

Controlling our inner control freak

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Judy preached a sermon in which she told a story about herself, a lovely narrative that helped us connect with her on a personal level and supported the scripture lesson well. Judy was known for her preaching, and the church had grown steadily since the day she stepped in the pulpit.

In the handshake line, I overheard a parishioner telling her, “I’m getting awfully tired of hearing your stories. Next time, could you just stick with the text? Our last pastor just talked about the Bible and I learned so much from him.”

When I went to greet her, Judy looked clearly deflated. I said, “I’m sorry. I thought it was beautiful. I don’t know why people think they have the right to tell you what to preach.” I knew the downcast frustration well. I knew what it was like to spend a week wrestling with the scripture, praying for guidance, digging deep for just the right illustration, and preaching with that nervous feeling that you hope never goes away. Then the years of study and hours of preparation are disregarded in a matter of personal taste.

I also worry that we are becoming a nation of control freaks. So many of us need to control other people’s work and words, not because the person is wrong, but because he or she is not saying something in the same way that we would. I’m concerned that we’ve lost the art of listening without having to tell the person how to say it better. After all, it is very hard to fully hear and edit at the same time. What is this constant stream of feedback doing to pastors and artists in the midst of the very vulnerable act of creativity? What has brought us to this point?

Could it be the constant surveys we receive? Every time I stay at a hotel, rent a car, read a book, or buy a coffee, I’m asked to “rate my experience.” Was the experience a happy face or a sad face?

I don't know why we would need to rate our experience. The woman at the counter doesn't owe me a good time. My existential wellbeing cannot rely on a stranger's customer service. What is it doing to us, if we go through life, trying to count up all the ways people let us down, or imagine how our experience could have been better? Do we think that some corporation can give us a better experience of life? Do we believe that our lives would be better if we hire people to do things that way we would do them, and say things just the way we would say them? Does it follow that we think we should control the words of our pastors?

I'm pretty sure that the need to control the words and actions of other people is a recipe for frustration, not fulfilment. Our lives are made up of experiences—the happy face and the sad face experiences. And the people we interact with do not exist of the sole purpose of giving us a good experience. Imagine how drab our days would be if we only heard echoes of ourselves and we never listened to the anger, bitterness, or frustration of our barista. If we are talking about a matter of personal taste (matters of justice are in a different category), we can't make our lives better by controlling the people around us. It is our responsibility to live our moments, wake up to the wonder of people around us, and listen to their unique stories, especially when they are not like our own.