

Checkpoint

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [September 20, 2011](#) issue



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I was driving across the border into Canada to give a couple of sermons at a church in Toronto. The no-nonsense officer in the booth asked if my visit was for work or pleasure. She looked tired, perhaps bored, and wanted a straight answer to a standard question. But I paused.

Work or pleasure? After writing sermons for most of the Sundays over the last 30 years, I still don't know which word better describes preaching.

It is certainly a lot of work when it's done well. Every week I excavate the biblical text in a desperate search for the holy insight that will speak pastorally, prophetically and hopefully to the congregation. It wears me out. Don't get me started on the challenges of carving the sentences well, or the incredibly hard work of making delivery appear effortless.

But preaching is also about pleasure—not the pleasure of getting what we want, but the delight of getting what we need. Preaching invites the congregation to be renewed in the pleasure of a God who rejoices when the lost are found and eyes are opened to the sacred purposes of life. As the preacher, I should also find some pleasure in this holy moment when heaven and earth come back together. But every good preacher I know works very hard to get a glimpse of such pleasure.

The customs officer was standing beside my car, which meant that I was staring straight at the pistol strapped to her waist. I didn't think she would shoot me if I came up with the wrong answer, but the gun was silently telling me not to get too theological. I was also aware of the long line of cars behind me filled with people hoping that I would soon get over my confusion.

Finally I said that I was going to be a guest preacher in one of Canada's churches. The officer then asked if I would be paid, as if that would clarify the work-pleasure question. I told her I would probably receive an honorarium. She asked me what an honorarium was, and I told her it was a love gift from the congregation. My explanation didn't help.

I began to ponder what it means to be paid for preaching. I know that I have a mortgage payment to make every month, but would I have refused to come to Toronto if they couldn't have paid me? Probably. I'm not in the ministry for the money, but it bugged me to realize that I do expect remuneration of some sort.

I was still mulling over the notion of getting paid when the officer asked me where I would be preaching. After I told her, she asked me to describe the specific services that I would be providing this congregation. "Preaching," I said again. She shut the glass door to her booth and picked up the phone. That got me thinking about who my parishioners would call for help in understanding their pastor. Do they look to the marketplace, the humanities, their therapists or to social workers for models that make sense of what I do? "Is he a professional, monk or just a guy in search of a love gift?"

The officer opened the door of the booth. "Let me get this straight. You're coming from Pennsylvania to a church in Toronto to preach tomorrow." I responded, "Yes, that's right." She was trying to figure out why a church in Toronto would need a U.S. citizen to do a job many Canadians must be qualified to do. I was a bit puzzled by that myself. But I was still stunned by her next question: "Why you?"

The question was stark and clear, yet it filled me with more existential angst than she could possibly know. Yes indeed, why me? This plunged me back into the most familiar confusion of all. Why am I called to preach the gospel? Surely better qualified people are available.

It is amazing how fast the mind works in such moments. Within nanoseconds I remembered being a young seminary intern serving as the substitute teacher for the

church's adult Sunday class. I knew that most of those present were executives from a nearby multinational corporation. I spent the first 15 minutes of the hour apologizing for being the one who would be their teacher. A man who was the CEO of the corporation eventually interrupted me to say, "Craig, we're not here because you're the best qualified person for what you do. We are here because we believe you're called." That memory has returned many times when I'm on the way to the pulpit and see someone in the congregation who's more qualified to preach than I am.

So I said to the officer, "Why me? I have no idea. I just know that this congregation called me to be its preacher tomorrow." She shrugged and told me to keep moving. I always have, but I take these questions along as part of my baggage.