

When preaching is out of control

By [William H. Willimon](#)

April 20, 2015

I'll admit it. I like to be in control. I don't think of myself as a control freak. However, I want there to be a minimum of chaos. On Sunday, for instance, I like to have a general idea of where we are going to be by noon.

It is fine for the Holy Spirit to be invited into our worship, but only to a degree. I like the Holy Spirit to have some room for movement, but not all that much.

I believe it is helpful in the planning process to state a theme of where the sermon might go on a Sunday like this one, with a text like the one assigned. After all, we ought to know where we are going, and if we don't, we'll never get there. However, the statement of theme might be guilty of giving the illusion that we have somehow, by simply stating a theme or a message for the day, controlled where we are going. Most preachers learn very early that preaching is not an easily controlled activity. And I like to be in control.

Some time ago Barbara Brown Taylor stated that "something happens between the preacher's lips and the congregation's ears that is beyond prediction or explanation." Taylor notes an experience that every preacher has, sooner or later: "later in the week, someone quotes part of my sermon back to me . . . only I never said it. There is more going on here than anyone can say." And how! In order to prepare our sermons well, we need a fairly clear idea of our intentions. But in preaching there can be a huge gap between intention and result.

And so a distinguished literary critic, in pointing out the great gaps that occur in literature between a writer's intention and the results that take place in the reader, calls his book *The Uses of Misunderstanding*. How well I recall interviewing an older preacher, asking what he had learned in 40 years of preaching. He answered, "The possibilities for misunderstanding are virtually limitless." And how!

How many times have you stood at the door on a Sunday morning and a layperson says to you, "That was a great sermon on . . ." And you want to say, "But I never said that. That was not what this sermon was about." Too late. The sermon is

already out of your hands and into the congregation. Something has wrenched the sermon from your control.

The sermon is not, therefore, best conceived of as a skillful packaging of ideas that are delivered to a congregation. Rather, a sermon is an event, a conversation between pastor and people that can go in almost any direction.

I remember an educational theorist years ago telling teachers, "Teaching is not telling and listening is not learning." This teacher of teachers had learned that education is a more indeterminate, risky endeavor than simply delivering information. The receiver is busy intruding powerfully on the message that is delivered. We cannot predict where a sermon will finally go. Rather than predicting, we ought to consider that perhaps the most important preaching task is offering, intending to evoke an event, but not being able to control that event. My friend Eugene Lowry likes to say that the preacher's work is to help people get to the point where they can perceive what God is doing and open themselves to that. Beyond that, preaching is mostly out of our control.

We are not simply delivering a package of information to a congregation. In the sermon, we are walking a journey together, engaging in a conversation. In any conversation, there must be a willingness on the part of each partner to be changed through the conversation. A lecture is one-way communication. The speaker hopes to change the listeners. But in a conversation, all of the speakers are also listeners. As you preach, you are busy listening to the congregation, picking up on a number of subtle, but powerful cues from them that tell you how you are communicating. The congregation is also struggling to hear what you are saying. But as they struggle, they are also busy rearranging what they hear.

Add to this the Holy Spirit. By God's grace, the Holy Spirit takes our pitiful words of preaching and enlivens them, rearranges them, helps them to catch fire in people's lives.

In the African American tradition there is the powerful use of silence. The preacher stops frequently throughout the sermon, sometimes even in mid-sentence, to let the congregation have some room to process what is being said. This is crucial space. Not only does it provide space for people to thoughtfully consider what is being said, to catch up with the flow of ideas, but it also provides for the Holy Spirit to come. It is in the gaps, these life-giving spaces, that the Spirit can roam, can take hold of

lives, and can make of our preaching more than it would be if left up to us. No one did this better than the great Howard Thurman of Marsh Chapel, Boston University. The phrase “pregnant pause” was meant for Thurman’s preaching.

Eugene Lowry says, “We cannot control the result of our sermon. We do our best, of course, but know that with God’s Word we are at best working provisionally. The Spirit works with certainty. Our task is to try to maximize the possibility of proclamation happening. We simply cannot produce it by will.” And I like to be in control.

Better than seeing the sermon as my product, I ought to see it as my gift, my part in the divine-human conversation that takes place in the congregation. I ought to enjoy the freedom that is given in the sermon, the freedom for new insight to arise in the congregation, the freedom for the Holy Spirit to take my poor sermon and make it mean even more than I intended. There can be great grace in learning to enjoy being out of control in the sermon!

*Originally posted at [A Peculiar Prophet](#)*