





*Abstract*

“THE PITCH OF A WOMAN’S VOICE: PARADIGMS IN PREACHING AND  
POWER”

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This project focuses primarily on the voices of female preachers. The interest arose from personal experiences as a woman whose voice has been challenged and questioned as well as encouraged and sustained both within the life of the church and in the world-at-large. The timing of this project is important in light of the ways in which women’s voices continue to be opposed, oppressed, or silenced. This project discusses the use of language in sermons as well as how the absence of certain language benefits preachers and listeners alike. Because the Women’s Movement and Feminist Theology overlooked the additional challenges faced by women of color, the writings of Womanist Theologians and preachers are included. This is followed by considering the metaphor of ‘voice.’ The project offers ‘real-life’ experiences of a group of diverse women preachers as they undertake using their voices in varied settings. Their generosity extends to offering examples of their own sermons for our edification and inspiration. This work provides preachers serving in a variety of ministry settings an overview of the still-unfolding theological reflections of women as well as guidance on applying feminist and womanist theology to the process of sermon-writing. An overarching goal is to encourage preachers, particularly women, to find and use their voices for the benefit of all of God’s people. An appendix is provided for those desiring to read more about the







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## Preface: Setting the Tone

It is fair to say a personal, decades-long-journey in the church leads to this project which seeks to explore and examine how the “voices” of women preachers are heard, respected, and valued in the life of the church.

Truth be told, as we near the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women’s voices are still opposed, oppressed, or silence in the home, in workplaces, certainly in the body politic/public arena, and often in the church or other faith communities. Whether arising from patriarchy sustained by one’s culture or because the pitch of a woman’s voice may differ markedly from the males around her, women younger and older can find more than their biological ‘voice’ put to the test, challenged, denigrated, or denied a hearing.

The all-too-common sharp divisive tones clearly evident as reported in the media, including social media, add fuel to the fires of separation and judgment between the worlds of women and men. Some of these fires are set or stoked by certain theological interpretations of and preaching about the role of women in home and society and pulpit. Women preachers continue to be told to ‘smile more’ or are thanked for the ‘talk’ they just delivered from a pulpit or are told pointedly women should not preach.

Even now it feels as if we are living in the midst of a fog shrouding the voices of many women seeking justice and equity – hoping for an equal ‘hearing.’ Social and political pressures on women’s rights in general are creating an atmosphere of ‘backsliding’ from the life-enhancing progress for equality and equity made in recent decades, in recent centuries. In the fall of 2018 remember how Dr. Christine Blasey Ford was treated based on her testimony about a Supreme Court nominee’s behavior or how

the 'MeToo' movement reemerged in response to women's experiences of sexism.

It is also true that other voices are silenced by societal, political, and theological power structures. In addition to gender, there are biases rooted in racism, ageism, ethnicity, national origin, heterosexism/homophobia, transphobia, classism/economic status, ableism, anti-Semitism, anti-Islam, etc. Some of this project's studies may also apply to these important categories. But the focus of this study and investigation applies first and foremost to women's voices.

The writings of feminist theologians will help us set the tone. Because the Women's Movement and Feminist Theology overlooked the additional challenges faced by women of color, it is important to include in the conversation writings and perspectives of Womanist Theologians. The two disciplines help us understand the Divine is revealed in and through the experiences and voices of women, be they preachers or listeners, as well as through the traditionally valued experiences and voices of men.

The roots of this project grew from a long-held interest in the ways the voices of ordained and lay women are perceived, received, and encouraged vis-à-vis the voices of their male counterparts. This interest runs parallel to the influence the use of exclusive vs. expansive language has in shaping the theological understandings of congregants and clergy as well as the world outside the doors of our churches.

Language is powerful indeed. A simple example is using 'girl' when speaking of women. It disempowers and infantilizes grown women, keeping us forever 'little' or 'young' and therefore less qualified. Unfortunately 'girl' is reemerging in the vernacular. This language also is alive in the church. It is important to expand our understanding of

language for female human beings as well as for males.

Whenever faith communities exclusively name God as male, expanding our vocabulary for the Holy One is a key imperative for women and men as they preach. It is vitally important to release God from the tiny, ancient box created by patriarchy's power to name the Holy. Feminist theology serves us well in calling us to emancipate our imaginations and spirits from that box. The sometimes overlooked good news is that men also gain a measure of freedom in removing the restraints of limited language.

Churches are one of the influential locales in which the voices of women preachers have the potential to help re-shape the tone and content of public and private theological and social discourse. Preaching has the potential in every age and location to sculpt ethical, moral, and spiritual values and practices. Included in this exploration are the voices of real, live women who are called to preach in the Episcopal Church and have answered faithfully that call by saying, "Here am I, send me." (Isa. 6:8b, NRSV) While sermons are written primarily to be heard, the women participating in this adventure offer us their 'voices' in written form. We will observe in what ways their writing adds depth of meaning as we listen intently for the pitch of women's voices everywhere. My own voice is included at the end in sermon form as well as personal observations and reflections on this project.

Appendix A is included for readers desiring to read more about Gender, Patriarchy, and Power as articulated by feminist theologians.

## Chapter 1 – Striking the Right Notes: Language and Proclamation

Preachers are ‘people of words.’ Whether in our mind, in outline form, or in fully developed manuscript, proclamation involves language. Preachers are called to discover ways of describing human beings in the midst of a biblical narrative which, on the surface, favors the males of our species over the females. Exploring in more depth what it means to be human informs and shapes preaching, whether a text comes from the *Tanakh*, or the newer Testament. Focusing on scriptural stories recounting the ways in which women as well as men relate to the Holy One, how humans fulfill the hope of God for relationship and for justice, invites all of God’s people to hear themselves in those stories. When women’s voices from the Bible are heard from pulpits through preachers who represent those women as fully human, the whole of creation is finally revealed as made in the image and likeness of the Holy One.

In our quest to explore the importance of language, we begin with a story. This is a true story shared by a woman religious in the Roman Catholic tradition. Sr. Mary Margaret Weber, CSC, was in a seminar at Notre Dame in Indiana. Three of the seventeen participants were men. One day during a break, as is often the case, participants took advantage of the time to use the bathroom. The signage on one door read “Men” while the sign on the other read “Women.” A long line formed outside the single-use bathroom marked for women. No one was waiting to use the other restroom. Mary Margaret took advantage of the room with no line. Upon exiting she found a man waiting. He looked shocked and confused when he saw her. In a stammer, he pointed to the signage and said, “I thought this was the men’s room.” Mary Margaret paused and eyed the sign herself. Then, while making eye contact with the waiting man, pointed

towards the sign and said, “Yes, but according to the Church this includes me.”

“Yes, but according to the Church this includes me.” That is a traditional teaching about the meanings of ‘man’ or ‘men.’ But, does ‘man’ truly include ‘women?’ I would argue the answer is an emphatic ‘no!’

The choice of language is the most obvious means by which preachers empower listeners to locate themselves in the stories of scripture and the life of faith. For those who have not had the opportunity to study biblical languages, it can be eye-opening to discover that every translation is an interpretation and that interpretations can vary wildly from one another. For those who first study biblical languages, it can be eye-opening to discover that most translators demonstrate a bias in their choice of words and their bias may be located in their own faith journey’s experience.

Hearing exclusively masculine language to describe God or to refer to humankind can mean one-half the human race may miss hearing themselves in the stories of our faith. I find it surprising that some women preachers continue to use exclusively male language in speaking of or about the Godhead. I work diligently as a preacher to use expansive language for God as well as for humanity. Praying does indeed shape believing. The language emanating from pulpits has the power to shape both the understanding and the relationships listeners have with God.

Feminist theology continues to advocate and use what was initially referred to as ‘inclusive language’ which is now called ‘expansive language.’ There is a great body of work discussing the power of language as we use it in faith communities.

For decades women theologians have been pointing out the obvious connection between hearing God-language limited to male images and metaphors and the role of

women in the life of the church and the opportunities they have to use their voices.

Decades ago Anne Carr put us on notice:

Feminists in the church argue that language shapes experience as much as experience shapes language. Thus, the repetition of prayers, hymns, and scriptural passages that consistently refer to Christians as “brothers” or “men” and to God as “he” – despite the protests of theologians who insist that God transcends sexuality – do inculcate an idea of God as male.<sup>1</sup>

She goes on to acknowledge that while some changes have been made in liturgies to expand the language used for men and women, Carr points out that the biblical narrative is more problematic since God is referred to as ‘father.’ She goes so far as to say,

Because of the historical contexts in which Christian images and symbols for God emerged, contexts that ascribed all eminence, superiority, dignity, and value to male human beings as distinct from the inferiority of the female, it was almost always considered appropriate to designate the personal God of Christianity as “he.”<sup>2</sup>

This serves to limit God, putting God into a metaphorical box and causing women looking into mirrors to ask if they are also created in the image and likeness of God.

While we may argue all the day long, of course women are created in God’s image, we may go on to ask, then why is our language of and for God limited to the male of the human species?!

When she wrote *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God*, Rebecca Chopp questioned whether or not feminist theology was failing in its quest to insure women are heard, seen, and understood as central participants in the Christian story. In particular she questioned “...the challenge to the metaphor of God the Father and the shift to include

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experiences* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

new metaphors, including the metaphor of God as Mother.”<sup>3</sup> She opined that, “Changing the most basic of all metaphors should have a linchpin effect, since if one alters the key term of a system, other changes should result necessarily.”<sup>4</sup>

She goes on to discuss the function of metaphors and their potential to shape the thoughts and meanings associated with particular language. Chopp then argues that using ‘mother’ for God should be a representational metaphor more easily appropriated by hearers. But, then Chopp points out,

Some can, of course, pray to God the Mother and at least most potentially can recognize maternal, or feminine, images of God in the Bible. But the question must be raised as to why it is so difficult to say, “O God our Mother,” and why it is so startling to uncover scriptural images suggestive of God as a woman... God the Father is more than a metaphor that can be changed at will.<sup>5</sup>

She points out that the symbolism of language carries weight in particular cultures and ‘woman’ is traditionally associated with chaos. We can add few cultures are willing to set aside an image reminiscent of chaos when an ordered image remains available:

Father is thus not only a metaphor but a law and an ordering: Father regulates the law of separation and division, obedience and submission to the governing order. In one sense “Father” is a metaphor but it is a metaphor for God, and God is determined in a fatherly way as the determination of the patriarchal order, *fatherly* here being defined as that which orders, determines, divides, and demands loyalty to a way of representation, preservation, and identity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 110.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-112.

In her work *Feminine Registers*, Jennifer E. Copeland uses Chopp's earlier work to continue unpacking the ways in which language preachers choose shapes the world of those listening. Copeland notes, "Chopp suggests that language itself is not a neutral variable. Our choice of language influences and even directs the responses of those who hear it."<sup>7</sup> Copeland adds, "Words create a world, and critiquing our conventional use of language offers a starting place to examine the transformational possibilities for the proclamation of God's word."<sup>8</sup>

Early on in Chopp's own work she proclaims,

Feminist theology expresses deep religious sensitivity, words full of Word, and, as such, words of grace, healing, wholeness, new possibilities, and crucifixion and resurrection. To understand how feminist discourses proclaim Word to and for the world is to speak of God, and of God's movement in the margins and fissures of the world.<sup>9</sup>

Of interest in Chopp's work is her willingness to name openly the influence feminism has on the body politic, whether it be advocating for the roles of women in issues of healthcare or the opportunities women have in the workplace. She helps us understand when she writes, "Language serves as both the material and the frame for structural and cultural debates about the role of women... Yet language is also the site where our subjectivity is formed; we think and feel, we experience the world according to the categories given to us by language."<sup>10</sup>

Chopp herself can be poetic in her writings, "Language, at least as it is used in

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer E. Copeland, *Feminine Registers: The Importance of Women's Voices for Christian Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>9</sup> Chopp, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 12.

feminist discourse, involves a creativity, a fluidity, or what Hannah Arendt called a natality... Language... can birth new meanings, new discourses, new signifying practices.”<sup>11</sup>

Language can break open new possibilities for insight into the knowledge and love of God. Language can form an invitation into a deeper relationship with God Who Creates All That Is. We acknowledge we human beings create the words which come to form languages. But the words we choose are one tool at our disposal in the quest to free us from the bondage imposed by other human-made structures that limit the full participation of women in the journey of faith. Women, and men, who preach by stretching their own practices of naming and knowing God bid listeners to explore their own universe of names for the Holy:

Language must be constituted as multivocal, open, practical, anticipatory: rich, embodied, full of connections and of differences. While language in modernity reflects a monotheistic ordering, in feminist proclamation language constitutes an open possibility for transformation.<sup>12</sup>

Transformation is one of the most important aspects of expanding our language for humanity and for God. In doing so we proclaim “release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind” – those held captive by systemic injustice, those blinded by the patriarchy that still exists within faith communities as well as the body politic. (Lk. 4:18b)

To speak of God using feminine images is still unsettling to some congregations, particularly if the preachers they hear have done little to dissuade them of the traditional

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>12</sup> Chopp, 126.

masculine language used for God.

In writing about Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Professor of Homiletics Enjoo Mary Kim points out the subversive nature of the ways in which the three women preached, “The sermons of these three women subverted the sexist mentality and misogynist attitudes prevailing in their worlds. Their subversive rhetoric had the power to deconstruct the exclusively masculine concept of God and reconstruct new images of God that associate with the matrix of women’s experiences.”<sup>13</sup>

What to many a female preacher may be obvious, but not to all, Kim points out,

“...preaching from a woman’s perspective can be ‘dangerous business,’ for it often creates hostile reactions from congregations that are used to the patriarchal culture of the church and larger society. This negative situation requires contemporary preaching to be subversive. The goal of preaching is to undermine the symbolic and social order that upholds the sexist culture in order to help our listeners meet the living God in a new way.”<sup>14</sup>

Kim goes on to describe characteristics of the type of rhetoric preachers need:

First, theological language is taken seriously... Although language does not determine how we think, it shapes our thinking and behavior. The way we speak of God shapes and slants our understanding of God. Thus, God-language in preaching and worship forms our concepts of God, beginning in early childhood and onward.

The second characteristic... involves creating new language for naming God based on women’s particular experiences. Preaching as subversive uses inclusive language and feminine imagery of God in subtle and heuristic ways to help listeners understand the holistic nature of God and the egalitarian nature which the church should strive for... Changing language for naming God is based on the fact that almost all theological language is metaphoric, not literal.

