



Preaching Is an Act of Pastoral Care:
A Conversation with Richard DuBose and Pam Driesell
April 8, 2026

Mark Ramsey: Hi, this is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative. And today, I get to be with great friends and colleagues: Richard DuBose, Pam Driesell, and my TMC colleague, Adam Mixon. I'd like each of you just to introduce yourself briefly and say where you are in, sort of, the landscape of ministry and life. And then, I'll tell you why the three of us are together. Richard, why don't you start?

Richard DuBose: Okay. I'm Richard DuBose, president of the Montreat Conference Center, a conference center located in Western North Carolina that's affiliated with the Presbytery Church (U.S.A.). And I'm an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church. I'm not an ordained Minister of the Word and Sacrament, so I come to this discussion today from the perspective of someone who sits in the pew.

Mark: Pam?

Pam Driesell: I'm Pam Driesell. I'm semi-retired. I still work some with ministry collaboratives. I work with Adam, co-facilitating a preaching cohort. I work with the Princeton initiative called Iron Sharpening Iron, equipping young women pastors for senior positions in the church - that's across denominations. I was a new church organizing pastor and pastored a larger church in Atlanta. But now, I'm also just mostly preparing to be a grandmother.

Adam Mixon: Nice.

Mark: Congratulations. That's great. Adam?

Adam: Yeah. My name's Adam Mixon. I'm the content curator for the Ministry Collaborative, but I also pastor the Zion Spring Baptist Church in downtown Birmingham, Alabama, for the last 25 years. I'm interested in what this conversation is going to be like today. So, let's get at it.

Mark: Yeah. And this conversation's kicked off by, of all the emails I get, a bunch of colleagues forwarded me something Richard, you wrote, I think on the Montreat platform in early July, with the title "Are There Boundaries for Politics in the Pulpit?" And you came at that, I think, from a wonderful perspective of hosting preachers every summer at Montreat. Could you just say a little bit about what prompted you to write that? And I'd love to get Pam and Adam in the conversation.

Richard: Sure. So, to begin, we have 10 worship services every summer in Montreat, primarily for the community who is here over the weekend. Our conferences run Sunday to Saturday, but we have a congregation of significant size on Sunday morning, and we invite 10 preachers from around the country, with a preference for Presbyterians, but certainly not exclusively Presbyterians, to come and preach in Montreat. I've been here now for 11 summers, which means I've had the experience of 110 Sundays, and we deliberately try to diversify that offering. So, we've had a few repeaters during that time, but in the main, we have had a wide variety of preaching here in Montreat. What prompted me to write the article was just an observation that kicked up again this summer that periodically rises.

My first summer was 2015. That was the summer of the tragic shooting in Charleston, South Carolina, Mother Emanuel. And there was a lot of debate that summer over how sermons should or should not engage that shooting, politics in general. And I see an ebb and flow in this, but it comes and goes in its intensity in summers in Montreat, where we have a debate that usually runs through my inbox. I don't hear the community debating it very often. I overgeneralized it, polarized it a bit in my article, to make a point, what I termed a unity versus prophecy debate, i.e.: should sermons primarily promote the unity of the church, or are sermons really necessarily required to be good sermons to engage in our social, economic, political issues of the day, and to be more prophetic in taking stances on those issues? And so that's what the article was about. Without burying the lede, I'll just say ultimately the article takes us into a place that the unity versus prophecy debate is really a false debate, that that's really not what makes a strong sermon, that the best preaching is both unifying and prophetic. And that's, I think, why it sparked some dialogue, is that folks had different reactions to that interpretation.

Mark: Yes. And I'll just say, as somebody who talks to pastors every week, you're touching something that every pastor struggles with. And, frankly, every church member who faithfully attends worship, I think, struggles with that balance as well. Pam, what's your take on that?

Pam: Yeah. So, I love where you started, Richard. It's a question. Are we curious about are there boundaries? Where are the boundaries? To me, I don't know, the older I get, the more I consider curiosity itself a spiritual discipline. And, for preachers, I think getting curious about the question itself is really important, and helping the people with whom you are sharing the good news to get curious. What are boundaries around that? I don't necessarily think it's the preacher's job to answer the question. I think it is the preacher's job to raise the question, and to struggle with it in their sermon preparation, in their own soul. I think sometimes there's a temptation in preaching to think, "I've got to have this completely settled conviction in order to preach something, rather than preaching the struggle itself."

