

Blank stares: Who's listening to sermons?

by [William Brosend](#) in the [April 21, 2009](#) issue

A group of pastors had been brought together by the Episcopal Preaching Foundation to talk and share and practice preaching. It was my turn to address the group, and I had a particular focus in mind. I presented a composite mental sketch of some people whom most preachers know all too well—people who haunt our sermon preparations, trip up our tongues so that we're left stammering nervously, and bedevil us in the after-worship handshake line. Sometimes we try to pursue them as they deftly slip out a side door. I spoke of the obvious occasions, the Sundays we know that "they" will be there—Easter, Mother's Day, a baptism in the family and Christmas Eve. But here's the kicker: they do not want to be there. Their body language and facial expressions shout, "Can we go now?" They are uninterested, unconvinced and certainly unimpressed. How do we preach to them?

I was barely under way when my colleagues stopped me and challenged my assumption that these uninterested people attended worship only on special occasions. Not true, they said; those people are in the congregation every Sunday. I had quoted a friend who says, "Never forget that half the congregation almost didn't show up." These pastors said that in their experience, those in the half that "almost didn't show" at least want to be there. The other half, the uninterested, unconvinced and unimpressed, would rather be anywhere else—not necessarily playing golf or watching a game, but maybe doing their taxes or painting a closet. How do we preach to this half of the congregation?

Do you have a hobby, maybe an unusual one? Some odd thing you collect or passion you pursue? That is Christianity in America to the uninterested—some weird thing we do with our time that, as long as we keep it to ourselves, doesn't really concern them. Worship doesn't matter to them. They did not read Paul Tillich's *The Dynamics of Faith* in college and don't know they are supposed to have a latent religious impulse. Many would say they don't have a religious bone in their bodies.

The unconvinced come in a variety of shapes and sizes. They may consider themselves graduates from Christianity and smile at us as they would at an adorable child or cute puppy, maybe even pat us on the head. These folks don't want to argue because they don't care. They've moved on, and hope that one day we will too. Others are argumentatively unconvinced, perhaps having been there and done that, with scars to show for it. They will challenge us, sometimes with disdain and almost always with sarcasm. It's not just that they are unconvinced by our faith, they are dismissive of it.

Some of us have a hard time imagining how someone could be so maddeningly unimpressed by all that Christian faith has to offer. We point hopefully to polls that show that the percentage of people who believe in God and say they go to church remains high. But we ignore the fact that while the population of the United States has doubled in the last 60 years, overall worship attendance has declined. If we do the math, we realize that the Ashtabula liars study, famous for documenting the discrepancy between survey reports of church attendance and actual weekend counts, is as true as it ever was.

So where do we start? How do we preach effectively to those who do not care, actively disagree and think we are deluded? We don't understand why they attend church, but if my colleagues are correct, they'll be sitting there next Sunday with legs crossed, arms folded or chin in palm, staring blankly in any direction but toward the pulpit.

We might begin by not being so quick to dismiss them or the situation as hopeless. Tom Long tells of being a guest preacher in a church. He had just finished his sermon when an elderly woman "with a face like a hatchet dipped in vinegar" approached him and asked, "You teach preaching at the seminary, don't you?" "Yes, I do," Long said. "Well, I have something that I want you to tell your students," she said. "Tell them to take me seriously."

It is too easy to take the listeners for granted, especially the ones who may not be listening. They are welcome along for the ride, of course, but the sermon is supposed to be a sharing of the preacher's personal encounter with scripture and experiences on the journey of faith. For many the operative homiletical question is, "What do I want to tell the people of God today?" Unfortunately the answer to that question often leaves out the listener. Recall Mark's summary at the end of his parable chapter, "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were

able to hear it” (4:33). Responsive and responsible preaching is focused on what words will be heard and shapes the speaking to foster the listening.

Responding to differences in cognitive style and development is one way of taking the listeners seriously, and is certainly in harmony with the example we see from Jesus in the synoptic Gospels. This effort should begin early in the sermon creation process. Long gets at this as he reflects on what the woman meant with her demand to be taken seriously:

I have been thinking about what she said and what it might mean if those of us who preach genuinely take seriously the people who sit in the pews. I want to think, first, about what it means to take the listener seriously when the listener is not literally present—when we are in our studies doing biblical interpretation in preparation for preaching.

The greatest advantage the preacher has on Sunday morning is also the greatest disadvantage: we are the only person in the room who has been thinking about the scripture lesson all week. Closing the gap between the time we have spent pondering the hermeneutical and homiletical possibilities and the time our listeners have not is critical to good preaching. The gap is much greater when we include those who are uninterested, unconvinced and unimpressed. How do we take seriously those who do not take us seriously? We could get theological here—*imago dei*, children of God, etc. Or we could try a couple of things for Jesus’ sake.

We should not try to impress such people. There are reasons they are unimpressed, and if we attempt to address those reasons by channeling Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert for insights, Jay Leno and David Letterman for humor, and Google for compelling stories, listeners will sense our fear and laugh at our desperation, not our jokes. More to the point, exactly how does one fit *impress* and *gospel* into the same sentence?

What we might try is putting more effort into an obvious strategy: be more interesting. Quite honestly, and not just because my work involves listening to scores of student sermons every term, the reason many are uninterested is that we are boring. Sometimes we even plan to be boring, forgetting how little time we have to close the gap between our study and preparation and the listeners’ mostly scriptureless week, and worse, forgetting who we are preaching to. A few months ago I met with two mentors to review a manuscript I hope to finish before the

second coming. They both asked me more or less the same thing—who are you writing this book for? Preachers. Then why do you keep looking over your shoulder with footnotes only graduate school professors would care about? They aren't going to read the book. It might be a good idea to write for your intended audience.

They're right. We need to learn more about what interests those in the congregation, and a more interesting way to relate the gospel to those things and not just to what interests us. My analysis of the rhetoric of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels suggests three positive things we can do to be more interesting and convincing, though not necessarily impressive.

First, like Jesus, our preaching must be intentionally dialogical. Not “dialogue sermons,” please, but sermons that, from the moment of our first reading of the passages for the coming Sunday, take the listeners seriously. We do this by asking their questions, anticipating their concerns and remembering the challenges, sorrows, fears and joys of those who will make it to church on Sunday.

Next, we should follow Jesus' example by not hesitating to make clear and sometimes bold proclamation. Listeners in some traditions call out: “Make it plain, preacher!” Would that we all had such reminders before us! Make it plain. Apologetics has nothing to do with mumbling, “Well some people think, but I am not sure, and anyway, it is up to you.” Tell them what you believe—not to intimidate, but to make the call of the gospel clear. Worry less about offending the people and more about offending the gospel.

Finally, remember that the reason the preaching of Jesus was and is so interesting is that Jesus was persistently figurative. You name it, Jesus used it—hyperbole, example, metaphor, allegory, exaggeration, parable, even sarcasm. His descriptions were vivid, his use of the tradition creative and his stories unforgettable. If our preaching begins to sound more like the preaching of Jesus, our listeners may be more interested, more open to persuasion and, on a really good Sunday, a little bit impressed.