The third characteristic... is the use of various literary genres both

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<sup>13</sup> Enjoo Mary Kim. *Women Preaching: Theology and Practice Through the Ages* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 73.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

eclectically and contextually... preachers must use sensitivity and subtlety when approaching their listeners... Rather than teaching or giving intellectual and moral lessons, [Hildegard, Julian, and Sor Juana] helped their audiences experience epiphanies by leading them to discover the hidden truth in the ambiguity and complexity of human life. In this sense, their preaching can be considered as a performing art.<sup>15</sup>

Kim points out that theological views typically considered male-oriented can be expanded; using skill and creativity in choosing feminine images and language in writing sermons, can support listeners as they find new ways of imagining and naming God.<sup>16</sup>

In an article on God language, Rita Gross states, “To speak of God is among the most difficult and audacious things that humans do... The essential difficulty of God language is that it proposes to talk about that which is absolutely transcendent – that which is not encompassed by or contained within any of the categories that point to it.”<sup>17</sup> And yet, as difficult and audacious as it is, to speak creatively of God is also one of the most exciting things preachers and listeners do. Such speech has the power to break open new understandings of the Holy One as well as to strengthen individual and communal relationships with the Divine.

Paul van Buren observed in the 1980’s, “When we speak of God, it is always as creatures speaking of our Creator... Human terms are all we have, so the only issue is which terms to use.”<sup>18</sup>

We may forget sometimes that we have such extensive options available to us. The languages claimed by people of faith around the globe are filled to over-flowing with

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 74-78.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>17</sup> Rita Gross. “Female God Language in a Jewish Context,” *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*. eds. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 169.

<sup>18</sup> Paul van Buren, *Discerning the Way: A Theology of the Jewish Christian Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 100, 104.

words which can be used to describe the Divine, to claim a relationship with the Source of Life. Rather than see as a burden the freedom to choose words in preaching and speaking of God, we can see the vast array of words as a gift from the very heart and mind of God.

Though this is an amazing opportunity, some women have been unable to wait for changes to be made in the language used by preachers (and liturgists). They have left the church in search of a spiritual life with which they can relate. But, hope does spring eternal, as the old saying goes.

In her own research Rebecca Chopp has identified this hope:

Many women have remarked that even as Christianity has oppressed them, they have heard in Christianity words of freedom. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, for instance, has observed: “Despite all masculine terminology of prayers, catechism, and liturgy, despite blatant patriarchal male spiritual guidance, my commitment to Christian faith and love first led me to question the feminine cultural role which parents, school and church had taught me to accept and to internalize. My vision of Christian life-style, responsibility, and community brought me to reject the culturally imposed role of women and not vice versa.”<sup>19</sup>

Language, structures, and attitudes do not change overnight. Resources are necessary if institutions which resist change in these areas are to be transformed. In searching for adequate resources several requirements are critical. Anne Carr writes, “The first is the need to ground the possibility of understanding past theological tradition both critically and constructively, of seeing it anew from the perspective of contemporary questions.”<sup>20</sup>

Of course, we misunderstand tradition if we view it as static. True tradition is

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<sup>19</sup> Chopp, 136-137; Footnote 24, quoting from “Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Christ and Plaskow, p. 137.

<sup>20</sup> Carr, 99.

dynamic – moving and changing as cultures and practices change. We forget that the very word ‘tradition’ comes to us from the Latin *tradire*, meaning ‘to pass on.’ At our peril we forget this is an action verb. Each generation is asked to ‘pass on’ to the next the very best ideas and practices. Tradition, in its original sense, has always required contemporary questioning! To critique tradition, or to call it into question, is not necessarily to negate it. Rather, seeing tradition anew brings it into focus for the age in which a particular people live.

Carr advises us to observe,

The second requirement for a feminist theology that takes seriously both the radical contemporary critique and the authority of historical Christianity is a theory of religious symbols that grounds both negative and positive moments in its interpretive horizon.

An adequate feminist interpretation is dialectical: it is suspicious as it unmask the illusory or ideological aspects of symbols that denigrate the humanity of women, and it is restorative as it attempts to retrieve the genuinely transcendent meaning of symbols affirming the authentic selfhood and self-transcendence of women.<sup>21</sup>

It will prove beneficial to Christians as a body if symbols which have become idols are unmasked and if symbols which affirm the personhood of all people are restored or created anew. Carr rounds out this conversation by writing,

...the third requirement emerges. An adequate theological method must exhibit a double critique... This double critique takes serious account of the experience of women and at the same time holds itself bound to the progressive and anticipatory power of the gospel and its symbols for women and for contemporary life as a whole... Christian feminist theologians are convinced that the symbols both of the religious tradition and of culture say “something more” than is apparent on the surface.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 101, 102.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 102, 103.

The works of feminist theologians help move society toward a view that ‘women’s issues’ are not peripheral and even trivial, but are foundational for a just society – and for a truly Christian institutional church. This double critique will bring together experiences of women and men in our contemporary culture. By critically reflecting on the meaning which lies ‘below the surface’ of traditional Christian symbols, the freedom to form new, more fully disclosive symbols will result. “Religious symbols thus demand both theological-spiritual sensitivity and ethical-critical interpretation.”<sup>23</sup>

This work is best done in dialogue with others, particularly women acting together, but also by including men. Many feminist theologians are also willing to identify the danger of reversing the tables and using all-female imagery lest they fall into the ages-old problem of idolatry. It is ironic that what we might call ‘masculinist’ theologians often appear unable to see the forest for the trees. They do not seem to recognize the idolatry inherent in all-male imagery and language for humanity and for God.

Feminist theology seeks to establish a language which speaks to all of God’s people in this day and time, especially God’s people in the church. Feminists’ reflections hope to provide our culture with ways of speaking of the realities of faith which can bring peoples together and bridge the chasm created by outdated ways of thinking and speaking and relating to one another.

The feminist approach attempts to respond to what is going on in this culture at this point in history. The work of feminist theologians may appear to still be a new phenomenon. But history is a movement which always encompasses change. In the process of change, communities endure, albeit in a possibly different form. The feminist

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 167.

goal of providing new or renewed symbols and metaphors, new equality and relationality, is consistent with the theme of change in the overall history of human cultures.

The words of feminist thinkers respond to inadequate traditions of women's roles and activities within the Christian church and in the structures found in the secular world. Feminist theologians continue to call into question patterns which are no longer meaningful for one-half the human race.

There is a way of speaking which already exists, about which theologians have written, which is available to us and which appears to have appeal for all people.

Christian feminists can appropriate contemporary theological language for God as the ground and dynamic power of Being, the infinite and incomprehensible horizon of Holy Mystery, the absolutely related Thou, language that serves to underscore the final transcendence and absolute immanence of God beyond all human understanding.<sup>24</sup>

This is not new language. It may seem strange to congregations not accustomed to hearing preaching which claims such poetic and enigmatic language. This language and language like this needs to move out of seminary classrooms and into the church living all around. This language invites our imaginations to move beyond the image of a white, elderly, white-bearded man sitting on a throne in a heavenly sphere and surrounded by images of medieval artists' concept of the heavenly host.

Newer language can also provide us a way to understand God as one who suffers when human beings suffer. And, it is most assuredly true that suffering is something with which women can identify. The God who chooses to enter human history enters a realm in which history is replete with examples of suffering. Women do not suffer alone. Men suffer as well. It is part and parcel of the human condition.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 144.

Much of this conversation has centered on the need to use feminine as well as masculine language for God. The rationale is to find freedom from the bonds of patriarchal images for God and to provide balance so that the “other half” of the human race is represented in preaching as well as other aspects of religious life.

We are, however, in no way bound to binary thinking when it comes to naming and knowing God. While scripture is generous in its usage of male images for God, we know that feminine images reside there as well. A host of other ‘names’ or ‘attributes’ of God are at our fingertips, waiting to be discovered or rediscovered in the pages of scripture. Study a variety of biblical translations and prayer books. Reading poetry and other literature offers a wonderful world of images and metaphors waiting especially for preachers to claim them.

One strategy is for preachers to spend a few minutes thinking ‘outside the box,’ brainstorming names or attributes of God other than the possibly most familiar masculine ones. Read and reflect on the life experiences of people most often described as living ‘on the margins.’ Seek out realities other than those most familiar and possibly the safest. Engage in conversations with colleagues who serve in communities speaking languages other than English, with cultural traditions different from one’s own. Do not assume the ‘tried-and-true’ images of your life are meaningful to everyone else.

I spent a few minutes brainstorming names or attributes of or for God which are meaningful to me and available to all: Creator of All That Is; Divine; Divine Presence; Eternal; Eternal One; Ever-living God; Ever-loving God; Fountain of Life; Friend; Giver of Life; Giver of Light; Giver of Peace; God of All; God of Peace; Gracious God; Guardian; Guide; Holy Spirit; I Will Be What I Will Be; Infinite God; Infinite One;

Liberator; Life-giver; Light; Living God; Love; Loving; Maker of All Things; Maker of Heaven and Earth; Merciful God; Most High; Mystery; Our Beginning and Our End; Our Refuge and Our Strength; Peacemaker; Potter; Presence; Protector; Radiant; Reconciler; Redeemer; Refuge; Righteous God; Righteous One; Shelter from the Storm; *Shekinah* (a reminder our Jewish sisters and brothers can provide us with wonderful language, images, and metaphors as well); Shield; Silence: Sophia; Source of Blessing; Source of Life Abundant; Sovereign; Steadfast and Loving One; Sustainer; True Light; Truth; Understanding God; Way; Wind; Wisdom; Word; You.

My experience in parishes leads me to conclude that the power to shape, or reshape, how we perceive or name God and one another is sometimes as much about what we do not say as what we do. The absence of male language in sermons, and in liturgies, is noticeable. Such absence can sometimes take longer for listeners to become aware of how much more open and free is their experience of ‘being’ church – an inclusive and more welcoming church – a church in which all of God’s people can hear themselves in the stories of our faith.

Omitting masculine language is also do-able even for preachers for whom male language for the Godhead and for humanity is fine. It may take practice for some to stretch the skills it takes to craft the sermon message absent what may be more familiar word choices. Upon reflection, it is also a pastoral gift to the community at large. It is an important gift to girls to grow up realizing they, too, are created in God’s image because God is not identified as ‘a boy’ or ‘a man.’ Widening our word-choices is a justice issue as sermon language communicates to individuals and communities who is within the saving grace of God, which means all of God’s people.

Stretching the preacher's imagination is also a spiritual discipline which can open up new avenues of relationship between the writer of the sermon and God whom the writer loves. Expanding our language is a gift preachers deserve as much as their listeners. Broadening our own language for the Divine is also a gift to our prayer lives as preachers because God will become ever greater and, at the same time, ever closer than we might have ever imagined before.

In the course of my ministry I have facilitated many workshops and classes about the language we use for God and for human beings. Nine times out of ten, as the old saying goes, participants leave understanding that the language we use for God does influence the language we use for one another. In most cases it is easy to make a leap in understanding that language shapes our perceptions of one another as people we claim are all created in God's image. In almost every instance individuals leave those workshops or classes believing the words we use in our everyday language, especially the language used in liturgy and heard from pulpits, leads to a greater degree of respect for the dignity of every human being.

To close this conversation about Language and Proclamation I offer a collect I have written. Please consider this prayer an invitation to go deeper into the quest to name and to know God, thereby learning more fully to love one another.

Gracious God, we thank you for creating us in your image, women and men, and for bestowing upon us the gifts of language and reason; so guide us in our search for a greater knowledge of your will, that our human efforts may, with the help of your most Holy Spirit, bring justice to the systems of our society and our churches, and true respect, love, and understanding to all our relationships, through Jesus the Christ. Amen.

## Chapter 2 – A Color-full Note: Womanist Theology

A chapter about Womanist Theology written by a white woman must begin with Confession: feminism, feminists, and feminist theologians have often overlooked, short-changed, and by-passed the realities of black women's lives. An honest reading of the history of women's rights, in whatever 'wave' one reads, must now give voice to the women of color whose voices were ignored, discounted, or disregarded. We begin by giving Delores S. Williams' definition of Womanist Theology:

Womanist theology is a Christian theological perspective emerging among African-American women in the United States. It derives its name from the African-American poet and novelist Alice Walker, who coined the word *womanist* in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). Walker described a womanist as a black feminist or a feminist of color. She emphasized black mother-daughter communication, women's thirst for knowledge, their responsible behavior, and their seriousness... Walker portrays a womanist as also committed to the survival of an entire people, male and female (xi-xii).<sup>25</sup>

Williams goes on to credit black female scholars with the initial stage of development. She points out the variety of fields in which these scholars were engaged from theology and Bible, to ethics and sociology of religion, as well as their teaching in seminaries and religion departments in universities and colleges. "The goal of these scholars has been to bring black women's experience into the circles of Christian theological interpretation from which it has been excluded."<sup>26</sup>

Dr. Williams' own work is part of the foundation of womanist theology. Her book *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* uses the biblical story of Hagar to describe and educate readers on the experiences of women of color.

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<sup>25</sup> Delores Williams, "Womanist Theology," eds. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996): 299.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Womanist theology attempts to help black women see, affirm and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of the Christian religion in the African-American community. Womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women's struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women's and the family's freedom and well-being. Womanist theology opposes all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual [identity], physical disability and caste.<sup>27</sup>

She is honest in recounting the history of the feminist movements of the past and the omission of black women's experiences in the struggle for freedom and rights of all kinds. But Williams is also willing to be in dialogue with white feminist theologians in the hopes that all women can work together for the benefit of the whole. She writes, "the purpose is for all feminist-womanist women to exchange ideas, enlarge definitions and concepts and plan political strategies. Women must learn to help each other see when and how they are instruments of their own and other people's oppression."<sup>28</sup>

It is disappointing at best and shameful at worst to read how white women suffragists participated in racist oppression in order to gain a foothold for their own agendas. That is not to discount the oppression that white women experience. It is, however, to agree with Williams' assessment that all women must work together to make substantial progress.

We are living in a time in which racism is escalating as is sexism. A shift has taken place in the most public of political figures in our common life. It is imperative that women of all colors, classes, and religions come together to provide relief from the violence and oppression that surrounds us on every side.

