

David Ward. *Practicing the Preaching Life*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2019. 193 pages. \$21.49.

Homiletician David Ward (Indiana Wesleyan University) issues an invitation to preachers to step off the preaching treadmill and reconsider what makes preaching “good.” This may seem a tame project, except that the driving question Ward pursues is not at all tame: What if a good sermon is not, after all, the product of a failsafe homiletical *method*, but the byproduct of a soul-feeding, engaged, sustainable *life*? Ward’s argument draws deeply on Augustine and other homiletical sources, as well as social practices theory with its recasting of virtues as practice-sustaining *habitus*. In the course of his discussion of practices, Ward renders readers a double service, providing not only a fresh view of preaching, but a sound introduction to social practices theory. His discussion is both constructive and duly critical, drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Pierre Bourdieu.

Ultimately, Ward invites us to spend less time tinkering with homiletical innovations and more investing in life practices that contribute to spiritual depth, compassion, and justice. This is what makes lives good, and good lives get to Sunday with something good to say.

Ward is persuaded that, for too many preachers (including seasoned ones), preaching preparation is a desperate scramble toward Sunday, haunted by a sense of obligation to outdo oneself in the pulpit, week after week. Addressing the problem with the empathy and insider perspective of someone who has worked this territory, Ward urges preachers to forego making every week one more quest after the holy grail of the perfect sermon. Instead, Ward invites preachers to pursue a handful of life- and spirit-formative practices, including ones that engage us deeply with God as well as with radically “other” persons and communities. These include prayer and meditative reading of scripture, but also relationships of openness, care and service within and beyond the Christian community. When the preaching life is shaped by such practices, Ward contends, unexpected pastoral obligations are less likely to feel like unwelcome intrusions on preaching preparation, holding promise, instead, of relational wisdom and grace-filled surprise.

Following MacIntyre’s lead, Ward elaborates on three virtues he sees as essential to the practices that sustain the preaching life: “centered humility,” “compassionate empathy,” and “participatory wisdom.” Yet, following Bourdieu, he stresses that their expression must be calibrated contextually. Ward’s modifiers (centered/compassionate/participatory) signal that virtues are not ethereal abstractions, but take shape in and through sustained action. Active demonstrations of compassion develop empathy; openness to the life and perspective of the radically other develops wisdom; and intentional engagement with God through prayer and scripture study deepens humility by exposing one’s own limited vision and fallible judgment.

Somewhat controversial will be Ward’s caution against what he regards as overly broad lists of “Christian” practices propounded by such advocates of the Christian social practices movement as Dorothy Bass, Craig Dykstra, Miroslav Volf, and others. Ward stipulates, in line with the Wesleyan tradition, that practices only count as *essentially* Christian if “commanded” by scripture. Yet, surprisingly, he singles out the practice of “saying yes and saying no” as a non-essential practice, even though it appears to meet the Wesleyan “command” criterion (“let your yes be yes, and your no, no,” Matt 5:37). Moreover, for a preacher to speak a clear, discerning “yes” or “no” to dozens of good causes and harmless diversions seems crucial if she hopes to maintain the sort of sustaining and sustainable life Ward commends.

Some readers may find Ward’s vision for practicing a good, productive preaching life energizing, yet be at a loss when it comes to restructuring their complicated lives to

accommodate the web of sustaining practices Ward commends. Preachers' lives, like everyone else's, are sites where multiple communities of obligation and expectation overlap. Family expectations, ongoing networks of friendship and collegiality, ecclesiastical roles, and pastoring itself pull in all directions. Ward acknowledges this complexity to an extent in his brief discussion of bivocational pastoring; but a more stepwise map toward sustainable patterns that take competing demands seriously would have been welcome.

That said, Ward succeeds in liberating his readers from the notion that the truly "good" sermon must dazzle the listener with theological sophistication, beguiling poetics, or a spitfire delivery. A life of sustained and sustaining Christian practice interweaves naturally with everyday experience, scripture, and the wider world sending the preacher to the congregation ready to testify. Such preaching builds good lives, not only in the pews, but in the pulpit as well.

Sally A. Brown, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