

Leaving the church

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [June 16, 1999](#) issue

Since I left parish ministry almost two years ago, the oddest question I have been asked is, "What do you preach about now that you have left the church?" The people who ask tend to be deeply involved in their communities of faith. Many are clergy or denominational officers, while others supply the volunteer hours upon which any community depends. Church is more than a place or a people for them; it is a primary source of identity. So when they ask me their question, they ask it with compassion, as they might ask an amputee how she is getting along without her leg.

The first part of my answer is that I have not left the church. While I no longer serve one particular congregation, I still work for the church. The difference is how round that word has become for me. It no longer means a denomination, a building or even a self-identified community of believers. Instead, it means a far-flung bunch of people who are engaged in holy work. Some of them belong to church bodies and others do not. Some identify themselves as Christians and others would rather not. They include stockbrokers, seminarians, ballet teachers and bishops, as well as a few homebound prayer warriors and some Native American elders.

What they have in common is an acute sensitivity to the brokenness of other people and a willingness to participate in their healing. If God were to give them True Church T-shirts, I do not think any of them would wear them. The work itself is their primary source of identity.

The first part of my answer makes the second part easy. Now that I have left the local congregation, I preach on what is happening everywhere else in the world. Since I am spending less time in meetings and on the telephone, I spend more time at the feed store and the post office, talking to people and listening to them talk. It is amazing how much you can learn about what really concerns people by hanging out in such places. If this summer is as dry as last, will the hay supply hold out? How long does it take for a money order to get to Mexico by priority mail?

Conversations are more interesting now that I do not wear my clerical collar every day. There is something about being identified as a religious professional that

deforms normal human discourse. People expect me to be nicer than I am, for one thing. I expect myself to be wise and helpful, for another. Without the collar, I hear myself saying things such as, "What does it all mean? I don't have a clue. Do you?" Since I no longer represent a local community, I do not have to worry about embarrassing them anymore. I can write a passionate letter to the editor if I want to. I can get arrested for civil disobedience. I can even put a Gore 2000 sticker on my car.

If anything, there is more to preach about than ever before, only some of it sounds disloyal in church. When I led a congregation, I spent most of my time inside the church looking out. Now I spend more of my time outside the church looking in, and I find myself asking some of the same questions outsiders once asked me. How long can the Christian church continue to preach and teach scriptures that villainize Jews? At what point does our evangelical insistence on the superiority of Christ make us less than Christian? Are we really interested in a God with power to transform us, or do we prefer one who helps us feel better about the way we are?

My secret fear about churchgoing is that it works like a vaccine: a couple of drops under the tongue each week and pretty soon we are immune to the whole thing. The God-beseeking language requires no extraordinary effort. The summoning of the Holy Spirit expects no untoward response. Even the sacrament, when it comes, tastes more like breakfast than sacrifice. In most churches, it is possible to take part in all of this while engaged in active enmity with the pastor, other members of the community, or the world at large. Maybe we should print Garrison Keillor's caution at the bottom of our Sunday bulletins: "You can become a Christian by going to church about as easily as you can become a car by sleeping in a garage." There is more to worshiping God than just showing up.

I have been called cynical for saying things like this. If it is true, then I hope I am no more cynical about my own community of faith than Jesus was about his. Love fuels the discontent. So does self-knowledge. God's vision of the church is so much grander than ours that sometimes it seems necessary, as Søren Kierkegaard wrote, to preach against Christianity. Otherwise we run the risk of preferring our own system for getting hold of God to the God beyond our grasp. Otherwise we may try to possess God instead of begging God to possess us.

One good way to get some perspective on this is to leave church more often—not permanently, but regularly—to vacate the holy premises and mingle with people

whose lives do not include church. Ask them why not and listen to what they say without trying to convince them they are wrong. Find out what really matters to them, and stay open to the possibility that they too know something about the truth. Then head back to church with them in tow, if only in your heart, and let them nag you while you are doing whatever you do there.

What do I preach about now that I have left the church? The same thing I always did.

If we want to be the church we will get out of the house, joining that far-flung bunch of people who are helping God heal the world.