The good news is that we now have access to the works of womanist theologians

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 186.

and their names are becoming, if not already, ‘household names.’ Some are ground-breakers. Some lived in ages past. Some are contemporaries. The best way to engage in the study of womanist theology is to read their works. Some of the names most important are: Anna Julia Cooper, Sojourner Truth, Amy Jacques Garvey, Mary Church Terrell, Harriet Ann Jacobs, Zora Neal Hurston, Harriet Tubman, Maria W. Stewart, Jarena Lee, Mary Ellen Pleasant, and Florynce Kennedy.<sup>29</sup>

Names associated with the emergence of womanist theology in the U.S.A. are Katie Cannon, Emilie Townes, Jacqueline Grant, Delores Williams, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Kelly Brown Douglas, Renita Weems, Shawn Copeland, Clarice Martin, Francis Wood, Karen Baker-Fletcher, Jamie Phelps, Marcia Riggs, and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. We are university, seminary, and divinity school professors. We are ordained and lay women in all the Christian denominations. Some of us are full-time pastors; some are both pastor and professor. We are preachers and prayer warriors. We are mothers, partners, lovers, wives, sisters, daughters, aunts, nieces -- and we comprise two-thirds of the black church in America.<sup>30</sup>

It is important to add Teresa L. Fry Brown and Lisa L. Thompson whose works are important for women preachers. We’ll hear from them later in this work, listening particularly to their reflections on voices of women preachers. It is also important to include Valerie Bridgeman who leads WomenPreach!

Another woman whose contribution to womanist theology is important is the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney. She is an Episcopal priest, author of several books, and professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. Most notably, she has recently published *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to Women of the Torah and of the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017). In an interview she gave

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<sup>29</sup> Anita Little. “How Many of These Early Black Feminists Do You Know?” MS Magazine, February 19, 2014 <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2014/02/19/how-many-of-these-early-black-feminists-do-you-know/> Accessed 12/29/18.

<sup>30</sup> Linda E. Thomas, “Womanist Theology and Epistemology, and A New Anthropological Paradigm,” *Cross Currents*, 8:4 (Summer 1998) <http://www.crosscurrents.org/thomas.htm> Accessed 12/29/18.

published April 23, 2018, on a podcast, Gafney discusses “Womanist Midrash: Bringing Perspective to Biblical Text.” Since preachers of all categories engage the biblical text, her comments are germane for us here.

So womanist midrash is a feminist practice. The difference between womanist and feminist, as Alice Walker said, is the difference between purple and lavender. In other words, that womanism is a richer deeper thicker feminism. So some of the insights of womanism are shared with feminism...

So when we approach a text, even a sacred text, we bring stuff with us and some of that stuff is the preaching we’ve heard, what we’ve already thought about God. And so interpretation is the work we do to make meaning of the text and womanist biblical interpretation, like other forms of academic and cultural interpretation, tends to be honest about who we are and what we bring with it and do the work of interpretation through a set of lenses or intellectual postures. Womanist biblical interpretation is rooted in the experience of black women.<sup>31</sup>

Because Dr. Gafney’s Ph.D. is in Hebrew Bible, she has a propensity to compare the ways in which contemporary interpreters of biblical texts use the tradition of Jewish midrash. She is quick to point out that the textual interpretation done by womanists is intended to benefit everyone and not only black women.

In addition, because womanist theologians do not limit the definition of patriarchy to the definition found most often in feminist theological writings, which is most often described by reference to power differentials between white women and men, Gafney also writes about differences in how members of black churches engage texts. Her comments are relevant to our earlier references to male-female language in preaching.

And so if we’re going to have a conversation about the spaces in which black women engage the text, church. And we’re going to look at a context in which, in many black churches, only

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<sup>31</sup> Pete Enns and Jared Byras, hosts. The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, guest. “Womanist Midrash: Bringing Perspectives to a Biblical Text,” Episode 46, April 23, 2018, accessed November 10, 2018, podcast, <https://peteenns.com/womanist-midrash-with-wil-gafney/> .

masculine God language is used and people, some people may say, well, that's just what the Bible says. Then we have a conversation about the fact that at the beginning of the beginning of the story, God introduces God's self using masculine and feminine language. And then later in the story when God says I'm going to create some people like us, using plural language, those people come out representing what was in the first verse masculine and...

Just that God uses the language of plurality, which signifies that we should not try to reduce God to any one thing. There is an old Mary Daly quote that says, "God is not a Ken doll and a Barbie doll scotch tape[d] together." So even if you want to say, oh, there's feminine language and masculine language. Even gluing those together in our best human work, that's still not enough to say what God is. But at the very least, some of the plurality of God is accounted for in masculine and feminine language, not only here in Genesis but throughout the Hebrew Bible and some in the later testament.<sup>32</sup>

Our contemporary culture continues to struggle with the power differential between races and traditionally described gender differences. But we are also struggling with the ways in which culture, and churches, treat individuals who are not described as the most traditional power group, 'straight, white, males.' Gafney talks about the ways in which the early church 'fathers' described masculinity as akin to godliness and femininity as the devil's gateway.

...there's a lot of theological work that's heavily invested in God being male and exclusively male. In fact, there's a text that says men are the image of God and women are the image of man or something. That sets up a whole world of church and theology that marginalizes women. Yet for people who come out of the community that I did – the black church – for whom it really matters, what does the Bible say? It matters that the biblical text says repeatedly that God's gender identity is complex. Binary language is used because the Hebrew Bible has two options. Masculine and feminine. But God is represented in a much more complex way. And that matters when we're talking about people and hierarchy,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., podcast.

particularly when those earthly hierarchies are entrenched in gender which is then claimed to be based on God and the Bible.<sup>33</sup>

Lest any of us think that language does not matter, womanist theologian Renita Weems points out the harsh reality that even what we term metaphorical language has consequences – consequences that can be violent. Black women, and men, historically have been on the receiving end of such violence. Language can hurt, but also heal.

Metaphors help to shape our understanding of reality by emphasizing some things over others, by organizing our way of thinking about things in which we had not before. They help us see ourselves and each other and to respond to what we see in ourselves and in others in new (sometimes unintended) ways. Metaphors matter because they are sometimes our first lessons in prejudice, bigotry, stereotyping, and in marginalizing others – even if only in our minds. They deserve our scrutiny because they are intrinsic to the way we live and shape reality.<sup>34</sup>

Metaphors matter...because they teach us how to imagine what has previously remained unimaginable... Metaphors can hurt. Metaphors can distort. Metaphors can kill. Metaphors can oppress. In this study...the attempt has been made to show the potential of metaphors also to liberate, to inspire, to galvanize, and to give access to one another's deeply felt but inarticulable feelings.<sup>35</sup>

Weems joins other voices in recognizing that marginalized groups, including women, are now part of theological debates, including debates about the use of language. Such groups take on the traditional dualistic, hierarchical, oppressive, male-dominated traditions and discourses. She advocates inclusion of more diverse human experience, including "...women, ethnic groups, classes...."<sup>36</sup> This is important because metaphors

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., podcast.

<sup>34</sup> Renita J. Weems. *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 106-107.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 109, 110.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 118.

are effective at "...calling attention to some attributes and not others, and deliberately rousing certain kinds of emotional responses in an audience. In short, metaphors play upon cultural stereotypes; they stress some attributes while deliberately ignoring others."<sup>37</sup> Weems reminds us "...metaphors do not have to give accurate portraits of reality in order to be effective. But those metaphors that wind up finally as memorable and enduring in audiences' minds are the ones that tap into widely held, deeply felt values or attitudes within an audience."<sup>38</sup>

Any discussion of womanism must include attitudes towards skin color itself. If only we could declare with confidence that the differences in the myriad hues of human skin color no longer matters. But, with great sadness, we cannot make that declaration.

Delores Williams' description of our American heritage still reflects truth:

In North America popular culture, religion, science and politics have worked together to assign permanent negative value to the color black. This has led to the formation of an American national consciousness that considers black frightening, dangerous and/or repulsive, especially when this is the color of human skin.

In subtle and not so subtle ways, this repulsion and devaluing of the color black is communicated in the everyday life of American culture; white, on the other hand, receives highest valuation. While this black/white symbolism has gone on for centuries in Western culture...Americans still tend to assign black to evil and white to good without hesitation or reflection about the message this conveys.<sup>39</sup>

The language matters which we use in preaching images of white and black, of light and dark. Fear of darkness seems still ingrained in the human psyche. Even though

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>39</sup> Williams, 85.

it has been millennia since we humans learned how to keep fires burning through the night, we still associate darkness with fear.

We preachers are responsible for the metaphors we implant in the hearts and minds of listeners, especially if communities use biblical translations in which black or darkness is associated with that which is not of God. We can be instrumental in overcoming the cultural stereotypes Williams describes above. It can be as simple as referring to words of the psalmist: “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me turn to night,’ Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike.”<sup>40</sup>

In sermons, naming and making reference to the works of womanist theologians is another tool at our fingertips. Our listeners will be well-served, especially when we locate womanist theologians in our own states or cities, or nearby colleges and universities. We can begin with the list of names of womanist theologians included earlier in this chapter. Their works include names and references to yet other womanists. It is also easy to research faculty lists at local colleges and universities. It can be fruitful to have conversations with colleagues of color in our own locale, diocese, or adjudicatory. The ages-old practice of ‘word of mouth’ continues to be an effective way to find womanist writers, poets, or theologians. Our listeners will be well-served, especially whenever we make references to women, feminists, and womanists in our sermons.

It is important to locate men who advocate for women in the pulpit, especially calling on the black church to admit women to the pulpit ministry. The Rev. Lawrence

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<sup>40</sup> The Episcopal Church. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 1979): 794.

Ware sets an example by declining any invitation to a church in which a woman would not be treated equally.<sup>41</sup>

In an article by the Rev. Ware in the *New York Times* on December 1, 2018, entitled “It’s On Men to End Sexism in the Black Church,” he recounts as a boy how difficult it was for him to understand why a woman delivering a sermon in his church was not admitted to the regular pulpit. Instead, she spoke from a lectern. As Ware grew up he became more and more aware of the way in which black women are treated in black churches. He writes,

From the pulpit, Neichelle Guidry, dean of the chapel at Spelman College, brilliantly proclaims the truth about how ecclesiastical spaces are often full of “misogynoir”, a term coined and developed by the scholar Moya Bailey and the critic Trudy to discuss the way race and gender play a role in the misogyny experienced by black women.

Yet, even with black women leading the charge against this evil, the reality of patriarchy means many people in the black church will not take these moral failures seriously unless they are voiced by a man who has been ordained. This is wrong and unfair. But I have been ordained, so I’m speaking up.<sup>42</sup>

Ware goes on to explain how in his teaching, preaching, and public speaking, he calls on white people to confront racism when they encounter it. He is frank in pointing out that white supremacy is a major problem which people privileged with white skin can change. Ware goes on to say, “The same is true of patriarchy and misogynoir in the black church. It would be morally inconsistent for me to demand that white people confront

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<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Ware, “It’s On Men to End Sexism in the Black Church, *The New York Times* (December 1, 2018). Accessed December 31, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/01/opinion/sunday/its-on-men-to-end-sexism-in-the-black-church.html> .

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

their privilege while I let black men off the hook.”<sup>43</sup>

Because white skin means privilege even for women, the Rev. Dr. Carolyn B. Helsel, ordained in the Presbyterian Church and on the faculty at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, has written *Preaching about Racism: A Guide for Faith Leaders*. Excerpts from the book are included in the January 2, 2019, issue of *The Christian Century*. In the article Helsel addresses the following list of ten myths about racism:

Myth 1: Racism is not our problem. Myth 2: Racism is about hateful actions and words. Myth 3: Only Ku Klux Klan members and self-proclaimed white supremacists perpetuate racism. Myth 4: Racism has to do with intentions. Myth 5: Racism is caused by ignorance. Myth 6: Racism is irrational. Myth 7: Racism can be remedied through education. Myth 8: Racism will end as we have more and more inter-racial relationships. Myth 9: Racism is not something that impacts my friends of color. Myth 10: Racial discrimination is against the law; what else can we do?<sup>44</sup>

She goes on to present ‘Ten strategies for preaching about racism in mostly white churches’ which can be found on page 25 of the article. In addition to the printed version of the article, the details about these strategies can also be found online.<sup>45</sup>

Among the strategies Helsel recommends is to share stories of both people of color and white people who are role models in preaching about racial issues. Preachers can include in sermons references to literature, scholarly articles, books, and poetry by authors of color. In addition to this being a subtle yet overt way of acknowledging the accomplishments of people of color, it raises up for listeners the ways such works relate

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Carolyn B. Helsel, “Ten myths about racism, *The Christian Century* 136, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 23-25. Also <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/ten-myths-white-people-believe-about-racism> and <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/sidebar/ten-strategies-preaching-about-racism-mostly-white-churches> .

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

to the stories of scripture on which sermons focus. Such works also use images and metaphors revealing life-experiences which may be new to listeners.

By way of example, the Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray is especially important for those of us living in the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina as she was the first African American woman ordained an Episcopal priest and was the first woman to celebrate the Holy Eucharist in an Episcopal church in North Carolina. While much of her life and ministries were lived in other states and cities, in 2012 the 77<sup>th</sup> General Convention of the Episcopal Church added her name to *Holy Women, Holy Men*. She was a lawyer as well as a priest and worked tirelessly in the Civil Rights Movement. She was very proud of her writing, which included poetry as well as sermons and books. This conversation on womanist theology closes with Verse 8 of Dr. Murray's poem, *Dark Testament*.

Hope is a crushed stalk  
Between clenched fingers  
Hope is a bird's wing  
Broken by a stone.  
Hope is a word in a tuneless ditty —  
A word whispered with the wind,  
A dream of forty acres and a mule,  
A cabin of one's own and a moment to rest,  
A name and place for one's children  
And children's children at last . . .  
Hope is a song in a weary throat.  
Give me a song of hope  
And a world where I can sing it.  
Give me a song of faith  
And a people to believe in it.  
Give me a song of kindness  
And a country where I can live it.  
Give me a song of hope and love  
And a brown girl's heart to hear it.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Poetry by Pauli Murray. The Pauli Murray Project. <https://paulimurrayproject.org/pauli-murray/poetry-by-pauli-murray/> Accessed 10/15/18.

### Chapter 3 – Grace Notes: Women Finding and Using Our Voices

In music a grace note is a small note which enables one to move from one note to another. A grace note is literally smaller than other notes in a musical score and may not be part of the regular harmony of the score. The metaphor of a grace note herein points to something larger – the grace of God. Preachers throughout the ages have relied upon God’s grace to bring together biblical texts, the needs of particular faith communities and the people inhabiting them, as well as the world in which those communities are rooted. Women have been preaching since human beings first began to articulate a relationship with deity or deities. We say that because, at its most basic level, whenever we do theology – that is, God-talk – we are giving voice to that relationship. We have already acknowledged that giving voice to a relationship with God does not mean that women have had access to pulpits in the same ways or in the same times as have men.

Women’s voices have been opposed, oppressed, and silenced, put to the test, challenged, denigrated, and denied a hearing. Proof that this happens in faith communities is upheld, in part, by the feminist and womanist theologians who write using ‘voice’ as a metaphor at some point in their work. Five of those theologians in particular will help shape the reflections which follow. These five women echo the works of our foresisters in the faith, some of whose voices I’ve already called upon in this writing.

