

## **A Preaching Top Ten**

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*In the spirit of David Letterman and David Buttrick, Michael McCormack, a Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary alum, offers his humorous perspective on preparing the weekly sermon in his – "Top Ten Things you would have learned in preaching class if you had paid better attention."*

- 1. Don't use big words.** Hermeneutical. Eschatological. No one knows what those words mean. No one – not even you. In his book, "Finally Comes the Poet," Walter Brueggemann calls on all preachers to use language evocatively. "The poet/prophet is a voice that shatters settled reality and evokes new possibility in the listening assembly (p.4)." Don't settle for technical jargon that shows off what you know, and possibly what you don't know. Use language that calls individuals to the Word. That's something the use of big words rarely achieves.
- 2. Don't quote people.** I know I just did it, but don't do it in sermons. Or avoid it. Or if you have to, do it in moderation. Unless they have really funny names, nobody in your church cares about biblical scholars and theologians, not like you do. It's better to take David Buttrick's advice when he says ... never mind.
- 3. Never pass up a perfectly good opportunity to stop.** Jesus' first sermon, which is still the best, is as follows: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news (Mark 1:15)." (It's always permissible to quote Jesus. Everyone cares or is supposed to care about what Jesus said.) Can you hope to improve on Jesus' profound sermon with 25 minutes of your preaching? Twenty-five minutes says to me that you think you're as interesting as a television show. This is a bold claim. Twenty-five minutes also suggests to me that you have one sermon with two smaller sermons fighting amongst themselves, like ferrets in a paper sack. Please, take one of them out and set it free.
- 4. Be authentic.** You are a real person with real feelings, thoughts, concerns, and worries. Use those in your preaching. No one goes into their study or office, puts on a Geneva gown and becomes "CalvinMan" or "Wesley-Woman." Be a real person. Your parishioners will respond to this real voice, used to speak the truth that resides in your heart.
- 5. No preacher voice.** We have all heard the great preachers. The timbre of their voices is part of what makes them great. And ours is just ... kind of weird. Your voice won't make the church members swoon like George Whitefield or make them come down front like Billy Graham, but neither will affecting a preacher voice. Just talk, in your unique voice. Tell the good news as only you can tell it.

**6. Be clear.** If you don't what you mean, no one else will either. Seminarians, when you preach in a church, do not begin by saying, "When I was thinking about what to preach about today," unless you follow that up with, "St. Paul pulled me up into heaven to tell what the thorn in his flesh actually WAS." Just go ahead and begin your sermon with your focus statement, introduction, main points, etc. There's a reason preaching professors emphasize the need to write down a focus statement or a two-word phrase that will guide your sermon.

**7. You will have to cut your favorite part.** You know that great story about the kid who prays the Lord's Prayer, only she says, "HOWARD," instead of "HALLOWED?" It doesn't fit a sermon about "Love." If you are in your study, racking your brain, trying to fit an illustration, poem, or wonderful historical fact into your sermon, there's a reason why it is requiring so much work – it doesn't fit. Cut it. You don't have to throw it away. Print it, and tape it to the wall. Save it in a document call, "Stuff I love, but that alum said I had to cut."

**8. Number 8 had to be cut.** (See above.)

**9.** This is the last one (see number 3). **Have Fun.** It may be odd to say, but preaching is fun. As proclaimers we get to tell people the good news. It IS called the GOOD news, you know. It is amazing how the voice of the preacher can evoke, somehow, mental pictures and feelings and thoughts about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. We need to lighten up and not take ourselves so seriously. Honestly, we get to talk about God, who created the duck-billed platypus, a mammal that lays eggs, or St. Paul quoting (argh) Isaiah, who says, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news."

Preaching is one of the aspects of our calling to the Christian life that reminds us just exactly how much control we have over the Spirit of God or the people of God. Not that much. And that's why we make lists.