

Preaching: What's the point?

By [Beth Merrill Neel](#)

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Often on a Sunday afternoon, after I've changed out of my church clothes and into jeans and a sweatshirt, after I've had a wee nap in the comfy chair, after I've unwound from All Things Sunday Morning, a creeping doubt comes into my head: what difference does a sermon make? I'm not fishing for compliments here. I'm pretty realistic about my sermons and I, like everyone else, am an above-average preacher.

About ten years ago I let go of worrying that every sermon I preached had to be wonderful and inspiring. I'd learned that a lot happens between my lips and the congregation's communal ears, that people hear things I never said and don't hear things I thought I said quite plainly. Silly old Holy Spirit, interceding with sighs too deep for our words.

I've preached sermons that teach (I hope); sermons that lead (I hope). I've preached and heard sermons that are challenging and inspirational and sermons that are sheer poetry. I have also preached my fair share of dogs but always try, in the advice of my preaching professor, to walk those dogs proudly. A lot of us preachers spend a lot of time at our craft, and a good quarter of our time is spent planning worship, writing liturgy, coordinating music with the musicians, and writing the weekly sermon. Some weeks it feels positively prodigal to spend so much time on something that will only play out in a hour. But like a drama or a symphony, the preparation is as much as the performance.

Lately, though, I've wondered if it makes a difference if good, faithful people don't hear a decent sermon and then go home and go about life as usual. When I do a sermon series, how does that help when less than half of the folks are there to hear the whole series? And really, if every sermon is exhorting people to go out and be faithful in some way, might that not lead to some spiritual schizophrenia? Fifty-two ways you can be faithful in today's world? Maybe three ways would be enough, and we could dispense with the sermon altogether for the other 48 Sundays.

The world is a mess. A big fat mess. People are dying from cancer. Children are drowning as they flee with their parents in search of a safer home. Religious extremists of all faiths give God and God's followers a really bad name. We imprison people for the crime of being poor. Black lives matter and people don't get it. How on earth could one ten- to twenty-minute sermon make a dent in the mess?

It can't. Fifty-two sermons can't make a dent. Ten thousand sermons can't.

But 52 people can make a dent. Ten thousand people can make a dent. Maybe that's the part I forgot.

As the congregation settles in on Sunday morning, I think about all the hidden pain people bring in with them—irreconcilable differences, living paycheck to paycheck, enduring treatment, being shredded away from loneliness or addiction or ostracism. Worry about kids. Worry about parents. Worry about friends. Secrets and lies and shame. But I also think about the strength they bring in—perseverance, presence, advocacy, grace, hospitality, hope.

So maybe if for one hour a week, these wounded wonders come in and are soothed by music or a prayer or even a sermon, maybe it was worth it. Maybe if something I or another says in a sermon helps them to hang on for one more week, or gives them that kick in the proverbial pants, maybe if that tricky Holy Spirit intercedes and whispers something perfect that they then attribute to the preacher, maybe then there is a point to preaching.

Or three points and a poem. But hopefully not that.

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