Women, like men, bring our metaphorical voices to the task of preaching. While theology is not the only discipline in which the metaphor finds an important place, for our purposes theology is our locus of choice. Writing from the perspective of those who teach or have taught homiletics, Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson are especially

drawn to the metaphor of voice. They point out that the metaphor gained a private and public footing during the era encompassing the women's liberation and the civil rights movements here on our continent. Turner and Hudson explain,

“Voice” as a metaphor corresponds to basic principles in feminist, womanist, and liberationist thought that recognizes the issues of power and oppression in relationships. Its polyvalent dimensions have allowed all of those who have been considered “other” to adopt it as a means of symbolizing and depicting their value in our pluralistic postmodern world.

As today's dominant metaphor for power relations between persons and groups in society, “voice” signals the growing cultural acknowledgement of the right to self-expression.

“Voice” offers a new possibility for understanding the nature of self and world in relation to God and others. It is distinctive. It can call forth authentic selfhood. It is the self's authoritative expression. Sometimes it is resistant, but always it speaks of relationship. It opens the world to new perceptions, new action, and new ways of living. Voice subverts. Voice transforms.<sup>47</sup>

Those called to a ministry of preaching do so in particular contexts. Wherever located, preachers need to be aware of how metaphors work in the world outside the church. Not every faith community faces the reality that we live in a pluralistic world; those who preach in the face of such denial must claim their voices if listeners are to change their perceptions in the hopes of transforming their understanding of what it means to be ‘church’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the course of time women who preach have been considered ‘other.’ Many women still occupy a place of otherness. To be aware that one has value and is entitled to self-expression is necessary if we are to muster the courage to speak on behalf of all of God's people.

Reading about women's voices and, thanks to technology, listening to women's voices in various religious and non-religious settings is an exercise in self-awareness.

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<sup>47</sup> Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voices in Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Lucas Park Books, 2014), xii, 16, 17.

How do 'I' believe my voice is perceived? How do 'I' think my voice is honored when I use it in public arenas (remembering that the pulpit is a public arena)?

One of womanist theologian Teresa Fry Brown's careers was as a speech pathologist. She understands well the physiology of 'voice' as vocalized by women and men. Now teaching preaching, she is able to communicate succinctly to her students how our bodies produce sounds as well as the subtleties of how we embody sermons. "So much depends on the voice of the preacher. The emotion, tempo, articulation, texture, intensity, and even the meaning of the words sound *of* the preacher rather than sounding *like* a preacher."<sup>48</sup>

Brown's definition of preaching is worthy of sharing in her own words:

I define preaching as the verbal or nonverbal communication of the inward manifestation of a command by the Holy Spirit to relate to others something about God's presence, purpose, and power in one's life and in the lives of all humanity. To proclaim means to affirm, announce, declare, herald, profess, voice, illustrate, and inspire through articulating one's thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about God. Proclamation is sacred speech differentiated from public speaking. It centers on who God is, what God requires, when God acts, where God is, how God operates, and why God does what God does in the lives of all of God's people. The proclaimer is not operating on her own agenda but is empowered by the Spirit of God in prayer, preparation, composition, delivery, and feedback. The herald stands in the gap between God and the people to impart a healing, freeing, and life-giving word.<sup>49</sup>

This is a meaningful summary of what it means to preach. We can hope our preaching captures the essence of what Brown is describing for us. She is affirming our call from God to this holy enterprise we call simply 'preaching.' The process encompassed by her definition takes courage and commitment, dedication and devotion.

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<sup>48</sup> Teresa L. Fry Brown. *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 158.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

Preaching, in the best sense of the word, needs faith in and love of God. We preachers best serve our calling when we love the people of God entrusts to our care, whether that trust is for a single day or for many years.

Without voices proclaiming God’s loving presence in the world, a silence would ensue which may or may not communicate the life-giving love of God. Turner and Hudson put it this way, “God’s word is dependent upon the human voice to contextualize it for the present. The word is not static and confined; it is rich and multivalent. It calls forth a multitude of voices in different generations to embody it and give it life...”<sup>50</sup> The two authors quote Abraham Heschel saying, “Revelation does not happen when God is alone.”<sup>51</sup> Like the prophets who have come before us, the writers describe human beings as partners with God in the divine search for relationship with humankind.

Anna Carter Florence, another professor of preaching, picks up on the theme of partnership. In her writing she first points out that ‘testimony’ is “...one of the oldest forms of Christian witness. Testimony contains both a narration of events and a confession of belief: we tell what we have seen and heard, and then confess what we believe about it.”<sup>52</sup> She goes so far as to declare, “Testimony is an old, old word for homiletics.”<sup>53</sup>

Florence doesn’t believe that testimony is only for women. She does believe it is a form of preaching the church needs if it will have an identity and a future.

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<sup>50</sup> Turner and Hudson, 27.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>52</sup> Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), xviii.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., xx.

Even if we change the identity of one having faith, when we profess our own faith in sermons, it carries weight. It helps us answer a question this preacher has been asked by congregants, ‘But what do you believe?’ After all, why listen to a preacher for whom faith is only a tradition handed down intellectually or academically? How different it is to listen to the spark of faith from someone who personally has been a seeker after faith, who has wrestled with God, who has endured the everyday-reality-of-doubt, who has experienced the wilderness that comes to every person, who has discovered the Divine love in a time and in a place when least expected!

In testifying to our journeys of faith, Florence uses the history of the people of Israel when she describes what she means by being a partner with God in the course of preaching. She articulates four things we can expect to learn or experience:

First, we expect that God will, in fact, encounter us; that is what partners do. God has a pattern and a habit of breaking into human life, so as God’s partner we are primed to keep our eyes open – and to be very vocal in our disappointment if God doesn’t show up. Second, no one can expect us to be impartial when we talk about God. Partners have intimate knowledge of one another – the good, the bad, and the ugly...they feel intensely about one another, always hungry for the next encounter.

Third, we expect that this partnership compels testimony, because you can’t make a covenant with someone and then refuse to talk...As God’s partner, we have to say where we really are, and what we really feel. We have to really *see* the other, and allow ourselves to be seen.

Finally...we have to expect that our talk will expose us. It makes us vulnerable. There is always the possibility of rejection; not even true speech is immune to it. Testifying to an encounter with God (with all the awkward, passionate, outrageous speech *that* entails) is terribly risky, putting us at the mercy of the community’s judgment.<sup>54</sup>

What an amazing invitation to envision ourselves as partners with God. The call to partnership means being authentic. It is not fair to ask listeners to embark upon a journey we ourselves are unwilling to travel. There are more than enough false proclamations in

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

the world we inhabit. We are called to a higher standard. Faking it will not survive the scrutiny of human hearts intent on hoping to discover the love of God Who Creates All That Is. The covenant into which we enter when we agree to be a partner with the Divine is one which calls forth the very best that is in us. Women's voices must be genuine in speaking about God. In some cases, traditional expressions and readings may be in order. But it is important that the preacher's language not remain stuck in traditional ways of speaking that do not reflect the preacher's understanding of or experience of God. It is also essential to provide listeners with fresh ways of thinking about and articulating what it means to be in relationship with God.

Again, Anna Carter Florence describes what we ourselves expect when we encounter God "...right smack in the middle of our lives."

The first thing [to notice] is the word "when": experience is what happens *when* God meets us. The word is not "if." God will meet us; it is a given. Notice, too, that God is the initiator. We can count on God to come but not to call ahead, since it must be admitted that God shows very little interest in coordinating schedules, and apparently relishes the surprise factor. And finally, notice that although the encounter lodges in every portion of our being – body, mind, heart, spirit – we will never be able to describe it properly... All we can do is to *interpret* the experience through an act of imagination – which means that eventually, inevitably, we have to preach it.<sup>55</sup>

We can only preach 'it' when we are willing to claim our voice whatever the voices around us might say to us. It is a risky business this preaching. It is reminiscent of J.R.R. Tolkien describing a conversation in the third chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which Frodo recounts to Sam something Bilbo Baggins used to say, "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door... You step into the Road, and if you don't keep

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 69-70.

your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.”<sup>56</sup>

Notice that Tolkien capitalizes the word ‘Road.’

Isn't that what we ask of our listeners every time we step into a place of preaching? We ask our listeners to step into the Road with us. Our journey may not be as perilous as that the members of the Fellowship experience. But, it is a risky business, this life of faith. Being vulnerable is not something we humans often pursue willingly. It is more likely something that comes upon us, as Florence puts it, ‘smack in the middle of our lives.’

This means that there is something at stake – this asking people to undertake the risky adventure of an encounter with God. Lisa Thompson, of Union Theological Seminary in New York, also believes that something is at stake in preaching:

The preacher is clear that there is something hanging in the balance that makes the sermon worth preaching; this knowing then shapes the sermon and its content... The preacher's own experience of the message become the initial site of the vision and possibilities opened up by a message...

Preaching for the sake of life forges a sense of connectedness through its immediacy, even in the midst of imaginative resistance to the new possibilities it calls forth. The preacher is aware that they are offering a truth and risking the possibility of getting it wrong. Yet, when the risk of getting it wrong for the sake of life is held against the risk of death if one utters nothing, the preacher chooses to take the risk of getting it wrong.<sup>57</sup>

Thompson also declares honestly that, before ever we put pen to paper or fingertips to computer keys, preachers are required to be vulnerable and to have courage. Providing listeners glimpses into what it is God may want us to hear and know on any one day requires preachers to look deep within to discern and discover for themselves first what that might be. “This discovery is led by our deepest ways of knowing as a person of faith

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<sup>56</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of The Lord of the Rings* (Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954), 72.

<sup>57</sup> Lisa L. Thompson, *ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 127, 137.

trying to reconcile the joys and sorrows of life with who we believe we all are most created to be.”<sup>58</sup>

Sometimes we discover realities that put us to the test – that call us to question ourselves – to ask ourselves by what authority do we proclaim that which we proclaim. Official ordination or licensure aside, at one time or another it is probable that most preachers ask themselves such a question. ‘Can I Really Say That?’ is the way Anna Carter Florence frames the question. She provides readers with a series of ways to expand that question. For example, “Can I really say that...if no one will believe a word I say?” or “Can I really say that...if I believe it but can’t prove it?”<sup>59</sup> Florence engages the reader in a journey to uncover what it might mean for preachers to believe they can say whatever “that” is under the circumstances. In the final analysis she concludes, “How can I say that? How can I proclaim God’s liberating Word when no proof will protect me? On the other hand, how can I *not*?”<sup>60</sup>

How can *we not* find and use our voices? How can *we not* call forth the best that is in us, with all the doubts and surety that entails, and proclaim a word of God for the people of God, in the here and now, with and for those gathered alongside whatever pulpit we occupy?!

In their aptly named book, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women’s Voices in Preaching*, Turner and Hudson provide us with some sage observations for our inquiry. It is imperative,

...that the preacher bring forth the gospel in her own distinctive, authentic,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 176.

<sup>59</sup> Florence, xvi.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 158.

authoritative, resistant, and relational voice, born of spirit and expressive of one's own god-likeness. The voice of the preacher, in its own distinctive form and register, is a place where God becomes present. Voice contextualizes word and allows for plurality. Voice is the point of integration between word, world, and self.

This is where the learning of preaching must begin – not with homiletic style but with “unlearning not to speak,” learning to trust one's own voice so that the sermon can be “populated with one's own accent.”<sup>61</sup>

Women preachers of all ages and races, of all denominations and experiences, need to unlearn ‘not to speak’ for the sake of life, for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of God's people. Finding and using one's voice is as demanding an undertaking as it is an exciting one. It may help to remember that old question, “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?” To which the answer remains, “Practice, practice, practice.”

Practice finding the language that gives voice to one's own relationship with God. Practice locating the grace of God in one's own everyday life. Look for signs of grace in the lives of those all around. Practice articulating the most personal, meaningful ways of what it means to name and to know God. Listen to the voices of other preachers as they seek to find and use their own voices. Live into what it means to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with all the freedom that brings to explore metaphors and meanings that expand our God-talk. Practice using one's own physical voice. Give thanks for the pitch that is uniquely your own.

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<sup>61</sup> Turner and Hudson, 99, 100.

## Chapter 4 – The Tone of Voice: Personal Journeys of Women Preachers

This Project now turns to parts of a review of oral history of six women preachers who have agreed to be part of this adventure. These women currently live their vocations in the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina (EDNC). Again, I highly value their participation.

The Episcopal Church (TEC) reports that at the end of the calendar year 2017, there were 1,712,563 Active Baptized Members.<sup>62</sup> Of that number 427,518 members, or 24.96%, were reported in Province 4 for 2017.<sup>63</sup> The statistics indicate that the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina has the greatest number of members in that Province. Of the number of members in Province 4, there are 49,212, or 11.51% active in the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina. As of the 2017 Parochial Reports EDNC shows 109 Open Parishes & Missions.<sup>64</sup> There are also nine campus ministries. A review of the statistics also indicates that EDNC is the sixth largest Diocese in TEC.

It is interesting to identify the numbers of clergy in EDNC. As of November 30, 2018, Ordained Clergy Canonically Resident and Clergy Licensed in EDNC were:

<u>Ordained Clergy</u>	338	100.00%
Woman Bishop	1	.30%
Women Priests	95	28.10%
Women Deacons	39	11.54%
<u>Licensed Clergy</u>	65	100.00%
Women Priests	18	27.69%

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<sup>62</sup> The Episcopal Church. “Episcopal Domestic Fast Facts: 2017.” Accessed January 6, 2019. [https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/documents/2017\\_fast\\_facts.pdf](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/documents/2017_fast_facts.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> The Episcopal Church. “Table of Statistics of the Episcopal Church 2017.” Accessed January 6, 2019. [https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/documents/2017\\_table\\_of\\_statistics.pdf](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/documents/2017_table_of_statistics.pdf)

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

Women Deacons            1            1.53%<sup>65</sup>

As of December 17, 2018, there were 294 Retired Bishops, Priests, and Deacons in EDNC.