Adam: I think I've always imagined your question slightly differently, but kind of along the same line. I've been confronted with this idea of prophetic versus the pastoral. In my tradition, and owing, in some parts, to my social location, that line is super blurry. In a community that's in the margins, the luxury of choosing whether my sermon is going to speak to the broader context, or to speak into people's personal lives in a way, or speak into their interpersonal relationship, it's almost imperceptible. I've never really spent a lot of time drawing those lines. I've kind of trusted Spirit to give me what the people need to hear, and then they draw conclusions on, now so what? What do I do with this immediately? What do I do with this when I leave here? What do I do with this when I go to work? What do I do with this when I'm confronted with an irritable neighbor or something like that?

The need to synthesize how people respond to it is not really my job. I might be an outlier in that respect. But yeah, I think you're spot on, though, in calling out the fact that this dichotomy that we created is a false one. And if the gospel is full, then it speaks to the wholeness of our experience, and not just the little compartments that we choose to live in.

Richard: I think that's true. I mean, one thing that nobody disagrees with, when I end up in conversations about this, is that the gospel transcends political issues. Everybody believes that. That doesn't mean that political issues shouldn't be addressed by people who feel strongly that they do. They're just placing the gospel first.

And I really think you put your finger on a very interesting word, pastoral. It's the degree to which people come seeking a pastoral message, and what they view as a pastoral message. So, some people

come out of what they perceive to be a cacophonous environment of discord – while on some levels I question that, because I do believe we actually tend to curate the messages that we receive most of the week, and Sunday may stand out in opposition to that, but they're looking for some unity. They're looking for some message that brings the church together in their eyes. And for them, that would be something different from what they get from cable news, or you know, social media, or whatever. Flip side, though, I have had people in my office, one or two in particular, who have come to church to make some sense of some terrible thing that has happened that week. And if the pastor has not addressed it, they feel like they have not been pastorally provided for. It's a real challenge.

Pam: I love the pastoral piece. For me, preaching is an act of pastoral care.

Mark: Absolutely.

Pam: Which is why I really loved preaching while immersed in a community of faith. I don't love outside preaching engagements.

Richard: Hey now. Hey now, easy.

Pam: But when I do them, I do want to get a lot of background information. What's going on in the community? What's happening, blah, blah, blah? Everything for me is both-and. I want to say, like, yes, it's important to know: what are the needs in this community? What's happening in people's lives? What's the context in which you're preaching? And to preach to that context.

However, it's super easy to slip over that line into thinking that our job is customer satisfaction. And it is not. Did people like my sermon? Did people get what they came for? Yes. Are we called to meet the need, to know the need, to address the need? Yes. But is our job customer satisfaction? No. And I think the consumeristic mindset that pervades our culture – we even talk about we're shopping for a church. Does it fit like a pair of jeans? Rather than using the language of, are you called into this community? And the preacher's job is not to provide religious services. We are a convener of a community where we preach what God calls us to preach. Everybody doesn't have to agree with it or even like it, but it creates conversation that a community can mobilize around and then ask, what is God calling us to do? Who is God calling us to be? Those are fine lines to walk.

Mark: Yeah. Pam, I love your framing of that. And I think back in my own preaching, the line between becoming a pundit instead of a proclaimer is very thin. And sometimes, I don't know it until I'm in it, and I'm like, "Oh my."

I was talking to a group of preachers not long ago, and one of them, very sincerely, said, "I've just got to be prophetic."

And I'm like, "You know, as I read scripture, no prophet wanted to be a prophet. They got dragged kicking and screaming into being it. We can do it, but maybe we should be a little reluctant to just mount that up."

Adam: I love the idea, again, of not being in the customer service department, or the complaint department, or whatever, because – dare I mention Jesus, and the way he responded to questions in ways that often didn't please the people who he was talking to? They would come with one set of

expectations, and some notion of what they expected to hear, and Jesus responded with what they needed to hear. Not that I'm supposed to be Jesus, but I think that's the aim.

My daughters used to watch and read the Nanny McPhee books. There's a cute little phrase in there that says, "When you want me but don't need me, I gotta go. When you need me and don't want me, I have to stay." And that's kind of that spot of, "I'm going to say some stuff that maybe you don't want to hear, but maybe you need to hear."

Pam: What I would say to that, Adam, though, again, because I'm always like, "Where do we live in the tension?" That they're also going to say some things to us, in response to our preaching, that we might not want to hear. And we also need to be open. I mean, everything we preach is provisional. Sometimes we get so like, "Ah, I had a right to say that or whatever." Like, we also have to constantly be in an open position of hearing things we might need to hear in terms of adjusting how we preach; not for customer satisfaction, but to meet the real people who are gathered. We don't set ourselves above to say, "We know what you need." There's a lot of nuance, I think, to this question.

