

Bad words in the pulpit

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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A few months ago I preached a sermon that a lot of people loved and a few people hated. I heard from both groups but spent more time, as is perennially the case in ministry, with the few.

I didn't set off to be controversial. I looked at the texts, read some commentaries. (Get behind me, Satan.) And then, in the middle of the week, a United Methodist preacher's kid [made the news](#). Sandra Fluke testified before a congressional panel about the Obama administration's contraception mandate, after which the Georgetown Law student suffered a [verbal attack](#) by Rush Limbaugh.

At least in my neck of the woods, the cultural conversation that followed lacked a Christian voice reminding people that Jesus didn't call women "sluts." So I did what I felt called to do: [I preached a Lenten sermon](#) on birth control and standing up for those without a voice.

Also: I said "slut" from the pulpit.

I debated doing this. I prayed about it. I'm generally a from-notes preacher, but this time I wrote out a manuscript. If you're going to use a bad word in the pulpit, it's helpful to have the evidence of what you did and didn't say. I also find it's important to write down anything controversial I intend to say, so that I don't lose my nerve.

In the aftermath, some of my friends questioned whether “slut” really counts as a swear word anymore. But in the congregation I’m serving, “slut” is as bad as the other “s” word (which I say more often, potty-mouthed klutz that I am). And the fact is, I *do* think it’s a terrible word. I also believe that proclaiming the gospel is a holy responsibility with which I’m tasked, one that ought not to be profaned—whether by bad language or bad theology or reducing the gospel to truisms and stereotypes.

A few church members objected because they thought I said “slut” for the shock value. And yes: I did quote Rush’s use of that derogatory noun because it was shocking. I was shocked that a woman advocating for justice could be spoken of in such an offensive matter. I also found it shocking that Christians weren’t saying what we know to be true: that huge percentages of us use birth control, because not every time—even within a loving marriage—is the right time to have a baby.

There’s a lot written about what religious leaders can say and how. Nadia Bolz-Weber [loves Jesus but swears a little](#), an approach that is authentic to her and not out of place in her congregation. In the midst of the hubbub over my sermon, a retired pastor in the congregation assured me that “if you show the biblical basis for your viewpoint, people may disagree with you, but they will respect you for dealing with the issue.” I was grateful for his wisdom.

I was also grateful to hear from many who were glad to hear this word from the pulpit. Lots of women, and lots of men. Yet I worried immensely about those who were upset. About the woman who left in the middle of the service, who told me later that she felt attacked. I never want people to feel that way. But we’re not that great at knowing the difference between being attacked and being offered a view that challenges us.

The onus is on preachers to make sure that we are never abusing the privilege of the pulpit, that we can say with the honesty of deep self-knowledge that we aren’t trying to pick a fight from a place of authority. We have to know ourselves, and we have to know our communities. We have to be aware, too, of [how our own quest for truth and authenticity affects those in our care](#), for better or for worse.

The tasks of leadership can lead us into dangerous waters, places and conflicts we’d rather avoid. [Margaret Farley](#) and a host of other Catholic sisters have my deep admiration as they speak up, risking the ire of their church hierarchy, to proclaim the gospel. Farley reminds us that being a Christian leader may include stepping on toes, shocking the complacent—and growing into a dynamic faith. Such leaders

know that this work is critical for a living, flourishing church.