

Never Open Your Mail on Sundays!

Dear Rebecca,

Never open your mail on a Sunday! I know this may sound rather dogmatic, but I assure you, it's one of the best pieces of advice I offer colleagues new to the ministry. It's not really a warning about exploding letter bombs, but about a threat that is potentially deadly to the spirit and to worship. On the Lord's Day we must maintain a single focus.

Therefore, on Sunday mornings I don't check e-mail, pick up voice mail, or attend to anything in my office box. If I'm tempted, I give myself my own good advice: *Leave it alone. Another time. Later!* Mail that's the emotional equivalent of either a poison pen letter or a lovely compliment is best digested at another time.

I settled on this guideline the Sunday an innocent white envelope was placed in my mailbox in the church office. I didn't recognize the handwriting and tore into the letter with surprise, enthusiasm, and curiosity. There were four pages of blue lined notebook paper, filled with advice, detailing—at what I felt was an excessive length how mistaken I had been in my last sermon, interpreting the ministry of angels. I thought the sermon *The Christmas Angel in the Water Tower* had been especially helpful. The letter seemed mean-spirited and small-minded. I was thrown off guard, frustrated, broken-hearted.

That's not where I am called to be on Sunday mornings.

As a pastor, my task on Sunday mornings is to stay focused on the work I am called to do. Whatever my ministry responsibilities, I do not need to be distracted during these key hours. If I lead the worship, I need to be ready to worship with my whole heart. If I preach, my attention needs to be centered on that crucial task. If I teach the Junior High youth, mentor Children's Church Mime group, or organize the huggers in the Baby Nursery, that's where I need to center my whole self.

On Sunday mornings, I seek personal engagement with the family of God that gathers for words of hope. This is my chance to look into people's eyes as I ask, *How's it going?* I want to do more than hear a pat answer—I want to look for health, sadness, joy and need. I also want to connect with the congregation through touch as I hug, give a handshake or encourage with an arm around the shoulder. If I am deeply available, I can hear their whispers, and can whisper back to them God's words of love and grace.

As I number them I'm amazed at the ways I've been drawn away from my primary task. Focused relational ministry isn't easy. Invitations to distraction are always present. For example, I remember a pressured encounter with an aggressive leader of a local ethnic group who needed to rent the church and needed an answer NOW! Wasn't I the pastor? Didn't I know the church calendar? This was important—to him. To me, it felt like an encounter with a bulldozer. Steamroller people with an agenda are not just present in *my* congregation, friend. Stay focused. If not, your Lord's Day passion will be flattened.

Or consider these situations: We have an unusually lovely sanctuary, so it's not uncommon to meet a young couple who have come full of smiles and hope on Sunday morning to arrange their wedding. They want to meet me, to know how much it costs for a wedding, to inquire about date availability, to look around the rest of the space, to maybe meet the wedding consultant, etc.

There are also people who come to our services to introduce their ministry to us—right there on the spot—with no prearranged appointment. They want to present themselves, explain their gifts, and discuss opportunities for the future. Could this be an opportunity from God?

For us, the answer to all of the above is that we just don't do that kind of business on Sundays. We focus. We come to be molded and changed by our corporate encounter with God. This is our top priority. So we sweep aside distractions, step around energy drains, and avoid the black holes of doing business by saying, *Please call the office on Monday, we'd love to help.*

In many ways, I am the one who decides what Sunday mornings will hold for me and for my congregation. If I believe God wants us to be as free of confusion as we can be, I need to make choices that lead to that point of focus. This I know: God wants us completely there with Him in worship—wholly attentive, loving one another as we grow together.

On a recent Sunday morning, a plain white envelope, plump with potential, with my name written in unknown script, rested invitingly in my box. I picked it up, shook it a little, and then thought better of the temptation. I put the unopened

envelope back in the box for Monday and entered the sanctuary to say *I love you* to God.

Becky, don't open your mail on Sundays—you have better things to do!

Joyfully,

Penny J. Zettler

Faculty Associate, Bethel Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota

*. . . if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable,
and if you honor it by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
then you will find joy in the Lord . . .*

Isaiah 58:13b-14a