

Sermon writing and other slow rituals

It'd be easy to rush though my preparation time. I start by making coffee in a French press to set an unhurried pace.

By [Darlan Duckworth](#)

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"I'd like to come observe your sermon-writing process one day."

Still draped in his choir robe, the parishioner expressed his wish while in the hand-shaking line after worship. I was surprised, then I chuckled.

"Of course," I said. "It might not be very exciting, but you're welcome any time."

The mental picture of his request was simple. The pastor would sit at a desk and type. The parishioner would sit across from her. Neither would say a word.

However, I realized that my initial declaration of the sermon-writing process as boring to an observing parishioner was inaccurate. Even though I usually wrote my sermons in a room by myself, the congregation was always in that room with me. My sermon writing process was not done in solitude with only the Holy Spirit, scripture text, and resources. I wrote in the company of those who would listen. I carried their needs to the text with me. I listened to them throughout the week to help steer the next Sunday's sermon. They were already a part of the process.

United Church of Christ minister and author Lillian Daniel once wrote that [the crafting of Sunday's sermon was the priority of her work week](#). I agreed. Ever since I became a pastor, my first priority after Sunday ended was to begin working on the following Sunday's sermon. Monday morning is time set aside as holy time with the text, and I make every effort not to reschedule that sacred appointment. I rarely ever come from the writing room with a finished product, but I come away with the beginning of a reflection for the great company of saints with whom I will preach.

When I moved to West Point and began adjusting my rhythms to those of the church's life, I found myself struggling to hallow the sermon preparation time on Monday mornings. I knew that the contemplative within me needed a ritual to reset my priority.

So, I turned to the French press.

I love the taste of coffee prepared in a French press, but it takes time and is a mess to clean up. There is the measuring of water to coffee grounds for the perfect ratio. There is the boiling of water. There is the stirring of water and grounds together. There is the waiting for the two to blend. There is the pressing. Then there is the cleaning of grounds out of the carafe.

It's so much easier to pop a coffee pod in my one-cup maker, but the end result of the French press is much richer.

At a set time on Monday mornings, I pull out the French press and start the process. Once the coffee is ready, I show up for the next process of sermon creation. Like the French press, crafting a homily takes time and measurement and messiness. One question of the text leads to another, followed by questions of what I should say or not say, what needs emphasis, what the overarching message should be. There are as many ideas and directions as grounds in the carafe.

“Sing them over again to me ...
Let me more of their beauty see ...
Words of life and beauty
Teach me faith and duty.
Beautiful words, wonderful words,
Wonderful words of life.”

— Phillip P. Bliss, 1784, "Wonderful Words of Life," *The United Methodist Hymnal* #600

One of our greatest enemies is hurry. One of our greatest hindrances is rush.

The body of Christ is called to live at a different pace, in a distinct way. Our words of life flow from the life we receive from the Word, which requires us to resist the temptation to always choose the quick and easy. Our lives are our sermons of what we believe and who we are in Christ Jesus.

Originally posted at [Duckworth's blog](#)