

Homiletics and humor

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I was at a youth retreat and a senior in high school asked me, “Who are your inspirations when it comes to public speaking? I mean, you’ve told us how you felt called by God and how the church influenced you. Who influenced you outside of the church?”

I said two things: **[TED Talks](#) and comedians.**

It’s interesting that we think about abandoning sermons, as TED Talks gain popularity by trying to imitate a good sermon. (Likewise, it’s odd that we talk of abandoning membership when the rest of the world is discovering it. I’m now a card-carrying member of my grocery store, drug store, coffeehouse, and bakery. But I digress.)

My favorite TED Talk is probably [“If I should have a daughter.”](#)

Yet, the best insights have come from comedians. I’m often told that I’m either like [Tina Fey](#) or [Janeane Garofalo](#). And I have to respond with [this](#).

**Here are my top comedian/preaching moments.** (Of course, a bit of a warning here. There is adult language and raunchy content with most of these comedians.)

- **[Chris Rock](#) talks with Terry Gross** about how watching his grandfather write sermons and preach had an influence on his stand-up. He often watches preachers to hone his craft. It’s very insightful.
- **[Lewis C.K.](#) plays God.** I’m not sure what else to say about this clip, other than “Amen.”
- **Margaret Cho’s [revolution](#).** No one preaches like Cho. She’s incredibly raunchy and then... Bam! She delivers. She performed in a [Presbyterian Church](#) once, so I’m going to go ahead and claim her as one of our own.

- **Steve Martin's [Born Standing Up](#)** was serious and talked a bit about the business of comedy. Oddly enough, I read it at a time when I was going from workshop leading to keynote speaking. Workshop leaders don't always get paid, and with as much traveling I was doing, I couldn't justify the time away from my family without any income. The transition felt overwhelming and (again) I didn't feel worthy—but Martin's matter-of-fact explanation of moving from warm-up to headliner helped me.
- **Tina Fey's [Bossy Pants](#)** gave off a great vibe, particularly in the ways that she navigates being a woman in a male-dominated world. I'm sure some female clergy can relate.
- **Samantha Bee talks about her childhood crush on Jesus in [I Know I Am But What Are You?](#)** I have to give a hat tip to [Ed Blum](#) and [Color of Christ](#) for this one. *Color of Christ* has a section on Jesus jokes.
- Also, I cherished my advanced copy of **[Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint](#) by our favorite comedian-turned-Lutheran-pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber.** Nadia's wisdom and humor soak each page of this book. It'll be out in about a month. Do yourself a favor and pre-order it now and learn from the best.

What about you? Who influences you in your preaching, writing, and speaking?