

Harvard's preacher: Peter J. Gomes, 1942–2011

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue



DIVINE JOLT: Gomes practiced his unusual homiletical gifts at Harvard's Memorial Church. COURTESY OF HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

The guest preacher opened his sermon with a rather long explication of Augustine's contrast between blessings and consolations. It was probably the first time most of the listeners at Duke Chapel had heard of *The City of God*. The preacher then reflected on how he had grown to appreciate the blessing of human sexuality. He was reminded of a story about Queen Victoria, who on the night before her wedding supposedly asked her mother how to handle the challenge of marital relations. "My dear, just close your eyes, lie back, and think of England," reported the preacher.

Even the Duke football team—which, since it was "Football Sunday," was packed unwillingly into the front pews—listened intently at this point.

"Young men," said the preacher, looking down on the football players, "Enjoy the gift of sexuality. True, it can make you miserable; but it can also bring you great joy.

Don't think that you invented this particular pleasure—surely even you have read the Book of Genesis."

Then, raising his voice to a virtual shout: "God has blessed us with sexual procreation, ordered us to be 'fruitful and multiply'—surely one of the Lord's most gracious commands."

The young jocks, indeed the whole congregation, was now sitting upright, uncertain whether to laugh, cheer or be indignant.

"Be fruitful! Enjoy the full range of God's gifts! Do not delay until you are decrepit and wasted. Look upon me and become wise. Imagine me in the shower. I don't care how much you are working out and how firm your biceps, one day you shall be as I. Obey Genesis 1:28!"

The sole postservice comment I recall came from a member of the defensive line: "What kind of accent was that anyhow?"

I feel sorry for those who never got to hear Peter J. Gomes work a congregation while a biblical text worked him. The theology displayed in his writing is biblical, in a highly imaginative way—a sort of eloquent last hurrah of New England Christian liberalism at its very best. He was a fine teacher, a legendary dinner-table raconteur, a self-described "secretary of state for religion" at Harvard, an Anglophile, a sometime organist and a perennially best-selling author. But his primary vocation was as a preacher.

Peter's pulpit posture might be described as one of gracious contempt for his congregation—no small achievement for a preacher at a place like Harvard. I greatly envied Peter's ability to be embraced by a congregation even as he ridiculed it, using his unique brogue—a mix of New England and upper-class British accents, with a hint of Harvard and a dash of southern gentility.

"We're in Advent, eschatological season par excellence," Peter would start a sermon, "and don't lie to me, you know little of eschatology; don't even attempt to fake that you do. You're thinking, 'Eschatology—Isn't that a subspecialty of proctology?' But do not despair of your intellectual limits; you shall know a great deal more about biblical eschatology before I'm done with you this morning."

I have known few preachers with more reverence for the homiletical arts and almost none who were more grateful that God had called him to preach. He once told me that he was ready to "robe up for the game anytime Harvard wants something said in a way that adds weight, no matter how trivial the occasion."

When I got Peter to speak at my alma mater, Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, Peter addressed a packed house in Wofford's Old Main, a building built by slave labor with bricks made by slaves on campus.

"I am not unmindful of the significance of this building, nor my presence in this pulpit," he said. "As a preacher, I'm accustomed to answering to the claims of the dead. I am acutely aware, at an occasion such as this, we are accompanied by the dead, anonymous and remembered, surrounding us, wanting to speak to us. Yet the voiceless dead cannot speak without us. Thus I speak to you . . ."

Peter's skill as a speaker made him the darling of Harvard alumni associations around the world. Two or three stereotypes were sure to be broken in the first five minutes of encountering this African-American Baptist, sometime Republican, Massachusetts-born preacher of Portuguese descent. (Peter was incensed to discover that Harvard was counting him as both an African-American and a Hispanic: "It's Gomes, you fools! Not Gomez!"). His many crossover identities equipped Peter to be a great apologist in dozens of unlikely settings. He always rendered his apology for the faith without groveling or patronizing.

One of the greatest sermons Peter preached was not on a Sunday morning from the pulpit of Harvard's Memorial Church but on the church's front steps. Speaking to a throng that had gathered after a gay hate crime on campus, he announced that he was "a Christian who happens as well to be gay."

One Sunday morning, after we had chatted in the vestry before the service at Memorial Church, Peter pulled out his big gold pocket watch (who but Peter carried a gold watch?), flipped it open, then closed it and said, "The hour hath come. Let us pray for grace." My knees were buckling at the thought of preaching in that space in my high-pitched southern twang, but I was emboldened by Peter's "Go get 'em, friend."

One Sunday, as Peter sat in that vestry and prepared for the morning service, a student usher entered and stammered, "There's somebody preaching here this morning."

Peter replied, "Of course, me."

"I mean there's somebody preaching in the pulpit. *Now*. Is that OK?"

"What?" Peter thrust his head into the sanctuary. Aghast, he saw an African-American woman in the pulpit ranting at the docile congregation, screaming over the organ prelude. Indignantly, Peter bustled over to her and hissed through gritted teeth, "You, come down here this instant. Yes, you."

The intruder stared down at Peter.

"This instant!" he sneered.

Startled, she came down the steps and informed Peter that she had been commissioned to preach that day a word direct from the Lord.

"Look you," said Peter, in love, "this is my pulpit. I have earned the right to preach in this place. No one is going to deliver any word from the Lord today except for the Reverend Doctor Peter J. Gomes. Now you go sit down on that pew and keep your mouth shut or I will call the campus police after I wring your head off."

Peter reported that the woman sat there throughout the service—silent, with a beatific smile upon her face.

"As the prelude ended, I looked with scorn upon my congregation," Peter confessed. "White, guilt-ridden liberals all, they would have sat there all morning, doing nothing while that woman continued her drivel unabated. They should thank God that their pastor is not some intellectual wimp."

When I got word that Peter had died, I recalled some of his memorable pronouncements, uttered in his inimitable voice: "Anything worth saying in a sermon is worth taking at least 40 minutes to say it." "What that preacher said, he said quite well, though what he said could have been as well left unsaid."

Peter's preaching was a divinely inspired jolt—biblical, urbane and intelligent.

"I never believed, never wanted to believe," a recent Harvard graduate said to me, "until I heard Professor Gomes speak. His wit and old-fashioned eloquence coaxed me into the faith I didn't desire until he told me about it in a sermon." Any preacher could die happy with such a eulogy.