

## Church Door (2006)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner on WLRH, Huntsville, AL USA

Of all the feedback mechanisms that have been designed to help assess how things are going, perhaps the worst is what people say to the preacher at the church door. I sometimes think that ancient custom was designed by the Other Side, because it's so misleading.

You know how it works. The service is over, the organist starts the postlude, the clergy and maybe the choir process to the back of the church, and folks start straggling out. There stands the minister, by sacred tradition, standing in the vestibule or narthex or just inside the back door, smiling and awaiting judgment. People come by and smile in response, and grab the parson's hand, and say something. What they usually say is, "Nice sermon." If they didn't like it they can say, "Good morning!"

Now here stands the preacher — or priest, or worship leader, or rabbi, or maybe the imam (I've never been to a Moslem service, so I don't know for sure), desperately in need of some indication about how he (or she) is doing. It's tough work, to try to discern what the Almighty has in mind for that particular group of people on that particular day; in times past they've been zapped by fire from heaven if they didn't discern correctly; these days they get told, "Nice sermon."

Let me suggest something quite radical: that you tell the truth. No, not savagely, or ruthlessly, or heartlessly, you can still be kind. But pick something specific that you heard and liked (or at least can remember). If there was an illustration that spoke to you, or that poem before the conclusion, or a well-turned image, or a point that really hit home, mention it to that needy person who stands on the bridge between you and heaven. Tell 'em what worked, what stood out, what helped.

Now if it didn't work, for you, that Sunday, you can say that, too, and don't have to be destructive about it. You can say, "I didn't understand that point about 'Ta-dah, ta-dah,' or 'You were over my head when you talked about Thissa or Thatta.'" That helps just as much — maybe more — than your compliments, as long as it's not EVERY Sunday!

Two things are likely to happen if you get specific at the church door: in the first place the preacher will be very surprised. And in the second place, they'll start preaching better, before your very ears.