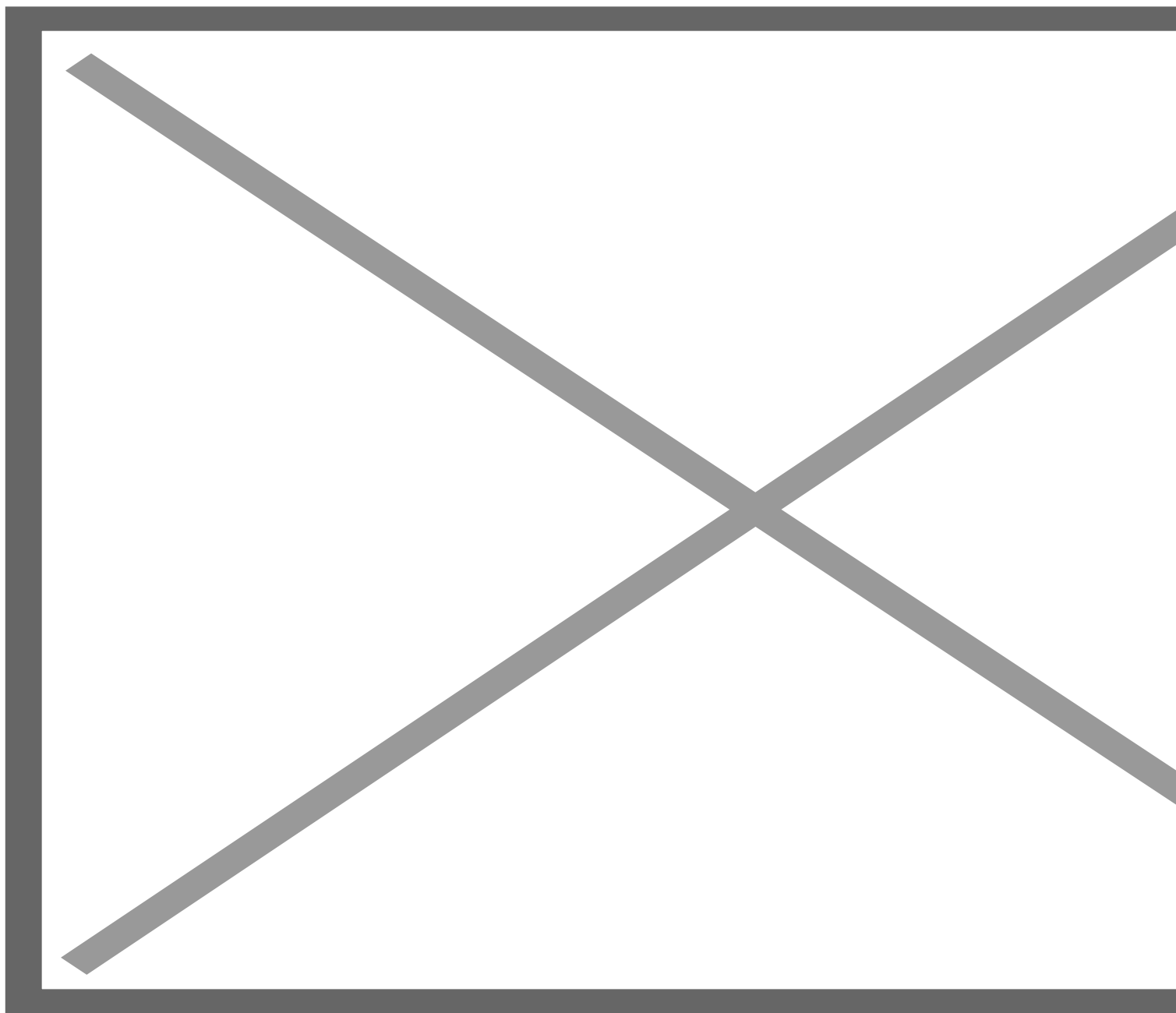


Sermons without church

For someone who doesn't call herself a Christian, I listen to a lot of sermons. They're providing some much-needed sustenance these days.

by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue
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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

Lately, when I mention that I work in immigration rights, I get grimaces of sympathy. Or, confoundingly, I get thanked for my service like I'm a soldier in some kind of just war.