<u>Retired Bishops, Priests, and Deacons</u>	284	100.00%
Retired Bishops & Priests	261	91.90%
Retired Deacons	23	8.09%
<u>Retired Bishops &amp; Priests</u>	261	100.00%
Retired Women Bishops & Priests	46	17.62%
Retired Men Bishops & Priests	215	82.38%
<u>Retired Deacons</u>	23	100.00%
Retired Women Deacons	12	52.17%
Retired Men Deacons	11	47.83% <sup>66</sup>

The six women preachers participating are from a variety of ministry settings. Of the five who are already Episcopal priests, two are Rectors, one of a Resource Sized Congregation and one of a Transitional Sized Church. One is a University Chaplain while also serving as Director of Religious Studies. Another woman is a Missionary Vicar while also serving as a Mission Developer for the Diocese, and one serves as Associate Rector of a Resource Sized Congregation and works under the supervision of a male Rector. Also included in the project is a lay woman in the ordination process who has graduated from seminary and just completed a six month parish internship; her voice adds interest as she is in the discernment process transitioning into a future ministry having identified a call to the priesthood.

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<sup>65</sup> The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina. “Diocesan Statistics: Ordained Clergy Canonically Resident and Ordained Clergy Licensed as of November 30, 2018.” Data provided by the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina on December 20, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina. “Diocese of North Carolina Retired Clergy as of December 17, 2018 ” Data provided by Shelley Kappauf, Executive Assistant to the Bishops, on December 17, 2018.

One woman is African American. Another identifies as a lesbian Latina woman. The other four women identify as Caucasian. These participants bring a variety of gifts to the preaching ministry, all having had careers or work experience prior to seminary including: a K-2 teacher; an engineer in the nuclear division of a public utility company; a Pastoral Care Associate in a private Catholic hospital, followed by being a fitness instructor and who then worked with victims of crime and trauma; another woman worked in outdoor education; one was ordained in the United Methodist Church before joining the Episcopal Church and becoming a priest; and one worked in laboratory medicine and then as a lay chaplain in two different hospitals, one a children's hospital.

Their demographic data indicates the following age groupings:

18-30	0
31-40	3
41-55	2
56-65	0
66-75	1

On average, in their current context this is how often they preach: two preach three times a month; one preaches weekly either on Sunday or in a weekday service; another preaches weekly; the parish intern preached four times during her six month timeline but also preached in parishes and seminary; and one preaches once a month on Sundays as well as in weekday services.

All six participated in a review of oral history either in person, on the telephone, or via e-mail. The reviews were lively and, in some cases, extensive because in the process of speaking our interactions were exciting, eye opening, and poignant.

What follows are highlights of the process, particularly conversations applicable to the topics at hand.

Early in each conversation I was curious about what was going through their minds as they waited to deliver the inevitable ‘first sermon.’ The Latina preacher was the youngest at the time and she recalls thinking, “Oh, my God, please help me. Help me not say something stupid, please breathe in me, help me stay calm, use these words if it’s your will to lift someone up.”<sup>67</sup> The preacher who is African American is also a ‘p.k.,’ her father having been a pastor well known in the Raleigh, NC, area, and her brother is a pastor in the Baptist Church. She remembers, “My family was there – my brother and his wife and a cousin traveled to be there. I was kind of nervous but felt like it [the sermon] was supposed to happen and I felt supported by St. Mark’s [her internship parish prior to ordination]. I was aware of support and was grateful for that.”<sup>68</sup>

The woman serving as Rector of a Resource Congregation described those pre-preaching thoughts: “I recall having a feeling of a kind of holy anxiety – that what I had been tasked with and the opportunity I was given to preach was weighty.”<sup>69</sup>

The Rector of the Transitional parish describes her memory,

“We were singing the last verse of a song before the sermon, I had this very vivid voice in my head, ‘Just sit down! You don’t have anything to say to these people. Who do you think you are?’ But I was up, so I did it; there was no backing down then. There were different factors...gender, age...fact I was a new Christian...still hadn’t been a Christian for ten years, so... a lot of things made me feel ‘who am I to stand up and do this?’”<sup>70</sup>

The preacher who has recently completed her parish internship remembers ‘preaching’ at age eleven (11) on what was probably a Youth Sunday. She states,

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<sup>67</sup> Audra Abt, Missionary Vicar, Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>68</sup> Nita C. Johnson Byrd, Chaplain, St. Augustine’s University.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Marie Melchionna, Rector, Chapel of the Cross.

<sup>70</sup> Sarah Hubinsky Phelps, St. John’s Episcopal Church.

“I’ve felt called since the age of 6. The sermon was, ‘God was not a big white man but if God was, God would be wearing a Hawaiian T-shirt and flip-flops and celebrating our joys with us.’” Of her first ‘more formal’ sermon she describes the pre-preaching experience, “I was a wreck. The week preparing... wrestling and it wouldn’t come together... Woke up [Friday] at 3 a.m., felt moved by the Holy Spirit and [the sermon] flowed out and by 7 a.m. it was written and altogether. I had a sense of peace and being pleased with the sermon. ...Anxiety came from the sense of responsibility for not causing harm.”<sup>71</sup>

The Associate Rector recounts, “I was worried about saying the right or the wrong thing – getting the text right. It’s always about preparing – the right research, examples that work for people... If you preach from the heart, that can take away that fear. There’s always this momentary time when you wonder, ‘will they throw tomatoes?’”<sup>72</sup>

In light of the premise of this Project that women’s voices are not always treated equally or respected, I wanted to hear from these preachers in what ways, if any, someone questioned, challenged or criticized their call to preach. In a similar vein, I was curious about memorable affirmations the women recall.

The Parish Intern remembers being told to “smile more,” which made her wonder if the person giving that advice ever told the male rector he needed to smile more! She also states, “I knew my preaching was going to have to be 10% better than a man just to pass. I think aggressions have come. I knew it was an issue before I started, so I talked to other women preachers who said being tall and a brunette and my voice being lower

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<sup>71</sup> Mia Hutchins-Cabibi, Parish Intern, in Ordination Process.

<sup>72</sup> Darby Oliver Everhard, Associate Rector, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church.

would be helpful.”<sup>73</sup>

Her latter comments resonate with me as I’m tall, a brunette, and have a preaching voice lower than some women. On reflection, those were advantages in the business world as well. This elicits a ‘sigh’ from me that such stereotypes continue unabated.

The Intern describes one of her memorable affirmations, “A former Presbyterian had left that church because of the treatment of women and the hyper-Calvinism. I preached about love and she appreciated hearing about love instead of condemnation.”<sup>74</sup>

The Rector of the Transitional church doesn’t recollect her call to preach being criticized, but, while wearing a clergy shirt in a hospital, her ‘overall call’ was vilely challenged by a woman-stranger in an elevator. It was easier to shake-off because the person in the elevator was a stranger. But our preacher does remember when being called as first-time rector having a man in her congregation tell her it was okay for her to be an associate, but a rector needs to be a man.

There is a very male charisma that many priests, especially in high-profile churches, embody and some even smaller churches have people who [would describe] a rector as male, 30-60, white, British accent is a plus, magnanimous, funny, warm, larger-than-life, but never really too close. That’s what people think of...authoritative when HE needs to be.”<sup>75</sup>

The other side of the coin for her is remembering hearing from other women, ““You bring such warmth or a personal and real kind of approach to the scripture and you make it relevant... it’s because you’re a woman...because women preachers are more able to do that.”” Another person remarked, “You bring something out of us that is

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Phelps.

deeper, more full...you've brought us out of our shell." This latter comment was made by a man who made it clear the depth resonates because our preacher is a woman.<sup>76</sup>

The Resource Parish Rector says she's never had her call to preach questioned in her own parish. In a prior context she served as an Episcopal Campus Minister. Some other campus ministers did not think it was appropriate for women's voices to be used in expositing scripture. They used words such as 'fitness,' 'rightness,' 'appropriateness.' She goes on, however, to say, "I have encountered in each parish I've served someone who felt that my femaleness should disqualify me from celebrating the Eucharist and/or they refused to receive communion from me. Interestingly, all of those individuals were okay with me preaching. They said they 'got something out of it,' but didn't think I should celebrate."<sup>77</sup> When it comes to describing an affirmation, this Rector has a most interesting one.

In regards to being a woman, it was powerful for me to hear the impact that my physical presence had while preaching, on other women (and a few men), while I was heavily pregnant. I was surprised how moved some individuals were, not by what I said, but by that I was the only way I could be at that moment, myself, which was with child. They mentioned how seeing someone pregnant and preaching allowed them to feel more connected to church and imagine how God might cultivate possibility in their lives."<sup>78</sup>

Her experience while pregnant is encouraging in light of the bias in many workplaces, including churches, against women while pregnant.

The University Chaplain has a vivid childhood memory that goes to the question of someone questioning women's voices in pulpits.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Melchionna.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

[The following event] had an impact of delaying me into going into discernment. [My] call was brewing ten years prior to ordination. As a child...it hurt me but I wasn't sure why. My father was a minister and he brought women in to preach in the early 1970's; people in the Baptist African American tradition were not very receptive. Some of my mother's closest friends said, "I don't want to hear anything a woman says in a pulpit." I overheard this as a child. My mother pushed back a little bit and walked away. She didn't want to get into it as a minister's wife. I felt it was hurtful because they [the criticizers] were women leaders in the church and because I strongly disagreed with them. Why would these women leaders in the church say something like that? That voice stayed in my head for a long time."<sup>79</sup>

Because her father was well known in the Raleigh area, the Chaplain has interesting stories about how people who identify the connection react to her. It has had positive effects. Upon hearing the Chaplain preach, one man said, "I hear your father's voice in you – I can tell you're your father's daughter." She describes his intent as positive, "It allowed me to take a deep breath and live into my call. It helped me relax... I knew it was going to be all right... At the same time, I want to have my own voice. That's another tension I hold... I want my own voice. I know I have my own voice and voices of my ancestors whom I never met...that's just part of who you are." On another occasion her older brother told her that their father had said something remarkable in the middle of a Baptist Convention; her father said, "How can we press – be fighting for racial equality when we're not promoting the ordination of women in our tradition?" She says there was a lot of sexism in the church and society at the time and her father having said this "...provided a counterbalance to what I'd heard in the church about women being ordained which has to do with women preaching."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Byrd.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

The Latina preacher recalls people questioning her call to preach by saying either “But you’re so young!” or “Well, aren’t you a pretty little woman! They let pretty little women be priests now? Just kidding! (with a pat on the back).” She also relates another critique, “‘Why do you feel like you need to be in the pulpit? It would feel so much more personal and relatable if you would get out of there and walk in the aisle.’ The response I could have given, but didn’t: ‘What is it about a woman claiming space in the pulpit that makes you so uncomfortable?’ When I asked the rector, a straight male, if he’d ever heard comments like this, he said no. He always preached from the pulpit.”<sup>81</sup> She astutely observed the difference that gender makes: women in the pulpit make some people very, very nervous. The power differential becomes very clear.

On the other side of the coin, she recounts two memorable affirmations. “For the four years I was the assistant in a parish, I was told, ‘In every sermon you’ve pointed toward God, and I feel closer to him (sic) because of your witness. Thank you.’” In addition, “So many women who’ve come out of the Roman Catholic tradition (like me) express gratitude for my presence, my boldness, my willingness to unapologetically speak about Jesus, from the pulpit, and I really appreciate those affirmations.”<sup>82</sup>

The Associate Rector describes questioning her ministry as,

Nobody challenged my call as a woman as a preacher. But plenty of people question my call to the overall ordained ministry. Disrespecting the fact that I also have a voice as a priest. I’ve always wanted to be a priest even though when I was younger I pursued a science degree... I sublimated the call; it was assumed because I’m a ‘girl’ I can’t be an ordained minister. Also, other women like the ‘uniform’ but don’t see women in the ordained ministry. ‘Father knows best’ is still an

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<sup>81</sup> Abt.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

undercurrent. Some people wouldn't call a woman as a rector... [They] want a guy with a young family... as far as we've come there is ageism and sexism still."<sup>83</sup>

In thinking back, she describes the affirming aspect of what people say, "There are people who really relate to my sermons. I don't know how much is about my being a woman as it is about my style. Do I see something about God's love that is different from a guy's perspective? I am calm in the pulpit. I have a low speaking voice and it's very calm. Mostly affirmations are 'you're very thoughtful' or 'I needed that.'"<sup>84</sup>

Among the most important information these preachers shared has to do with language – both for humanity and for divinity. Accompanying that is wondering what are these preachers' personal favorite names or language for God.

Continuing with the Associate Rector, she states that it is pretty easy for her to use expansive language for humanity and for God.

I was taught in seminary to write that way. For the most part I find a way to say things that doesn't lock God into one pronoun... Some people miss the point on language. People...aren't disrespectful, but I think women have been oppressed and are oppressed and we have a lot of problems because of male-centered things. It's like a non-awareness... people blow it off.<sup>85</sup>

Her favorite names or language for God are, "Gracious God or Loving God. God is almost a feeling – like being surrounded by loving arms that are soft all the time. God isn't necessarily a father or a mother to me. I don't use 'Almighty God.' I do like some of the images from *Enriching Our Worship*."<sup>86</sup>

The Mission Vicar address both the use of expansive language and the language

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<sup>83</sup> Everhard.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

she prefers this way,

For humanity I was raised to say “men and women” (not just men) so that comes easily. Learning from my trans friends and community that language that emphasizes sex binaries reinforces the dominant thinking that a “man” or a “woman” can be easily described and identified by their behavior, body, and gender expression. This not only leaves out many people, but it makes them invisible and contributes to violence against them. So, I have moved to a preference for “children of God” vs. “sons and daughters.” Instead of “men and women/girls and boys” I try to use the language of “people.” Instead of “brothers and sisters in Christ” I try to say “my kindred” or “my friends in Christ... I love saying “God” and I love talking about “God,” so every time it’s honey on the tongue... I’m not particularly keen on using parental language of any sort for God, because that’s not how I experience the Divine, though I do know that others experience the holy more easily that way.

Personally my favorite is a ‘sigh.’ I know it is not a name, but it is my internal movement and the sound I make when I say Y—H. It speaks to my longing for the life and love that is all-in-all and that will make all this painful mess we’ve made of creation new, and me along with it. I have often wished we had a completely different pronoun that is only used for the Divine.<sup>87</sup>

With regard to expansive language the Chaplain explains two important aspects:

I would have it no other way. I never refer to God as ‘he’ – I will do a benediction with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but also Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. It would be difficult for me to say ‘she’ but I’ll refer to God as mother, nurturer...Feminine metaphors, I’m comfortable. I’m preaching to a young congregation, most are from conservative backgrounds. Students almost always refer to God with masculine pronouns.

Something else that’s important about expansive language... It’s also important not to have language that denigrates darkness. A lot of ways I address this is referring to divinity is “like a womb that is dark that nurtures us.” The other thing I do is couch the darkness in other positive terms... velvety darkness... I use ‘cloudy’ as negative. God moves clouds away. Dark and light are necessary... Poor clouds get the short end! That which veils us and allows us not to see. Part of my expansive language is how feminine darkness is part of God’s goodness.<sup>88</sup>

It is particularly important for preachers to be aware of the ways in which words

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<sup>87</sup> Abt.

