

He doesn't just listen to the Sunday sermon; he draws it

by [Lilly Fowler](#)

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ST. LOUIS (RNS) On the second Sunday of Lent, John Hendrix sits in one of the pews near the back of Grace and Peace Fellowship, a Presbyterian church with stained glass in green and orange, and a giant, organ pipe front and center.

Casually decked in a striped, button-down shirt and jeans, he looks like any other member of the hip and young crowd. With his wife, Andrea, and his two children, Jack, 8, and Annie, 5, Hendrix stands and sings and partakes of gluten-free communion.

But as soon as the sermon starts, Hendrix sets himself apart, whipping out his sketchbook and pens to draw the pastor's sermon.

"My sketchbooks are some of the most favorite things I do where I just love the images I make," Hendrix, 37, said in a recent interview in his home near Washington University where he teaches at the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts.

Hendrix doesn't make his money through his sermon sketches but in other ways: He teaches and freelances as an illustrator for big-name magazines such as *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone* and *The New Yorker*. He also draws pictures for book authors. And he writes and illustrates his own nonfiction work.

His first book *John Brown: His Fight for Freedom*, about the white American abolitionist, was published in 2009. This fall, he's due to release a book about World War I called *Shooting at the Stars: The Christmas Truce of 1914*. Both are for young readers.

But Hendrix says his sketches of sermons are pure pleasure.

"In my professional work I always enjoy it but at the end of the day, there's always something that I wish was different," said Hendrix. "It's rarely like that with my sketchbook. It just connects me to the joy of making, and it makes me feel like I was when I was a kid and drawing in church."

In general, bold colors, macabre images and a combination of oversize lettering and text characterize Hendrix's artwork.

On this particular Sunday, the Rev. Thurman Williams preaches about the power of Jesus to cleanse those around him. He talks about a specific chapter in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus, filled with compassion, heals a man with leprosy.

Occasionally pausing to look up, Hendrix quickly sketches a clothesline. Along with images of socks and underwear, letters hang from the clothesline spelling out what the leper says to Jesus in the gospel, "If you are

willing, you can make me clean.”

By the time the service ends, Hendrix has completed a good portion of his latest church sketch.

In the coming week, he’ll finish the piece at home, adding color, though he says he likes to complete as much as he can during worship because the “magic happens in the pews.”

Originally from St. Louis, Hendrix grew up in a Methodist household. His mother liked to work with crafts and sew. His father was in the Navy for 30 years and had a job as a banker. Both were supportive of the idea of their son becoming an artist.

Hendrix left St. Louis for Kansas City, Kan., to attend the University of Kansas. He then moved to New York City with the intention of making it big, attending the School of Visual Arts and eventually working as an assistant art director for the Op-Ed page at *The New York Times*. He also taught at the Parsons School of Design.

It was in New York, Hendrix says, that he became comfortable with the idea that his art is informed by his faith.

“I really encountered for the first time this idea of artists, identifying themselves as artists, and also being faithful people, trying to make stuff that, you know, doesn’t look like painted Bible stories and sappy stuff you find in a Christian book store,” Hendrix said.

Although Hendrix sells prints of some of his church sketches on his personal website for about \$50 each, he says he’s dubious about turning them into a commercial venture because he’s terrified he’ll spoil the enjoyment of them.

Besides, Hendrix says, mainstream publishers have typically reacted skeptically to the idea of collecting his church illustrations.

“I think a lot of secular publishers feel a little odd publishing a book that’s just about sincere belief, sadly,” Hendrix said. The idea of working with religious publishers has never appealed to him, either.

Around Christmas time, Hendrix heard a sermon about Jesus’ birth. It inspired him to sketch a wolf-devil in the underworld who tries to devour Christ in his manger. In other words, not your typical Christian fare.

Even his Web comic *The Adventures of the Holy Ghost*, about what Hendrix imagines the day-to-day activities of the Holy Spirit to be like, conveys a dark streak. (Christians believe the Holy Spirit is the third divine person of the Trinity.) The little ghost Hendrix colors in blue for his series seems to alternate between sweetness and despair.

Despite the sometimes gloomy elements found in his work, the Rev. Kurt Lutjens, longtime pastor at Grace and Peace, says both he and the congregants are fans of the illustrator’s work.

“John’s an artist at heart and loves to draw, and it always struck me as a great way to take in what he’s hearing,” Lutjens said. “I never perceived it as inappropriate or anything other than the way John expresses himself.”

Hendrix says drawing the sermon has strengthened his convictions in ways hearing them never could. They are now ink-sketched on his heart.