tell us is that the world is broken and Jesus is expecting us to fix it. And there will be a minute for mission that tries to enlist our time and money.

Most of the people who come to church these days already have a pretty clear sense of their ethical and moral responsibilities. We're well trained and know what we ought to do. There is little gospel in telling us we're not doing enough. But that's the message the church keeps giving.

I am struck by how many preachers keep finding ways to give the bad-dog sermon, in both conservative and progressive congregations. The pastor stands in the pulpit and scolds the world for being a mess, and the congregation for allowing this mess to continue. Sometimes the scolding is about the mess they've made of their own lives or the mess they left in the church. "Bad dog!" the preacher barks, "Take that outside." What is even more amazing is how many good people are addicted to the bad-dog sermon. They sit in the pews looking like guilty puppies thinking, "You're right. I haven't been good enough. I'll be back next week to hear this again." The irony is that the best people are the ones most aware of their failures.

I don't think those of us in church are all that confused about being bad dogs. What we don't know is what to do about it.

This is why worship has to offer the grace of God woven through the whole liturgy. Maybe the threads of mercy will glisten through the amazing words of the declaration of pardon, the tender music of the choral anthem, the sacrament that offers a taste of grace, or come from a preacher who long ago gave up scolding. Maybe it will come when the congregation watches the pastor place a child on her lap during the children's sermon.

Our souls are literally dying to hear a message that can get our drooping heads off the floor. We're desperate for the extraordinary news that we are loved, forgiven, and belong in the family of God. And somehow the blessed manna comes along the way during the hour in church. We gobble it down.

Only then can we get off the floor and leave worship excited about our mission to guide others to such amazing grace.