

Virtues and imposters: Reliable witnesses

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

I write this near the end of a doctor of ministry class at Columbia Seminary, where 16 pastors are exploring virtues for preaching. We are exploring virtues instead of skills because most of us recognize that scholarly exegesis, narrative flair and good eye contact have gotten us about as far as they will. Sure as we are that the people who listen to us appreciate our exercise of these skills (they complain bitterly when we do not), we know that skills alone are not enough.

The reliable witnesses in our own lives have been those who embody the word they speak. Their practice shapes their proclamation. Their lives match their speech. This is true even when they fail spectacularly to love God and their neighbors as themselves. Even then they show us what repentance and resurrection look like in the flesh. They are our reliable witnesses not because they are flawless but because they are honest, humble, brave and kind. When they speak, these virtues make them worth listening to. They do not traffic in counterfeit speech.

The book list for the class includes Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*; *Reverence*, by Paul Woodruff; *Testimony*, by Tom Long; and *The Word Before the Powers*, by Chuck Campbell. With the help of these authors, we have come up with a long list of virtues for preaching that includes courage, curiosity, humor, hope, reverence, openness and cruciformity. Except for the last entry on that list, we have wondered if there is any such thing as a Christian virtue. Our current wisdom is that virtues only become Christian as Christians practice them.

The concrete connection between virtues and practices has been the greatest "Aha!" for most of us. We were not born virtuous, yet we can name the people who taught us mercy by taking us in their arms when we were at our worst, who taught us generosity by requiring us to give 10 percent of our allowances away, who taught us reverence by making us wait while they prayed before passing the pot roast around the supper table. If those habits of the heart rubbed off on us, then that is

because we practiced them in community with people who brought the words to life. Some of those people talked about the virtues as well, but the talk alone was not redemptive. We needed to encounter the talk made flesh.

Bringing this wisdom to the ministry of the word, we noted how often we speak of virtues without connecting them to the concrete congregational practices that give them life. Preaching justice is one thing, but being able to identify the concrete ways in which a community of faith practices justice is quite another. One question we have asked one another over and over again is, “What could I come see you doing at 2 p.m. next Thursday that nourishes that virtue?”

According to Woodruff, “Virtue is the source of the feelings that prompt us to behave well.” This makes virtues different from commandments, which tell us what to do without making us feel like doing those things. Whereas a commandment works from the outside in, a virtue works from the inside out. In virtue ethics a good person is someone who wants what is right. This capacity is cultivated by experience and training, largely in community, where the habits that give rise to virtues are formed.

According to Campbell, whose book begins with the story of 5,000 French villagers who sheltered 5,000 Jews during the Holocaust, the practice of such virtues enables communities of faith to resist the principalities and powers. Practicing courage, we become courageous. Practicing hospitality, we become hospitable. Practicing hope, we become hopeful, until such virtues become second nature to us. When asked what allowed them to resist the Reich so heroically, the villagers in question shrugged their shoulders. Sure, they were churchgoers. Sure, they counted on their pastor for support, but heroes? They were just doing what came naturally. Practicing Christ, they had become Christian.

We also have learned in this course about “imposter virtues.” If real virtues make one feel like doing good, then imposter virtues make one feel good about doing bad. With examples as portentous as the Holocaust on the table, I was looking for something equally ominous in the imposter department, but the fraudulent virtue that has come up more than any other has been—talk about what comes naturally—busyness.

Why don’t we engage the principalities and powers crouched at our doorsteps? We are busy. Why don’t we keep up with the friends who know us well enough to keep us honest? We are busy. Why don’t we spend as much time with our families as we

do with our computers? We are too busy.

Campbell identifies busyness as one of the prime strategies of the principalities and powers, and this is as true for churches as for their members. Busyness keeps us from lingering on anything long enough to engage it at any depth. Busyness convinces us that there is always something else we need to be doing. Busyness exhausts, embitters, divides and demoralizes the people of God. If we have not exposed this imposter virtue for what it is, then the reason is because so many of our congregational practices depend upon it.

Making these connections has helped at least one classroom full of preachers engage the ministry of the word with fresh resolve. Whether or not God sees fit to bless us with actual virtues, we are willing to engage the concrete practices that might produce them. Christ calls this the way of life, and this is the life we want, both for ourselves and for those we serve.