<sup>88</sup> Byrd.

or images of ‘dark’ or ‘darkness’ or ‘black’ are used in sermons (as well as liturgy). It’s all too easy for persons in positions of power or privilege to dismiss the importance, forgetting or denying the racial overtones of language. All of us need to keep keenly in mind the power language has to shape the thoughts and feelings and actions of the communities we inhabit.

The Chaplain shares with us a series of names or language she uses for God:

Font of Wisdom, Creator, Redeemer, Life-sustainer. I begin prayers and engage people by saying ‘Life Giver’ in public prayer. Privately I use Holy Mother or Life Giving Mother. Seeing God as the One Who Holds Creation is very much like a mother giving birth. Also, a lot of the imagery and feelings and ways I relate to the Divine come from other cultures... There’s a multi-cultural aspect that allows me to honor the feminine. That work I engaged in long before I became an Episcopalian. I began that journey in graduate school in the 1980’s.<sup>89</sup>

The Rector of the larger parish says about expansive language,

For humanity it is easy and it is something to which I am attentive. I am diligent to do it with God as well for a variety of reasons. In relationship to language, I think children are often concrete thinkers, so having a variety of words/images to encounter God is helpful. I endeavor not to refer to God as ‘he,’ but God as ‘God’ or as ‘God’s self (which sometimes gets cumbersome).<sup>90</sup>

Her personal favorite language for God is ‘Creator.’<sup>91</sup>

Relative to expansive language for humanity and for God in sermons, the Parish

Intern says,

I don’t have a problem with ‘Father’ language. I use ‘he’ about Jesus. I used to say ‘the Divine,’ but I don’t do it anymore. I think it flattens a robust language we already have. It waters it down to be like any other tradition. I try to draw from scripture. Holy Spirit as She. Mother who broods over her chicks. And I use metaphors such as ‘water’ as opposed

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Melchionna.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

to gendered language. Humanity I have to be deliberate about but it doesn't bother me. Specifically I pay attention to using gendered non-binary language. Not just 'he' and 'she.'

If I'm preaching on Matthew and Emmanuel, I would dig into 'God with us.' If I'm preaching on Hagar and the God who sees, I'd probably dig into the 'God Who Sees.'<sup>92</sup>

As to her preferences for personal names/language for God, she says, "I think I probably use Jesus the most. I grew up in New England where people are afraid to say Jesus. I probably use Lord and God. I know 'Lord' is contentious. But I like the political aspect of that word."<sup>93</sup>

The Rector of the Transitional sized congregation wrestles with the issue of expansive language.

I struggle with it because I've gone through seasons in my life and ministry when I have tried to always use inclusive language... almost trying to replace biblical language and it felt hard-edged. The effort to be perfect in always using [expansive language] felt like, as it was so intentional that I lost being relatable. It felt formulaic, artificial. So, and I've become more comfortable with it, I do use 'he' for God a lot. I need to come back... it is shaping children's minds. Pronouns are difficult but I do bring in imagery. Talking about God as birthing things... [using] a more female-inspired view of God in metaphor and imagery. Maybe I do that more than most male preachers.<sup>94</sup>

Personally she says she is drawn most to "Holy One... I do love the tie to the tradition of the church. And there's some female images that are biblical that help to articulate how that's part of our tradition. They are images that were pushed to the side for centuries. I also like 'Holy God.'"<sup>95</sup>

Other than a multi-staff context, it may take an effort to hear other women preach,

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<sup>92</sup> Hutchins-Cabibi.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Phelps.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

unless on vacation or sabbatical or at a preaching conference. But because preachers need to be fed by other preachers, I wondered how important it is for these six women to hear other women's sermons use expansive language.

The Mission Vicar makes a significant point when she explains,

If I'm ranking importance, one of my biggest desires would be male-identified preachers losing the gendered language for God and not using "men" when they mean "people." Why? Because men are the ones who benefit the most from gendered and male-centric language use; because men have the most to 'lose' from dissipating those linguistic ties that so closely equate God and maleness.

If I hear a male-identified preacher unselfconsciously calling God "He" over and over or say "men" rather than any number of other options when talking about a grouping of humanity that includes people who aren't "men," I presume that either he's privileged enough to not even notice the cultural shifts that have been taking place for 50+ years OR he is aware, and he doesn't care, and is, in fact, going to defiantly continue to use "He" and "men" for God and humanity. And in neither case do I feel particularly inclined to trust this male preacher nor to put my eternal soul under his authority.

Now, this all being said, I also know that changing linguistic habits is *really* hard. I don't judge or call out people, and most of the people I'm around, including myself, are in some sort of process of trying to change the way we talk and refer to ourselves and to God.

In prayers I speak to God in the second person and encourage others to do the same. I don't really favor substituting "Mother" for "Father," as in my experience this tends to perpetuate peoples' rather solidified notions of motherhood and fatherhood, so bound by cultural norms and expectations, and continues to limit our imaginations in ways that I find less helpful.<sup>96</sup>

About the importance of hearing preachers use expansive language, the Chaplain makes it clear, "Very important because I cringe when I hear male-only language. I hear it so much it's difficult."<sup>97</sup>

One of the Rectors says, "It's important to me. I'm not worried about the

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<sup>96</sup> Abt.

<sup>97</sup> Byrd.

pronouns, but if metaphors, if there isn't some expansiveness to describe God's being, then I find it narrow and as if I don't belong in it."<sup>98</sup> The other Rector explains her view, "I think that it matters in that the language that we hear in church is part of the fodder for our spiritual imaginations. The greater the depth and variety we have, the greater the ways in which we might have for accessing God."<sup>99</sup>

The Parish Intern says, "I miss it when it's not there. I think it matters more in the liturgy to me. But I notice it if its absent in full. That's probably because in a sermon you're listening for the story and the narrative arc, whereas in the liturgy you're letting yourself be formed... Well, actually, a sermon can form you, too."<sup>100</sup>

About other women preachers using expansive language the Associate Rector replies, "It's pretty important. I don't like it when I hear constantly male-centered language. If you have a chance to be non-gender specific, I like to hear it and think you should do it."<sup>101</sup>

When it comes to the question of using feminist or womanist resources in sermon preparation, the responses were mixed. The Chaplain and the Intern make more use of Womanist Theologians. As an African American, the Chaplain says those resources have been invaluable to her. The Intern leans heavily towards social justice and finds herself much more in-tune with Womanist Theology, in part, too, because she became acquainted with those writers in seminary. The Mission Vicar is drawn to Liberation and Latina Theologians; she also seeks out the thoughts of Trans Theologians, a pool of

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<sup>98</sup> Phelps.

<sup>99</sup> Melchionna.

<sup>100</sup> Hutchins-Cabibi.

<sup>101</sup> Everhard.

which is small but slowly growing. The Associate Rector sometimes consults feminist or womanist resources, usually in the form of commentaries including one edited by a woman.

I was also interested in the influence the digital age has on sermon preparation. The comments from the preachers came back quickly and were positive. Everyone uses the internet or social media in one form or another. Access to online resources has greatly expanded the breadth of scholarship, information, or opinions on scripture available for the process of sermon writing. Digital resources also allow small groups to form online providing support for sermon writing as well as general encouragement in ministry.

The last comments have to do with how these women preachers are addressed by parishioners or colleagues and how men preachers are addressed with whom the women may work or have worked. This question is ancillary to the issue of language. Three of the five already ordained women are or have been called 'Mother' while men are or have been called 'Father.' Several women report being called 'Reverend' or by their first name when some men are called also by their first names. A segment of one woman's congregation calls her Pastor or 'Reverenda' which happen to be cultural customs in that context. When asked, some of the women ask individuals to refer to them by their first names. Most clergy honor language requested by parents of small children. One priest asks that she not be called 'Mother.' She does not favor parental language for clergy, with which I agree. I think women being called 'Mother' sets up a false equivalency.

I do not believe the titles 'Mother' and 'Father' are equal in weight whether used for human beings or for God. In the past other women clergy have opined to me that they choose 'Mother' when men clergy are called 'Father' and the women do so as a defense

mechanism. A simple solution is to leave behind the traditional designation of ‘Reverend’ as an adjective. Instead, take advantage of the contemporary usage of ‘Reverend’ as a form of address which stands alone without being preceded by the article ‘the.’

Now, having been in conversation with these six faithful, talented, creative, smart women, we will move to hear their individual voices in written form as they share with us what their listeners hear on Sunday mornings. Each one of them has made an important contribution in the search for The Pitch of a Woman’s Voice and I give thanks to God for each of them.

## Chapter 5 – The Right Chords: Sermons in Women’s Voices

The following pages feature the voices of seven women preachers, including the author of this project. The women were invited to choose a sermon they believe expressed well their voice in their context. In conversations following up the written invitation to participate, I explained that I am particularly interested in issues of language and of social justice, particularly as those topics relate to gender. It was up to the preachers to choose what ‘social justice’ means in the communities they serve or have served. Some of the preachers provided a choice among sermons; given this pool of talent, the choices were not easy! In their sermons I looked particularly for stories of or about women, for traditional and/or expansive language, for boldness in the preacher’s context, and for the overt and subtle invitations to listeners to use their own voices in their ministries.<sup>102</sup>

Following each sermon this author will make observations on the ways in which the sermons relate to this project’s commentary on women’s voices. Meaningful phrases and expressions will be noted as well.

These preachers strike many ‘right chords’ with their voices.

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<sup>102</sup> Please note: there are only two formatting changes to these sermons, 1. font and font size required by this project and 2. the titles at the tops of the first pages to align the identification of the biblical texts, the preachers names, the churches in which and dates on which preached. All other formatting, including spacing, bold/italics print, and footnotes, is preserved in the original forms submitted.

Proper 17C – Jer. 2:4-13; Lk. 14:1, 7-14 – The Rev. Audra Abt  
St. Andrews Episcopal Church, Greensboro, NC – September 1, 2013

Let's go back and hear the prophet Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord to Israel “My people have committed two evils: they have turned away from me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”

50 years ago, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. invoked a dream for us, a vision of a nation caught up in the living, rolling waters of God's justice. It was a vision of a nation freed of our collective enslavement to militarism, bigotry, self-centered materialism, and racial hatred. Rev. King's ability to give voice to this dream was nurtured directly from God's ancient and trustworthy word, a living word that resists whatever would distort and deny the image of God in another child of God.

The movement that we've been remembering this week exposed the cracks in our cistern; exposed the deeply flawed and spiritually bankrupt society we'd built. Many Christian churches were complicit in this bankruptcy: Some through overt hostility, and others through quiet toleration.

Our own Episcopal church was, and is, broadly tolerant. We made space for members who marched on the Mall in Washington, *and* we made space for members who were against racial equality... much like in an earlier century when our Episcopal church made space for outspoken abolitionists *and* for slave-owning bishops, priests, and lay leaders. We tolerate a great deal in the Episcopal Church, and that can lead to blessedness. But it can also lead to brokenness. When we tolerate a system that denies the love of God and distorts the goodness of God's creation, then somewhere there's a crack in our cistern, and the water of life will surely drain out.

Jeremiah declares that when, in their satisfaction, God's people construct a life with themselves at the center, God will surely expose the failure of their man-made cisterns and invite them to come back to the true source of life. Dr. King's words resonate with the prophet Jeremiah's message that God, and only God, *is* the fountain of living water, who can invite people to drink by abundant streams and be satisfied.

Jesus comes to us as that God, an incarnate, breathing fountain, as living water for people who are depleted from struggling. Jesus shows up where institutions are cracked, and people are drained, and invites them back into the living waters of God's forgiveness and grace.

In the Gospel we hear today, Jesus is invited to a Sabbath feast. As we know, the Sabbath is given as a day for living and reflecting all God's promises of justice and mercy. But Jesus looks around and sees people turned in on *themselves* rather than toward God. Jesus sees people clinging to cracked cisterns: Sabbath traditions emptied of hospitality and meaning, and hierarchies drained of justice and compassion. For these people, most of them religious insiders, Jesus shows that returning to the fountain of God's living water will mean moving away from the comfortable center of the feast. It will mean giving up their privileged seats for those who've been seated at the margins.

What I hear Jesus inviting them to do is relocate themselves - not to shame them - but to give them a chance to know life in God's kingdom, a life of grace they have missed out on before because of the cracks in the cistern which kept them always at the center. The grace that comes from no longer being in the center may at first feel painful. Giving up privilege is hard, but that pain is part of being transformed for living in God's Kingdom alongside those who've been at the margins all this time.

Here at St. Andrews this past Wednesday evening we gathered to begin discerning whether we will offer pastoral care through a provisional rite for blessing same-sex couples. Our time together was fruitful, and it was blessed, but our discussion revealed some of the cracks in our cistern. First, it showed us, as Dr. King reminded us 50 years ago, that tolerance can foster complicity, and for God's living waters to flow we cannot tolerate injustice in the name of insuring harmony. Second, it showed us, as Jesus does in his parable at the Sabbath feast, how cracked our cisterns become when we rely on hierarchies of privilege of our own making.

On Wednesday, I heard a great many of you speak of your fear of division, of cracks between us that could not be mended. In our fear, we may be tempted to tolerate each other's differences to keep the cisterns from crumbling. But I've been thinking this week: what if *toleration itself* can become an idol and make a cracked cistern? Let me explain further... I believe that toleration asks people to endure each other, rather than make peace with one another. When we tolerate, we accept, endure or allow something that we fundamentally find unacceptable or abhorrent. Toleration asks us to make moral compromises we should not make and provides mere toleration for the people or things being tolerated. And that's how most of the world operates. That's how most of the world deals with division.

But that's not how Jesus deals with division. Jesus deals with division by keeping everyone at the feast, but... then asking everyone to move, to take a different seat. 😊 Jesus invites them to play a radical game of musical chairs, except with a much different ending: where when the music stops no one's left out. 😊

In our Episcopal Church's history, toleration has led us to accept beliefs and

opinions that denigrate members of our community. In the name of avoiding divisions and ensuring harmony, we have at times fallen into a silent or passive complicity with ongoing oppression. For centuries, some people have been privileged at the center of conversations about who is acceptable to God and who is not, while other people have been relegated to the margins.

In the Gospels Jesus loves *every single person* he encounters, but Jesus does not tolerate oppressive hierarchies and relations. Jesus offers an alternative to those at the center, which is to humbly give up their privilege— to switch seats with someone else.