In reality, my contributions to the cause usually take the form of press releases and Canva graphics. I work from home; I sit in meetings. If I am serving in a war, it is as an intermediate bureaucratic flunky.

The truth is that it doesn't matter how insulated or isolated you may be from the realities of "the immigration landscape." Even if you are not among those being materially harmed by armed men on the streets kidnapping their loved ones, you are suffering moral and spiritual harm from it.

I have taken the prophylactic measures one would hope to see me taking for my mental health. I try to leave work at work; I have a variety of coping measures (some healthy and some slightly otherwise); I see a therapist once a week; I have both a dog and a cat. And even so, I find myself reaching a point where I feel worn thin, the bad days outweighing and outlasting the good. I find myself dragging my feet to log in for work; I feel doom and a kind of fluttering tightness in my chest every time a news alert comes across my phone; I lie awake at night wondering if I'm doing enough, wondering how I could do more.

It was amid this worn-thin-ness that I started listening to sermons. It began on Instagram—little clips of a sermon by Matthew Potts, the head pastor at the Memorial Church at Harvard University and a divinity school professor of mine. The clips spoke to the despair and the harm of the moment, and they left me hungry for more. So I found the church's SoundCloud account and listened to the full sermon. It became a Monday morning tradition—each week, as I logged in to compile all of the weekend's awful headlines, I would have in my ears the words of whoever preached at Memorial Church the previous day.

Often that is Potts; sometimes it is a seminarian or a visiting preacher. Every time, it is a 15- or 20-minute reminder of the sacredness of my work and the holiness of my belief—if not always in God, then at least in the preciousness of the lives of my neighbors and community members. Every time, it brings me anew to the work, unwinds the tightness in my shoulders, reminds me that we do not get to where we are going through singular heroic actions but rather through a lot of us all hoping for the same thing.

I have written here before about my hesitancy around calling myself a Christian. A little bit of early religious trauma from some harmful encounters with purity culture and White evangelical churches, a little bit of lingering teenage suspicion of being a joiner, a little bit of slothfulness on Sunday mornings. I've been cynical and scared—sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for reasons you might call sinful or prideful. I've also been curious and open—you don't end up with a divinity school degree by accident, don't end up with a column in the *Century* by being completely closed off to the church. And so here I am, announcing that beautiful, well-preached sermons, formed in a Christian tradition, are helping to fill a spiritual need for me. Listen up, everyone: Water is, in fact, wet.

I want to let my listening to these sermons be what it is for now. I'm not ready to let it mean anything deeper than that, not yet. I'm not looking for a church, not ready to get my heart broken in this specific way again. But it's something.

Katy Kirby's song "Table" opens with the following lines: "He prepares a table for me / And one of these days I'll have to sit down and eat." Something about the song captures, perfectly, my hesitancy: knowing there's a feast of plenty but being able to do no more than pace around it restlessly, troubled and anxious. In the music video, Kirby is in puritan garb, smashing a table with an old-fashioned axe, turning it into splinters. I know the feeling—hell, these days I *am* the feeling.

I feel this way about the world, and I have felt this way about the church. But even as Kirby is demolishing the table, she is singing not just about being called to feast but about making the feast for others. By the end of the video, Kirby has assembled the scraps of the table into a makeshift shelter—table legs for sides, her voluminous puritan overskirt the roof. The song ends: “Have you ever tried trying to run out / Of everything you got?”

These days, I am running out of everything I’ve got about as quickly as I get it. I think many of us are. I don’t mind trying to go for broke—this is the time, the place to spend all of my energy and my anger and my sadness; there is no point in hoarding it away for some future day of change. I want to break apart the table, and I want to serve people around it. When I listen to these sermons, on my own and through headphones, I know they are not the same thing as sitting at the table. But as I give everything I have to the work I do, they are sustenance, napkin-wrapped, generously passed along by those able to sit, those still holding a chair open for me. One of these days I’ll have to sit down and eat.