

How to Improve Sermons (2008)

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

Preaching is hard work. It's a different kind of labor-intensive occupation than, say, operating a carpet sweeper or house-painting, but it's hard work. Those groans you hear coming from the sacred space where your religious leader crafts those weekly messages are indicators that someone is wrestling with some very old holy words and trying to translate them into today-speak.

The task is difficult enough by itself — to discern what the Almighty wants to communicate to humankind — nay, impossible; it's even more so with the kind of feedback preachers get from the bepreached. Generally they meet you at the door out of the worship space with a handshake and a cheery, "Nice sermon!" Sometimes it's more non-committal than that: "Good morning!"

Preaching is a task like those people who are trying to communicate with the residents of Outer Space: you send out radio messages and star ships and ether signals and Lord knows what else, just hoping that someone somehow somewhere will be able to decipher the code called language, and will respond.

But you, dear listener, can actually improve the quality of the religious messages you receive, by affirming (or gently defirming) the part of the message that was most notable. Religious spokespersons are desperate to know if it works — or even if it doesn't! No dummies they, your neighborhood preacher (or priest or rabbi, or whatever) will actually learn from your comments! All you have to do is say something specific about that particular homily: "I liked the poem," or "That story by Mark Twain was great!" It is just as educational if you're able to murmur something like, "You lost me when you got off on Sartre and Existentialism," if you smile when you say it. Someone figured that human beings respond to feedback when there are three times as many compliments as complaints; that's a pretty good ratio to aim at.

I still remember what I heard at a church door fifty years ago: "Houston, my hearing aid battery ran down, but you sure looked nice!" That's called "feedback," and it makes you try harder the next time.

Give the speaker a hint about what you like and what you don't. Before you know it the quality of the preaching will start to improve before your very ears. On the other hand, it may cut into your nap time some.

Houston Hodges says he's a "mostly retired" Presbyterian minister, but he preaches every month at the Big Cove Presbyterian Church at both of its locations on Highway 431.