

“Fear this!”

Preach like a shepherd unafraid of wolves

Discover how to acknowledge the clash of worlds parishioners live in

Many Sunday worshipers are “straddling two worlds,” according to Barbara Brown Taylor in her book *The Preaching Life*. While celebrating the liturgy, they inhabit a world governed by love. Once they are dismissed, they “cross a border into another country governed by other, less forgiving laws.”

Many homilists, intent on promoting harmony, tend to emphasize positive aspects of Christian life. Furthermore, the liturgical setting itself prods a homilist to reach for signs of grace—not sin—in order to foster an experience of praise and adoration of God.

But what about that “other country” governed by greed, arrogance, lust, and corruption? How do we address the lives of parishioners as they go out into that world? How do we make our preaching relevant to everyday realities?

Conflict avoidance

A hard-hitting diatribe about evils in that world to which congregants must return once the service is ended will be ineffective. This is “an easy way out” for the preacher. Members of the flock will face risks ranging from social rejection to economic deprivation...just for living the hard realities of faith in a post-Christian world.

The preacher’s task is to acknowledge that clash between the two worlds and—at the same time—to identify with the listeners in their struggle to confront the clash with courage and hope. This requires a shepherd skilled not only at birthing lambs with gentle hands but also at sighting wolves in the crosshairs of a rifle.

Rustle in the undergrowth

According to Barbara Brown Taylor, the worst sermons are those that try to squeeze life into a pre-fashioned mold, employing a style of discourse that sounds more like an argument than pastoral guidance. In contrast, the best sermons are those that begin with life, tell stories that ring with truth, and thus open ways in which God’s Word helps the community address the forces that oppose our way of life (35).

This suggests that the preacher develop a sharp eye and a good ear for subtle oppositions to the faith. For instance:

How does political discourse on immigration affect your family’s attitude toward classmates and coworkers?

How does pervasive advertising determine the way a college senior reacts to Jesus’ words to “sell all that you have and come follow me”?

How does the marketing of sex corrode the intimacy and sanctity in the marriages within our community?

Stories that connect to realities like these will identify the tough challenges experienced by the faithful on a daily basis.

Go in peace to love and serve

Of course, the encounter with God's Word, while beginning in church, doesn't end there. Its power to change the world will color the conversations of those who believe and uncover the thirst for truth in the lives of those who do not

Homily Excerpt: "A different kind of Sistine Chapel"

It wasn't some catchy advertising slogan that brought Gabbie to church that Saturday morning. It wasn't the urging of

- *"Have it Your Way"*
- *"Create a Storm"*
- *"Obey Your Thirst"*
- *"Now You're Playing with Power"*

That made her decide to pick up a paint brush and help other confirmation candidates refurbish a neglected chapel at the back of the church property

No. Gabbie is a girl who realizes that commercial slogans aren't worth the three seconds of time they demand. Gabbie has other words to live on, important words, words that ground her life in God. After all, she's been baptized, and she recognizes the emptiness in commercial slogans for what they are: empty promises of Satan.

She squints at the ceiling before climbing the ladder. "Father, guess what?"

I note the confident smile on her face. "What?"

"My grandfather helped build this chapel."

"Really?"

She starts up the ladder. "Yeah," she says. "Pretty neat, don't you think?"

St. Paul tells us we are part of a building that rests on the foundation of Christ and the apostles. He doesn't mention chapels with candles and statues of saints. He doesn't speak of service projects, or grandfathers with tool belts, or teenagers with paint in their hair. But he does inform us that foundations are comprised of more than words: they're made of concrete deeds and solid commitments.



Like our youth, we adults also live in a world where words are cheap, silence is rare, and self worth is a commodity whose value rises and falls with the latest fad.

But some things remain solid and reliable—things like covenants, devotion, vows, and sacraments.

And, for some fortunate teenagers, chapels built by grandfathers.