The surprising freedom of being a guest preacher

I might or might not be invited back. Either way, there’s no lasting harm.

by Barbara Brown Taylor in the October 21, 2020 issue

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When I left parish ministry 20 years earlier than expected, my preaching life was born again. This came as a surprise, since there was general agreement among my clergy friends that guest preaching was a lame gig. It was something people with no congregation did, filling in on a random Sunday for a preacher who was ill or away on vacation, or serving as a placeholder while a search committee did its job. It meant working hard on a sermon for people you didn't know but who knew each other well, which explained why it was so easy to make their eyebrows fly up when you said something that did not meet code or pressed a bruise you did not know was there. Guest preaching was for people who didn’t have a real preaching job.

Some of this was true. Once, when a charming clergy friend decided it would be fun for me to preach at his church while an assistant minister covered for me at mine, I failed to ask several important questions. Did he stand behind the pulpit when he

preached, or did he walk around? Did he use a manuscript when he spoke, or did he look straight into people's eyes? How long were his sermons, usually? But even if I had remembered to ask, his answers would not have helped. Afterward, as I stood shaking hands at the door, a small woman with bright eyes and tan cheeks said, with genuine pity, "I'm sorry. It's just that we love Sam."

I tucked that wisdom away and pulled it out years later when I was always and only a guest. Always ask questions. Remember they love their pastor. Don't pretend to be something you're not. By then my real job was teaching college, which freed up my weekends for the first time in decades. Invitations came and I accepted them, learning to preach in a whole new way.

The first gift of guest preaching was the loosening of denominational bonds. I learned how to wait for the Spirit to move in a Pentecostal church, even if it meant the sermon started late and ended even later. I learned that 30 minutes was about right for Baptists and too long for Lutherans. I spoke in gymnasiums, under tents, on stages, and in cafeterias, without any familiar furniture or forms of worship. The disorientation was dazzling. None of my Episcopal lingo worked. I had to reach for language that lived closer to the heart of common Christian experience.

There were also invitations from university chapels, which caused me to test the age limits of my resources. Some of my favorite books were written when I was in college, which made them grandparent-age for a 21st-century sophomore. This worked fine with older congregations, but a chapel full of young people—even those required to be there—deserved a new review of culture and media. The gift of being their guest led me to discover new authors, musicians, bloggers, filmmakers, performance artists, and podcast hosts who woke me up to new ways of communicating with people of any age.

The most surprising gift was the freedom to preach without fear of being fired—or, if not fired, at least roundly criticized with apparent relish. Since I have been married to a churchgoer for a long time, I know that criticizing the sermon is a group sport that can be carried out with no real malice toward the preacher (though this point is often lost on the preacher). Being a guest doesn't prevent it from happening. The difference is that both my listeners and I know it's a one-shot deal, freeing us to say and think things we might not otherwise have said or thought. Since someone responsible has invited me, I am presumably safe but still unpredictable, like the babysitter who shows up with steel darts and a dartboard instead of a Monopoly

game. If all goes well, I might be invited back. If not, I won't. Either way, there's no lasting harm. The great thing about guests is that they go home.

What I value most about speaking of faith far from home is that I have to travel light. I don't know my hosts well. There are so many ways of being Christian that I don't even know for sure how the worship service will go. I certainly don't know who the pillars of the church are, or the troublemakers, or what kind of a week they have all had. I don't know what turns a stranger's speech into a sermon for them. I don't know what they depend on it to do. All of these uncertainties unpack my bags until there are only a few things left: a sacred text, a trust in the Spirit, an experience of being human, and the desire to bear good news.

When I worry that won't be enough, I remember there may be another guest in the congregation that day—someone who didn't mean to come to church but turned in at the last minute, or came to placate a relative or please a friend. They don't know the same things I don't know. They too are traveling light. They are starting where I'm starting, with the desire for something to happen this morning that will make a difference.

The only thing I know that the other guest may not know is that something does happen, over and over again, in the most surprising ways. Sometimes it's a praise dance, and sometimes it's a descant on the last verse of a hymn. Sometimes it's a spontaneous baptism, or an old couple holding each other up on their way to take communion. I hate to say it, but it's rarely the sermon, at least not all by itself. Whether there's a guest in the pulpit or a pastor who knows everyone by name, that person's job is to do what any person sitting in front of them could do: give voice to the faith that is in them, and trust God to do the rest.

This article is excerpted from her new book, Always a Guest: Speaking of Faith Far from Home*, published this month by Westminster John Knox Press. Used by permission. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Traveling light."*