We don't often admit it, but giving up one's seat *will feel* painful. Giving up privilege feels painful. Sharing God's favor with others who've been despised means giving up some past assumptions and allowing transformation (and some loss) before the Kingdom rewards can be received. ...And loss feels painful...Some of that pain will come as those of us whose stories and opinions have been given air time step back to make room for others to be heard. And... some of that pain will come as those of us who have sat silently at the margins step forward and speak. Both of these stances take faith, both take courage. Both ask that we leave fear behind and give ourselves over to be completely swept up in God's living, rolling waters.

**I want to know these waters; I want to know that reconciliation!**

I don't want us to be cut off from each other or to crumble like a cracked cistern.

I want to seek the fountain of God's living waters together.

I want to meet Jesus, and if it takes letting go of my fears to take a seat by my brothers and sisters with whom I now disagree on things, then I want to be part of *that* church.

I want to be part of a church that trusts the Lord's righteousness enough to refuse mere toleration in favor of a feast where everything is rearranged for Kingdom-sized game of musical chairs, and everyone has a seat.

I want to meet Jesus, and I thank God that I **do** meet him here at this holy table with you, all of you, each week.

And I pray to God that wherever the Holy Spirit is leading, Christ will be our courage to leave behind all that's cracked and broken in us,

And... that Christ crucified and risen will be our guide as we turn again and again to our God, fountain of living water and source of eternal life. *Amen.*

### Observations

This is a courageous sermon. The Rev. Abt unpacks race as a justice issue. Race here is not limited to black and white. Her presence as a Latina woman represents an incarnational way of articulating other racial divides. Using the phrase “enslaved to militarism, bigotry, self-centered materialism” puts listeners on notice that something powerful is about to unfold. She is open about naming the parish's work on the use of a provisional liturgy to bless same sex unions. This is particularly meaningful being preached by a woman priest known in her community to identify as a lesbian in a committed relationship. The use of the phrase “cracked cisterns” visually stimulates the imagination and invites self-examination. She deftly crafts a contrast between the positive way in which we most often view ‘tolerance,’ revealing it's idolatry that can lead to brokenness. Noting that giving up privilege is a hard thing to do names honestly the difficulties this parish faces in the midst of change. The use of a series of comments

beginning with “I want to know...” is also effective in this context. Her shift from using ‘we’ to ‘I’ reveals to the listeners she is well-acquainted with the pain associated with divisions among God’s people and the judgments which can so easily follow in the wake of such divisions. She risks inviting listeners to identify with the depth of desire for reconciliation in the preacher’s mind and heart. The preacher leaves us hopeful that turning again and again to God we will find a “fountain of living water and source of eternal life.” Her use of language for God invites everyone to hear themselves in the story and the sermon.

All Saints Closure Service – Isa. 2:2-4; Eph. 2:13-22; Lk. 10:1-9 – The Rev. Nita Byrd  
All Saints Episcopal Church, Warrenton, NC – December 8, 2018

*They loved their Lord, so dear so dear, and his love made them strong;  
And they followed the right, for Jesus' sake, the whole of their good lives long.  
And one was a soldier and one was a priest,  
And one was slain by a fierce wild beast;  
And there's not any reason  
No not the least,  
Why I shouldn't be one too.*

This is our song for the Saints of God. Those who loved the Lord, stood for the right, and fought the good fight until they could hear the words of their savior say, “Well Done, thou good and faithful servant.”

We gather today to recognize the ending of the All Saints Mission and to honor the members who have followed what is “right for Jesus' sake; the whole of their good lives long.” All Saints Mission began with African Americans assembling to purchase a property and conduct Sunday School here in Warrenton beginning in 1892 and 1893. However, this was not to be the permanent home of All Saints Mission. They were visited by the Rev. Henry Delany once a month for services, in that he was the acting chaplain and a faculty member of Saint Augustine's Normal School. However, the members of All Saints Mission purchased property on Front and Franklin Streets for the construction of a permanent church building. Five years after construction began, the Rev. Henry Delany was consecrated as Bishop Suffragan in Saint Augustine's Chapel on December 21, 1918. In his first act outside of Raleigh as a new Bishop, Bishop Delany presided over worship for the All Saints' Mission in the new building exactly one week

and one-hundred years ago on December 1. December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1918 was the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the week. Today we stand also in the First week of Advent, but at the last day of the week, exactly one-hundred years later. I am compelled to point out that much is happening in this first week of Advent, both today and one hundred years ago. One hundred years ago All Saints' Mission looked out on a town with the hope of spreading God's love and compassion to many who were in need spiritual nurture, a pastoral presence, and education within the community of Warrenton. Today we gather to find closure for the ministry of All Saints' Mission, but we still see the same needs that the founders saw one hundred years ago in the town of Warrenton. I believe that the first worship service held by the Rev. Delany and this final service for All Saints' Mission are knit together with the common thread of hope and expectancy in this season of Advent.

The thread of hope and expectancy of in the first week of Advent should call us to all look at the lives of the saints, who 'labored for the right' so that we may join our voices to sing the words of the hymnist and declare, "...there's not any reason, not in the least, why I shouldn't be one too." The saints are common folk like you and me, who are courageous enough to enter sacred time and sacred space so that their lives can bless others with God's gifts. There are three gifts, which we must recognize today that God gives to common folk like you and me so that we can enter into sacred times and spaces:

- First, God grants the gift of memory so that we may move in sacred time;
- Second, God grants the gift of our bodies so that we may move in sacred spaces;
- Third God grants the gift of imagination, so that we can utilize the first two gifts of bodies and memories to BLESS others, as we hold the sacred times and spaces before Christ who redeems us for the work of the Holy Spirit in God's creation.

When we are open to sitting in the sacred memories of the past and are sensitive to the sacred spaces which hold these memories, we can truly look the challenges of the present in the face and assert, “I intend to be a Saint of God too.”

What are the besetting challenges that Saints face today? Unfortunately, these challenges have not changed significantly over the past one hundred years. We still face challenges of division and misunderstanding. These are challenges that we wrestle with because of sin, and we see the same challenges presented in scripture as struggles for the early Church. They may have had different reasons for divisions. In the early Church the division pertained to being circumcised or uncircumcised; today we continue to use our bodies as an excuse to rationalize human-made divisions based on ethnicity and skin color. I dare say that humanity will create new grounds for division until Christ returns again. However, we stand here in this time of Advent and should be aware of the signs of Jesus among us. These are signs of hope that Jesus has already done the work of reconciliation. The scripture in Ephesians reads, that we have been brought near by the Blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall...” [Eph 2:13-14].

When we allow dividing walls to go down then we make room for sacred space and sacred memories to be built. This is exactly what happened in the building of the church where All Saints Mission worshiped one hundred years and one week ago. I am indebted to the research of the Rev. Brooks Graebner who has shared much of his research into the sacred memories of All Saints Mission with me. There was a dividing wall of racism that disrupted All Saints Mission in their initial place of worship. The white citizens of Warrenton who insisted that All Saints Mission relocate their place of

worship at the risk of losing community support if a new church was not “built where the colored people live.” This statement exceeded the bounds of voluntary segregation, but rather was an articulated threat and the exercise of dominance and oppression to the African American membership of All Saints’ Mission in 1905. Nevertheless, the Saints persevered in the acquisition of property for a church. At this point, the building materials and bricks took on a new significance. As the walls of racism sought to divide, God was a work equipping the Saints with the strength of the unity of the church.

The Spirit of God was at work effecting the unity of a church that had heretofore failed to be open to people of every race, and God was working through the Saints of Warrenton to raise up African American leaders who would move in sacred space and through sacred time to build the church we see today. Four men in the late 1800s would be ordained in southern Virginia and become African American pioneers of Episcopal Clergy in the South. They were James Solomon Russell, John Pollard, Thomas White Cain, and George Freeman Bragg. Three have ties to Warren County, James Solomon Russell’s father Solomon Russell was enslaved by the Russell family in Warren County. Thomas White Cain and George Freeman Bragg were the grandsons of a “Mother of the Church” for All Saints Mission, Caroline Bragg, who was also enslaved in Warren County.

Thomas White Cain served in Texas as a priest at Saint Augustine of Hippo church in Galveston Texas. At this time Pollard and other priests were fighting for the Episcopal Church to give seat and vote to African American laity and clergy at Diocesan conventions. Likewise, no African American had served as a delegate in General Convention, and Suffragan Bishops were not allowed to vote in the House of Bishops.

Therefore, the African American portion of the Episcopal Church had no vote at any convention in the Episcopal Church. This all changed in the 1890s when the Rev. Thomas White Cain served as a delegate from the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, the first African American to represent a diocese as an equal within the Councils of the Church in the history of the Episcopal church at General Convention.

**When the Rev. Thomas White Cain entered the space of General Convention, a sacred moment in time was recognized by African Americans throughout the Episcopal Church.** Thomas White Cain embodied the hopes of Episcopalians throughout the African Diaspora, that one day **space would be defined as sacred when it was true to the dream of God that all people could sit across from each other as equals and engage the work of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.**

Thomas Cain's entrance as a clerical deputy to General Convention represented the in-breaking of God's reality in a world that had not fully realized the potential of the church; that had not truly acknowledged the image of God in each person from every nation streaming to her altar; that had not truly envisioned the power when all of God's children have a voice in the decision making as equals that God intended regardless of

- ♦ race,
- ♦ national origin,
- ♦ educational background,
- ♦ ability to speak a particular language,
- ♦ or any other attribute constitute the plethora of God's gifts to humanity.

Then tragically, Thomas White Cain was slain by the forces of nature; by the fierce beast of the Great Flood of Galveston in Texas in the year 1900.

The African American clergy recognized the necessity of preserving the memory whereby the Church had passed through sacred time and walked into sacred space when the Rev. Thomas White Cain sat in the councils of the Church. Therefore, Bishop Henry B. Delany along with Thomas Cain's cousin, the Rev. George Freeman Bragg, sought to build a church as a memorial to Cain. Instead of the simple wood structure that most African American rural churches had during this time period, the church in Warrenton would be built of substantial brick material that was meant to last. The Rev Bragg and the Rev. Delany made an appeal to every African American Sunday School in the Episcopal Church to donate a brick to for the building of the Rev. Thomas White Cain Church in Warrenton. ([https://www.dionc.org/dfc/newsdetail\\_2/3195551](https://www.dionc.org/dfc/newsdetail_2/3195551)) After a decade of appeals and donations from around the nation, the Thomas White Cain Church in Warrenton was built. The members of All Saints Mission worshipped for the first time in Thomas White Cain Memorial Church in a service presided over by the newly consecrated Henry B. Delany on December 1, 1918. We must understand that this was a sacred moment in time when African Americans held up the dream of God that resonates with the words of the letter to the Ephesians in Chapter 2.

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone [Ephesians 2:19-20].

The physical cornerstone of Thomas Cain Memorial Church has his name inscribed upon it. However, the spiritual cornerstone of such an endeavor was Jesus Christ our Lord. With Jesus as their cornerstone African Americans proceeded to build a church through the determination and the labor of a multitude of African American Episcopal Sunday Schools in our nation. This spiritual cornerstone joining each brick into

a holy temple in the Lord is Jesus Christ, our redeemer. For only Jesus Christ provided those saints with the fortitude to say:

- We belong to the House of God;
- We are not aliens to the Christian family;
- We are not second-class citizens in the Episcopal Church;
- We move into the sacred time and the sacred space that allows us to stand tall as sons and daughters bought by the price of Jesus' Blood;
- We are washed by His blood; and
- We may go before God's altar and receive the very Body of Christ that we are to become.

My sisters and brothers, we are here to celebrate those faithful Episcopalians who made this sacred declaration over one-hundred years ago. Over the years the members of All Saints Mission were true to their legacy as they served the community with a child care center; they nurtured the spiritual needs of their surrounding community; and they provided educational scholarships for many young people, to name just a few of their contributions. All Saints Mission also gave birth to many other leaders including the Right Rev. Bravid Harris, missionary bishop to the Diocese of Liberia. Today marks the ending of All Saints Mission as a worshipping community. However, I believe that we are in an in-between time as characterized by Advent. This season of Advent should plant the seeds of God's hope in our spirits so that we remain alert and keep the hope of God's possibilities for the future the Thomas White Cain Memorial Church Building in our sacred imagination. I have shared the story so that we may understand how God has worked through sacred time and sacred space by enlivening our memory and vivifying

our bodies as a people. Now that we have heard the stories of All Saints Mission worshipping within Thomas White Cain Memorial Church, we must open our imaginations to God's potential to imbue sacred hope for the future. I cannot say how this will look, but we must engage our imaginations reverently, prayerfully, and always remember that Christ has built this church upon the foundation of those with prophetic voice as part of Christ's one holy, catholic, and apostolic church, with Jesus himself as the spiritual cornerstone for us all. God bless every one of you.

Let us sing the last verse of hymn #293 in *The Hymnal 1982* again.

### Observations

The Rev. Byrd crafts an inviting, honest, and caring sermon in a difficult circumstance. It is not easy to close a church, particularly an African American church. She demonstrates her pastoral gifts as she recounts the history of the parish and the difficulties faced by the generations whose beloved worship space will no longer be open. Identifying three important gifts in the church's history helps address the grief while celebrating all that has come before: the gifts of memory to move in sacred time, of bodies to move in sacred space, and imagination to utilize the first two gifts. Naming the gifts as a blessing to others honors the persons and the ministries that served others for generations. Part of the congregation's legacy is rooted in the theology that God desires human beings, in all of creation's diversity, to live without dividing walls and together create sacred spaces. In womanist form she deftly recounts difficult aspects of the church's history and the divisions between black and white in the past and the present. "I dare say that humanity will create new grounds for division until Christ returns again," is

a very powerful statement of truth. She highlights a “Mother of the Church,” Caroline Bragg, who was herself a slave. The congregation is able to visualize black women’s bodies as enslaved while in the pulpit stands a free black woman! The preacher’s very presence is a powerful witness to the legacies of all black churches. The congregation is witness to the dream of God in which all people sit with one another and share the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. The language and images she uses are powerful; a few examples are: thread of hope, the spiritual cornerstone was Jesus the Christ, we belong, we are not aliens, and we are not second class citizens. She is preaching the freedom revealed in the Gospel of Christ and in the people of God. Acknowledging that the people of God at All Saints fully belong to the household of God is God’s justice at work and sums up well the contributions made by the saints of the church.

Living Bread – Proper 15B – Jn. 6:51-58 – The Rev. Darby Oliver Everhard  
St. Paul’s, Winston-Salem – August 16, 2015

I am the living bread that came down from heaven.

Lord Jesus, be known to us as you are – the living bread that comes down from heaven.  
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. +Amen.

