

They Call Me “Preacher”

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I am rather new to the vocation of Ministry of Word and Sacrament, having now been ordained a mere ten months. Accordingly, I am also rather new to the pulpit, having only recently preached my fortieth sermon. I am, by choice, a preacher for a very small, rural Presbyterian (USA) congregation in the Appalachian Mountains of southwest Virginia. I say, “Preacher,” because that’s how I’m known—that’s my title so newly acquired and so unabashedly now embraced. But felicity for the label didn’t come with quick grace or with much ease.

I remember the first time I heard someone refer to me as “Preacher.” I was sitting in “Anna’s,” *the* one restaurant in town. It was my first Sunday after worship; several of us had beaten the Baptists to the buffet line and were thus easily finding ourselves a seat. As I sat in the straight back wooden chair, a man’s voice suddenly boomed from the rear of the establishment, calling out to a young woman at our table. She said, “Hello” and then rather happily announced to the man, and also to the other guests, most of whom were known from childhood, that “This,” pointing to me, “is our new Preacher.”

The pronouncement of the title shocked me; it felt like a cold bucket of water poured slowly down the curve of my back. Immediately, I felt as though I were a specimen in a high school lab jar; I could easily imagine a student saying to a peer, “This is our new frog that we’ll dissect tomorrow morning....”

As the conversation ensued, I quietly debated within about the label or title of “Preacher.” A small voice echoing through the halls of my mind quickly began reflective discourse, saying, “‘Preacher?’ Well, preaching is in the job description, but that’s not my only job. That’s not who I am. That’s not how I think of myself. Not once in seminary did a professor other than the homiletician refer to me as a ‘Preacher,’ and that particular reference was made entirely in the context of a class. So how is it that now, my very first Sunday, I’ve been given the dubious title, the label, and the lab jar of ‘Preacher?’”

Initially, as one can see in the dialogue I had with myself, I was a bit annoyed by the label—I wasn’t quite sure if “Preacher” was an exalted enough title to convey the full theological weight of my position as Presbyterian Minister. After all, hadn’t I completed three years of post-college education and earned the distinctive degree of Master of Divinity? Hadn’t I studied Greek, Hebrew, hermeneutics, church history, theology, and pastoral care and even done quite well in some of it? Hadn’t I jumped through more “Committee on Preparation for Ministry” hoops than a circus dog at Barnum’s? Hadn’t I, after all of this, earned a more distinguished title than “Preacher”? And by the way, though not tangentially, what exactly do people mean when they call someone “Preacher”?

To my chagrin, it wasn’t long before I heard myself referred to, consistently I might add, as “Preacher.” Countless times, as I sat quietly in the home of a parishioner, the phone would ring and I would hear the all too familiar words: “Hello? Oh hey, can I call you back? I’ve got the Preacher here and we’re talking.”

Again and again it came, an assault without relent. I felt what Paul surely must have experienced as he was followed by the slave-girl who had a spirit of divination. Everywhere I went people would greet me by saying, "Howdy, Preacher," "You think it'll rain, Preacher?" "When are we going fishing, Preacher?"

I gradually began to ask myself why I wasn't called Administrator, Teacher, Minister, Sacramentalist, Liturgist, Singer, Studier, Writer, or any number of other possible titles that also play into my vocation. Why call me, as if it were my name, "Preacher"?

Then it hit, slowly falling upon me as rain in the spring. Drop by drop I began to understand. I'm "Preacher" because I'm the message bearer, the one who brings a word or two on Sunday mornings, or whenever else a word or two is called for.

But I resisted the title; I resisted being labeled like a frog approaching dissection. The title felt belittling, limiting, and too Pentecostal-like for my Presbyterian ears. I preferred folks to call me by my name, and in lieu of this, "Pastor."

The name-calling continued, however. "Why don't you come by in the afternoon, Preacher?" "You want to have lunch, Preacher?" "Oh, that fellow is a bad man, Preacher."

Though unwelcome, the title incessantly loitered around my study and the recesses of barbershops and grocery stores. "Preacher" came from the mouths of those who had lived fifty years, as well as from six-year-old first graders. "Preacher" even made its way into the sanctity of my truck through the thumb of a hitchhiker. Like the national debt, it seemed to have no end.

Finally, however, one afternoon while I was visiting a ninety-two year old woman, the label caught me off guard, overpowered my ability to resist, and commanded me in a southern drawl to embrace the resisted name of "Preacher."

The moment was like this: I was sitting in a comfortable cherry rocking chair inside a relic of post Civil War Virginia, doing my best to counter the forces of a seductively beckoning nap. The woman, in the sweet splendor of her southern accent, talked much about her life and the life of her church; just as I felt my eyelids grow exceedingly heavy, she turned rather unexpectedly to me and asked, with all the innocence of someone her age, "Pray, tell me, Preacher, why are you a preacher?"

Without so much as taking a breath or missing a beat I replied, to my utter bewilderment, "Because that's who I am."