Richard: I was just going to follow up with a question for those of you who do this. I don't, I won't. I have too much respect for those who train really hard to learn how to do it well, or maybe I'm just so intimidated, because I see how hard it is from my vantage point sitting about three paces behind the preacher in the summertime. I've heard some theologically in y'all's remarks. Do you walk into, or do you come into preparation for a sermon with a goal to achieve something on that Sunday? Is there something tangible, or do those goals shift over time? And if so, how? Because, I see all manner of things. And of course, I'm just speculating when I think to myself, "I wonder what she wanted to do this Sunday with that." Do you all literally say, "This Sunday, I really want to try to get my congregation to hear this message." Or how do you approach that question, if at all?

Adam: Now, that to me is audacious. I think what precedes the process of sermon development for me is intense listening. And I tell folks all the time, all the preachers that I deal with, "You better have a message before you craft a sermon." And that message only comes through intense listening. And that's listening to Scripture, listening to Spirit, but also listening to the subtext of people's lives, their stories. There's an intense listening. And if there's a goal at all to the sermon or to that moment, that preaching moment, is to honor that, to speak to what I've heard.

Pam: I think it was Calvin who said a preacher is called to be one sinner among a group of sinners who listens for the Word of God, and then shares it. You know, one of the things I've done since I retired and not tethered every Sunday to a pulpit and preaching is I've worshiped some with the Quakers at silent meetings. Nobody leads it. Nobody, you just come, you sit. If you feel led to speak by the Spirit, then you say something. So, they have this thing about: how can you tell in the silence if you're really called to speak this, if this is really from the Holy Spirit? Ten questions. And if you answer yes to each one, you keep going, and then finally you speak. If not, it suggests: return to the center. And I've shared that with preachers, and it's really interesting to use that as a tool for, like, if something arises and you're thinking, "This is my message this week." To answer these questions, one of is, "Are you certain this message is not primarily in response to a particular individual?" I would say that at the end of the day, I hope that my sermon has a takeaway in terms of a theological, Biblical nugget, but also a call to some kind of action.

Mark: Most of the last eight years I've been, as Pam said, gigging, you know, one Sunday in and out, which I, I'm happy to do it, but I don't find it satisfying, because it's not a long-term theological

conversation. But more than that, when I prepare sermons, I write to faces: faces of people I know, love and serve.

Pam: Me, too.

Mark: And without that, that's difficult.

This has been around for a while. I first heard it from Walter Brueggemann: that there's three parts of a sermon. There's the text, the congregation, and the preacher. And at any given point, two are beating up on one. And the problem is, often the preacher and the text, they use the text like a rolled-up newspaper with a dog: "Wap, wap, wap, bad congregation!" When in fact, it should be the preacher and the congregation standing together beholding the text. It's similar to what you said, Pam. When I start going off track, that's what I try to return to. Am I trying to grab the text and use it for my own ends, or am I beholding it in humility before God?

Adam: I think I'd probably return to Thurman's word about listening for the voice of the genuine...I dare not stand to speak something that hasn't resonated deeply in my own spirit. I think all of us have stood up at times and spoken messages that we weren't really convinced of, and it comes across that way. So, as a more seasoned preacher, I've learned to wait until I hear that sound. And if I don't hear it, this ain't it.

Pam: Preach.

Adam: This ain't it.

Richard: I was on a pastor nominating committee once, and we called someone out of a seminary to preach in a local congregation. That was one of his primary motives was he wanted to develop a long-term pastor relationship through his preaching with the congregation. So, I want to affirm everything that's been said in that regard. And, I want to let you know that, in our congregation in the summer, though it morphs and evolves over the summer, and from time to time, having 10 different preachers come in and preach over 10 different Sundays, I believe, does require of our congregation overall some theological growth, and potentially some theological maturity, for those who are willing to lean into 10 Sundays, or nine Sundays, or even five Sundays, knowing they're going to get a different perspective than they might be ready for.

Pam: Amen.

Mark: Yeah. Well, thank you. Richard, one of the things you said in your article is that one thing is clear the preaching is getting harder, not easier. I would affirm that. And I hope that this conversation, rich as it's been, will kind of help us move into those hard places right now, because great faithful preaching that has fidelity to the text, is crucial right now for the Church of Jesus Christ. And thank you for your contribution.

Richard: Thank you for having me.

Pam: Amen.