

A manner of speaking

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [September 27, 2000](#) issue

I am a longtime fan of public radio. It began years ago with Garrison Keillor, whose weekly monologues on Lake Wobegon became a regular feature of my Saturday evenings. With my transistor radio perched on my kitchen windowsill, I would put supper together during the first hour of the show. The music was a little corny and the comedy kind of silly, but when Keillor said, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon . . ." I sat down on my tall stool to give him my full attention.

Part of it was his voice. His mouth was so near the microphone that he did not need much volume. He seemed to be speaking directly in my ear, and he was so close that I could hear his breath whistling through his nose hairs. The other part was what he said. Describing the lives of ordinary people I had never met, he made me care about them. When he spoke of their petty quarrels and fears, I recognized my own. When he spoke of their yearning for larger lives, my own longing flared up. Without using one theological word, he managed to illumine the holiness of common life on earth. On Sundays after I had listened to him, I looked at people in a different way. I may not have known their stories, but Keillor convinced me that they all had one, and that our stories were what made us kin.

The other nice thing was that he was not selling anything. Compelling speech is so often linked to a cause that I have a built-in early warning system, but Keillor did not want me to buy, join, accept or vote for anything. His moving speech came without an altar call, which left me free to be moved. As a preacher, I could not help wondering about all the things he was doing right.

So I was excited earlier this year when I became a guest commentator for Peach State Public Radio, Georgia's National Public Radio affiliate. My "beat" was the northeast corner of the state, which I was supposed to prowl in search of human-interest stories. It was not exactly *A Prairie Home Companion*, but I remained intrigued. With my Sunday vocabulary off-limits, how would I talk about things that mattered? Could I, like Keillor, learn to speak of holy things without using holy words?

Every religious person should try it at least once. My first three stories were fairly mundane. I wrote one about how there is nothing like owning llamas to teach you unconditional love. I wrote one about how individual values have replaced community values in the real estate boom in my area. And I wrote one about how all of my wildlife-loving neighbors have suddenly gotten cold feet now that the new wildlife turns out to be coyotes.

The producer who taped these segments seemed relieved. She had been worried, I think, about what a Christian minister might do with free airtime. "I worked with one man," she said, "who could not open his mouth without proselytizing. I finally told him to go find a religious radio station." I noted the difference between her word ("proselytizing") and the word I imagined the man might have used ("evangelizing"). Judging from the tone of her voice, she did not hear anything in his message that struck her as good news.

A couple of weeks ago I wrote some more stories, and this time I ended one on the drought with a reference to "the creator." Before we taped it, I asked the producer if that was all right. "Why don't you change it to 'my creator'?" she asked. "Then it's about you, but you're not making assumptions about anyone else." That made sense to me so I changed it, but as I did I registered the full distance between public radio and the pulpit.

The larger question this experience has raised for me is about how the church speaks to the culture. How did our language become so offensive to so many people, and what can we do so that our message sounds like good news? Too often, I think, the church has blamed our communication problem on the culture. When people won't listen to us, we suggest that their hearts have been hardened by wealth and self-interest. But what about our own heart problems? Doesn't the church suffer from its own legacy of wealth and self-interest?

It has been only about 50 years since we lost our ascendancy. Before that, our ancestors backed empires and launched crusades. They jingled the keys to heaven and hell in their pockets and professed to know who was going where. They razed whole cultures in the name of God and were notoriously bad about handling other people's money. Not too surprisingly, we have lost our authority, and the authority of our speech as well. While plenty of us still speak the language of faith, it may take a while for us to earn people's trust again. For now, we could do worse than to surrender all claims to our old dominance, learning to speak once again as Jesus

did—from the bottom of the human heap, in simple words that become flesh in our lives.

I remember hearing Millard Fuller speak once about the birth of Habitat for Humanity. There was no better day in the world, he said, then the day he walked up to the woman whose family would move into the first Habitat house. “Do I ever have good news for you,” he said, holding the key out for her to take. There has to be language that works like that—language that does not ask people to buy, join, accept or vote for anything, but which simply announces the good news of a larger life in the most palpable terms possible. When that happens, it won’t be called proselytizing any more. It will be called bearing glad tidings, and the bearers shall be called blessed.