

Bad sermons?

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At a reception to launch a new collection of Lucille Clifton's poems ([*The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010*](#)), the editor of the volume, Kevin Young, described coming across a folder in Clifton's archives at Emory University. The folder had been labeled "Unpublished Poems." That label had been scratched out and replaced by something like, "Poems that really aren't that good and should probably just be thrown away someday." That label too had been scratched out and replaced with "Bad poems."

Young included several of the poems found in this folder in the collection. (He noted that these were "bad poems" that everyone in the room probably wished they had written.) I have to wonder how Clifton judged the value of these poems. We often don't know what we are saying or why it matters until someone says it back to us.

Recently my priest has been frustrated that our congregation is so silent after the sermon. She looks out and sees blank stares and wonders, "What does that mean?" Based on our reaction, she might very well file these sermons under "bad sermons." But the reality is different, more mixed and more subtle.

"Nice sermon, pastor" uttered in the receiving line can be as awkward and meaningless as a full-scale critique or argument launched at coffee hour. But our ecclesiastical systems lack mechanisms for pastors to engage meaningfully about their preaching.

Our tradition has the sermon as proclamation not dialogue. But many pastors never feel lonelier than when they preach into silence.