

# Pulpit play

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [May 22, 2002](#) issue

Discovering a Sermon: Personal Pastoral Preaching.  
By Robert C. Dykstra. Chalice  
Press, 154 pp., \$18.99 paperback.

Whether you are a preacher of sermons or a listener to them, you know how much rides on that 15 or 20 minutes in the pulpit. Hungry people are waiting to be fed. A holy God is waiting to be proclaimed. The word is waiting to be made flesh again, and the preacher's body is at least one of the vehicles available for the working of that miracle most Sunday mornings.

Sometimes it happens and sometimes it does not. When it does not, Robert Dykstra suggests, it is often because the preacher has surrendered curiosity for correctness, and has lost all appetite for playing with fire.

Dykstra, who teaches pastoral theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, approaches preaching from an unusual angle. His mentors are not Fred Craddock or David Buttrick but British psychoanalyst W. D. Winnicott and Winnicott's disciple Adam Phillips. People listen to sermons for the same reason that they seek pastoral counseling, Dykstra says: out of a deep and often unspoken desire for transformation. If they instead find themselves bored by what they hear, then something has gone grievously wrong.

According to Winnicott, being boring is a sign of severe emotional distress, since people generally become boring by working way too hard to manage their inner realities. Maintaining strict control over language and metaphor, boring people make sure that nothing dangerous or unexpected comes out of their mouths. The problem is that nothing authentic comes out either, so that it is all but impossible for transformation to occur, either for those who speak or for those who hear.

This is only the first of Dykstra's unsettling points. Leaning on Winnicott's observation that the human infant is born "an artist and a hedonist," Dykstra believes that preaching has suffered from the rejection of these identities by most

clergy. While he is careful to distinguish between what happens in the privacy of the pastor's study and what happens in the pulpit, he remains convinced that fewer sermons would be pronounced "boring" if preachers could allow themselves--in their studies at least--to behave like "biblical artisans" and "holy hedonists."

What is missing in much mainline preaching, he says, is the preacher's own discovery of anything interesting and new. Bowing to expectations both internal and external, many preachers cope with the stress of their jobs by becoming compliant. "Compliant persons exhaust themselves and bore others by striving overmuch to screen their passions," Dykstra explains. Compliant preachers overly control the language of their sermons, "seeking to limit any surprising eruption of emotion or spirit or any challenges to familiar patterns of belief or practice."

They also shun the ancient Christian practices of silence and solitude for at least two reasons. First, because protecting time to be quiet and alone can seem like indifference to Christ's call to serve; and second, because diving into such depths has always involved the risk of encountering God. Choosing instead to splash in the shallows of human experience, preachers who play it safe fetch up "monotonous words and metaphors ringing of inauthenticity [that] paralyze rather than elaborate or change human experience."

As a cure for this sick state of affairs, Dykstra leads his readers through four fields of homiletical play: playing with the text, playing witness to life, playing with strangers and playing with fire. In each of these four chapters, he focuses on a key theme of pastoral preaching--which usually correlates with a lost capacity in the preacher's life--and then offers resources for provoking it back to life. He includes one of his own sermons in each chapter as well, with extensive analyses of his process as practical guides for others.

The book's first chapter serves as a kind of test. Using insight mined from psychoanalytic theory, Dykstra likens the biblical text to a transitional object that offers "intimacy without invasion and individuality without isolation." Preachers who allow themselves a playful measure of "pastoral omnipotence" over the text-as-object stand to discover things in and through it that elude their more timorous colleagues, he says.

If a reader can handle this challenging idea, then there is nothing to fear from Dykstra's later counsel to preachers to "rejoin their words to bodies, to the passions

of their preverbal depths," or to "kill the words of the canon to discover what survives." The God of this book is "the Saboteur of foregone conclusions, the Source of our delight," who is both created and found by those who are willing to engage the genuine risks of real change. Meanwhile, what other preaching text can you think of that makes reference to a book titled *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, or that makes neighbors of Maya Angelou, W. H. Auden and Augustine of Hippo in its bibliography?

This is a brave book, in which Dykstra does what he counsels others to do. Refusing to add one more tame book on pastoral preaching to an already groaning shelf, he dives deep into the human psyche (which is to say, the human soul) to discover powerful and therefore dangerous resources for faithful transformation. These include the preacher's own appetite, interest, curiosity and passion, as magnets for those same capacities in those who listen. Rich pastoral preaching depends less on giftedness for speech, Dykstra says, than on intensity of attention and love.

In the end, he suspects, "we are likely to find the One for whom we long less in the clouds of spiritual heights than far down the mountain in the soulful depths--in the mundane particularities, the fierce complexities, the simple pleasures of everyday life." While Dykstra's book is full of such complexities and pleasures, that is not the best thing one may say about it. The best thing one may say is that Dykstra passes his own test. This book is never boring.