

Rhythm of preaching

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue



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["A preacher's anxiety"](#) by Teri McDowell Ott sets me to pondering the mystery of preaching. Sometimes preaching is overshadowed by liturgy, administrative demands, pastoral responsibilities, and contemporary cultural preferences and practices. Yet in my mind it remains at the center of things. Three years after retiring, I am still learning to live without the rhythm and weekly demand of preaching, and still pondering the mystery of it.

With integrity and eloquence, Ott describes not only the pre-sermon nervousness the preacher feels, but also the exhilaration when the preaching is over. We preachers are so invested intellectually, emotionally, and physically that we are notorious for needing a Sunday afternoon nap. Immediately after delivering an effective sermon, confesses Ott, "I feel magnetic," "soaring on the preacher's high." After worship, says Ott, "my ego continues to lap up kudos like a thirsty dog at the water bowl." Honest preachers know exactly what she means.

I love the way Barbara Brown Taylor described her vocational decision in *Leaving Church*: "Being a priest seemed only slightly less dicey to me than being chief engineer at a nuclear plant. In both cases, one needed to know how to approach great power without losing great danger and getting fried in the process." The pastor lives and works close to the heat: the passion, tragedy, and exultation, the pain, loss, and indescribable joy of human life. People invite us into their lives at a level not accessible to anyone else. They tell us things they tell no one else, things we must never tell anyone (even our spouse), things we carry around the rest of our lives. They call us when they lose their jobs or a spouse dies. They tell us that sex is

no longer interesting, that they can't believe in God any longer, that their teenage daughter is doing cocaine. They want us at their bedside when they are critically ill and invite us into the most intimate space in all of life when life comes to an end. They turn us into addicts with their postworship compliments, and then devastate us with criticism when we're most vulnerable. They know our salaries, what kind of car we drive, and where we go on vacation. And, remarkably, they also come week after week to sit quietly and listen to us talk. If there is a more astonishing fact and more unlikely honor, I cannot imagine what it might be.

I'm not sure there's another job in which professional identity and sense of self are so intertwined. Ott wonders if she will know "if my ministry is shape-shifting into being more about me than the people I serve, the word I preach, or about the God who honored me with this position in the first place." Simply asking the question is a kind of answer. The preacher should place a copy of Ott's penetrating question where she or he can see it every single day.

What I miss most is not the preaching itself but the preparing, the rhythm, the demand, and discipline. Preachers develop a weekly routine of Bible study, of doing historical, theological, and literary research, and of making connections between the text and life. Text leads to serious biblical inquiry, which leads to the theologians, which leads to literature, poetry, and the daily newspaper. Preparing to preach was my spiritual discipline, my devotions. I thought over, wrestled with, prayed in desperation, sometimes with tears in my eyes, at the profundity and beauty of what I was reading and pondering. The end result, the sermon, is the preacher's weekly offering to God. And as the psalmist suggests, God will prosper this, the "work of our hands" (Ps. 90).