I heard this great news story this week on Channel 12 – perhaps some of you did, too. A Golden Valley, Minnesota woman named Rose McGee makes sweet potato pies. She calls them the “sacred dessert of black culture” which just “soothes the soul.” She grew up in Tennessee and had perfected the recipe passed down from her great-grandmother. She and her company, Deep Roots Gourmet Pies, are widely known, but last year, Rose said she truly witnessed the healing powers of her pie while visiting Ferguson, Missouri. She was watching television like everyone else and was becoming very frustrated about everything, so she got up, went into the kitchen, and started making sweet potato pies! Her pie brought a young woman to tears at the scene of the shooting a year ago. As a bitter taste softened, the ingredients gave Rose another idea. She realized the pies could be a catalyst for building community.

And so she took the famed dessert in a new direction. McGee says she typically passes out pies in Minnesota during the Martin Luther King Jr. weekend. She decided to make another batch just for Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, following the tragic shooting on June 17. She said that she just wanted to somehow express love, and what she calls a “comfort pie movement” means she is putting something to action. She enlisted a group of family, friends and community volunteers to help her make some 80 pies in the basement of Calvary Lutheran Church in Golden Valley. The mayor of Golden Valley said, “There is always that food that brings people together to realize we

have more in common than we do apart from each other.”

Then she traveled more than 1,300 miles to deliver a little “sweetness that soothes the soul.” Members of Emanuel AME Church in Charleston were in for a sweet surprise following last Wednesday night's bible study. Fifty-six sweet potato pies were served by McGee and she told them that although they were getting money and visitors, they weren't getting any sweet potato pie until now! Each pie also came with a poem written by McGee's daughter to add just one more act of love.

McGee prays that her comfort pie movement is a reminder of deeply rooted strength and a symbol of what can happen if everyone did their part. She said that it's amazing what happens when people come together and there probably is no better way to do that than sweet potato pie, or any kind of pie, as long as we get to some “mode of action and movement.”<sup>103</sup>

Today's gospel story from John is about bread yet again. Last week, Jesus said to the people, *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.* We can sort of understand this as we know Jesus is a great feeder of people – he had just fed 5000+ on a small amount of food. Today, he speaks of himself being the living bread that came down from heaven and that whoever eats this bread will live forever, and the bread he gives for the life of the world is his flesh. We can sort of understand this too – living bread reminded the people of the manna their ancestors ate in the wilderness and we know that Jesus gave his body or flesh for the life of the world on the cross. Jesus makes a distinction between the manna and the bread that came down from heaven. The manna only gave life for a short time, but

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<sup>103</sup>[http://www.kare11.com/story/news/2015/08/10/mn-woman-harnesses-healing-powers-pie-comfort-charleston-church/31436959/;](http://www.kare11.com/story/news/2015/08/10/mn-woman-harnesses-healing-powers-pie-comfort-charleston-church/31436959/)  
[and](http://www.wltx.com/story/news/2015/08/12/dozens-comfort-pies-delivered-emanuel-ame/31591807/)  
<http://www.wltx.com/story/news/2015/08/12/dozens-comfort-pies-delivered-emanuel-ame/31591807/>, adapted.

the heavenly living bread gives life for all eternity. And to the first century Jews, bread was essential for life so they understood about having regular, earthy, physical bread to eat. Now Jesus has really put himself into the bread.

But then Jesus seems to get really graphic and says that unless they eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, they will have no life in them, but that those who do will have eternal life. I don't know about you, but talking about eating flesh and drinking blood kind of creeps me out and I think that the people who heard Jesus say it might have been creeped out too – maybe even totally repulsed. Especially because they had very strict dietary laws that forbade them to eat unclean meat and were very specific about what was clean and unclean. They believed that blood equaled life and all life belongs to God, and they were not allowed to consume any blood – animals used for food had to be bled out first. The Jews there wanted to know just how Jesus could give them his flesh to eat. Literally.

And many commentators and theologians have digested this text today, chewed on it, so to speak, and there are many perspectives on this being about the sacrament of the eucharist or about the sacrament of the living Word.

However, we know that Jesus invites us into a world where there are many layers, seen and unseen, fact and mystery, bread and flesh, wine and blood, eucharist and word. And we should already have an inkling that there is more to this than meets the eye, more to this than the stark images presented. This is about the Incarnation after all – God has come among us in the person of Jesus – along with flesh and blood, bread and wine, light and life, healing and love. Jesus, no matter what, was and is really present among us and is made known to us, week after week, in the breaking of the bread and the drinking of

the wine, and in many other ways. We know who Jesus is by this physical, total engagement with him. We listen to the living Word and then we must get up out of our pews, come forward to one of our communion places, kneel or stand, hold out our hands, sip or dip wine, and then return. This story reminds us that Jesus wants to be really present with us, wants to reside deep within us, wants us to abide in him as he abides in us, to nourish every part of our bodies, minds, and spirits. When we eat and drink at Jesus' holy table, we get a glimpse of that eternal life he talks about – and somehow, eternity has broken into the present moment. We eat a wafer or maybe chew bread, we take a sip of wine, and we are somehow fed by the body and blood of Jesus. We don't really know how this works, we just know that it does. St Francis of Assisi wrote: *for our salvation, Jesus hides in a piece of bread.*<sup>104</sup>

This is really good news and we are invited to be joyful about this love and abiding of Jesus in us, our spiritual food and drink of new and unending life. In my former parish, our music directors were husband and wife and had two darling children, 8 and 5. They didn't allow their children to take communion yet – they had grown up in a different tradition but had found the Episcopal Church through their music. One day, their daughter sat with another family while her parents were directing the choirs. She came up to the rail to receive a blessing but held out her hand. I knew of her parents' wishes, but inadvertently gave her a wafer that day. At which point she yelled out, "I got one!" Her mother looked over at me and well, I realized what had just happened. Mom didn't look too happy, but her daughter did. I really did not do it on purpose! But I have often thought about that time – because the young girl was so joyful and exuberant. And I think – what if we all had that joy when we received communion?

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<sup>104</sup>Lauren Winner, *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*, HarperOne, 2012, quoted in *Synthesis*, 8-19-12.

We are invited to the table to receive Jesus with joy, but the second big invitation in today's story, is the part about the living bread. As Jesus is living bread for us, we are invited to be living bread for others. It's as simple as that. Or maybe as complicated as that. But, as St Thérèse of Lisieux once put it – *the important thing is not to think much, but to love much; and so do that which best stirs you to love.*<sup>105</sup> We are invited to consider the ways we take in the living bread of Jesus, in prayer, word, community, and eucharist. And then to consider the ways we are called to be living bread for others, spreading it out and multiplying it.

So as we take in the living bread of Jesus each week, we are reminded of his giving us the gift of life. It is pure gift and he invites us to share that gift as he always gives it to us first. The ways we are invited to be living bread for others are sometimes obvious to us, and sometimes not so. When we take Jesus into ourselves it is a full-time challenge but it is transformative for us – we are what we eat! We are invited to be sustained and nourished by the real presence of Jesus in our lives, and sometimes we get glimpses of how we, too, can be living bread. Sometimes it's sitting with a friend who is hurting or ill; or taking altar flowers or communion to those who are unable to be at St Paul's; or helping feed others through a soup kitchen or backpack program, or prayer, email or phone support from far away; or things we haven't even dreamed of yet. When we gather together after the 10 am Eucharist today, spiritually fed, we will be physically fed at our parish picnic. Perhaps we can notice how our faith community is our special Jesus family, full of living bread that helps others and bears its gifts to our city and the world beyond. And it might just be sweet potato pie...I'm good with that!

This then, my brothers and sisters, is the living bread that comes down from

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<sup>105</sup>[www.gratefulness.org](http://www.gratefulness.org), 8-13-15.

heaven, and multiplies in unlikely places and ways, like sweet potato pies in Ferguson and Charleston. This then, is the living bread that feeds us so that we can become Christ's hands and heart in the world. This then, is the living bread that is the good news of Jesus. This then, is the living bread that, like the sweet potato pies, can fill us with joy and wonder and amazement, and a deep desire to share that with all others around the table.

So as Rose McGee also added, "today be blessed, remember to eat, pray and love as you partake in making a difference..." Amen.

### Observations

The Rev. Everhard tells a story important for a large, predominantly white congregation located near a city-center. The opening story of Rose McGee highlights from the beginning the ways black women provide nourishment to their families and communities. The preacher includes a reference to McGee's daughter thereby inviting the listeners to realize black women make contributions to society, and the church, generation after generation. The image of the sweet potato pie contrasts starkly with the violence in Ferguson, Missouri, and Charleston, South Carolina. Using the pies effectively describes how, in places of violence, ministry can come about in unexpected ways. McGee's seemingly simple act of baking a sweet potato pie becomes a symbol of the desire for justice and a badge of resistance to oppression. The preacher presents Jesus as someone who prepares food, a decidedly traditional feminine act. The contrast with Jesus as living bread is visually effective as well as the way she relates it to the Eucharist. The preacher also describes Jesus as one who invites us into a multi-layered world

through sacramental actions. Using the story of a little girl in the parish who unexpectedly receives communion – “I got one!” – puts front and center the lives of girls and women in the church. The joy the child exudes contrasts plainly to the grief which accompanies violence in all its forms. The sermon uses feminine images and references to women and girls throughout thereby making real for listeners the importance of women and girls in the world inside and outside the church. By presenting Jesus as “really present” the listener can find hope amid the ruins that death brings into human lives. Making reference to a female saint, Therese of Lisieux, brings into focus that women are saints as well as men. One alternative to the preacher addressing the congregation as “my brothers and sisters” could be “dear people of God.” That would avoid binary language and so expand the reach of the invitation to participate in the living bread that feeds us all. The Rev. Everhard points out that *we* are to be living bread and that there are many ways in which we can do so. We could even bake sweet potato pies! Closing with the words of a blessing by Rose McGee bookends the powerful place women occupy in the life of faith, especially women of color.

Proper 17B – Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 – Mia Hutchins-Cabibi, Diocesan Intern  
St. John’s Episcopal Church, Wake Forest, NC – September 2, 2018

Prayer: Almighty God, guide us all we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good; through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen.

Some of you may have spent this past week looking forward to spending Labor Day with family or on a special outing. With the promise of a hard-earned three day weekend just in sight, I imagine some of us spent extra time clearing our inboxes and tying up loose ends on Friday afternoon.

If you are anything like me, you may have told yourself how much you deserve this extra day off, how you have worked so hard – and you have earned the three day weekend. Some extra moments to gaze in wonder upon your children, or your garden, maybe a few hours to catch up with friends.

But I want to suggest, and I believe scripture is pointing us to, a different understanding of this Labor Day Weekend: that Labor Day is not about what any of us earn or deserve but **about how God has commanded us to live.**

Our Old Testament reading today is from Deuteronomy, when the people of Israel are just about to enter the Promised Land.

It’s like this past Friday, when the week is behind you and the promised weekend is in sight **but not quite there yet!** \*

You may recall, 40 years earlier the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt. God appeared to Moses in a burning bush and promised to deliver them from slavery. When Moses first went to Pharaoh, he knew freedom was God’s long game, but freedom isn’t the first thing Moses asked for.

No, God instructed Moses to ask Pharaoh for a three day weekend.

Moses told Pharaoh that God had been revealed to him. He asked Pharaoh for three days off so the Hebrews could go into the wilderness to worship the Lord.

For Pharaoh, the only reason for the Hebrews existence was to generate to profit.

To increase the GDP.

He saw them as workers, not people, so denied them their weekend, told the taskmasters and the supervisors the Hebrews had asked for time off because they were lazy... and then ramped up their hours, cut their materials, and demanded they continue to produce bricks for the kingdom.

Moses and Pharaoh go back and forth with demands and rejections of freedom, various plagues ensue... Moses, God, and the people come together, (one might argue, they unionize), and they flee Egypt, through the Red Sea, into the wilderness. \*

When we enter the story in today's lesson, they've been wandering the wilderness for **40 years**, and now they are on the threshold of their destination - Promised Land.

**Moses summons all of Israel and makes this speech to God's people.** He reminds the people of all God had done, and that God is **not done** with what God is doing *in and through them*.

You see, for generations *the Hebrews had lived in an oppressive society*, and the **imprint** of Pharaoh's Egypt still lives - in their memory and in their bones...

They are still learning how to trust God instead of seeking *security in human might*.

Lest they reproduce a pattern of oppression, Moses wants to have a plan in place for how to resist evil *before they enter the Promised Land*.

In resisting evil, human beings participate in the practice of freedom that is proper to their humanity.<sup>106</sup>

Said differently, ... in order to live into **who we are meant to be** as people, we must reject all that seeks to diminish humanity and suppress creativity.<sup>107</sup>

To be *fully free* and *fully human* **is to struggle for the freedom and humanity of all**, therefore.... freedom that is defined by slavery of others is not freedom, **because it diminishes humanity.**<sup>108</sup>

This is the fine print of the covenant God makes with Israel,

a covenant we are grafted on to in our baptismal vows.

Free from their bondage in Israel, God's people **are to live** as an example of justice for all the nations (Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9) -- not because Israel is perfect, **but because** God partners with those who are fighting for their humanity and struggling for freedom.

And God acts through their shared commitment to each other **for** the transformation of the world. \*

Moses and his speech writers know, that humans have a tendency to put our own desires ahead of justice... even when we claim to trust God.

So, in Moses' speech on "how to communally live out a commitment to God" he presents the ten commandments, and then he flushes out some of the details -

like not oppressing the laborer,

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<sup>106</sup> Cone, James H. *God of the Oppressed*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997., 90.

<sup>107</sup> Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986., 93.

<sup>108</sup> James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* p 74

limits on punishment for crimes,

and protecting the most vulnerable of society.

These teachings are defined as Torah, which is often translated as “law” -- but a more accurate translation is guidance or instruction.<sup>109</sup>

While it is true that there are consequences to *not* living in this way, we observe them NOT because we will be punished, but because adhering to these statutes is meant to collectively shape us into a just society **and the justness of our society it is evidence of nearness to God.** \*

This is a *key difference* between God’s commands and human laws.

Instead of encouraging a way of life geared towards **justice**, laws are all too often geared towards ensuring a way of life for **just – us ...**

just those of us who have enough influence,  
just us who are writing the laws.

All too often human laws are a means of control-

wrapped in an artificial guise of the common good. \*

Like in 1865, when the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude, **except as punishment for a crime.**

Almost immediately, states used this to control black labor. They began rounding up ex-slaves after the war, passing vagrancy laws that allowed the state to sell their labor.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> NIV commentary p. 284

<sup>110</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/30/opinion/national-prison-strike-slavery-.html>

**Then in 1934**, the US government established a corporation to restrict how much the prison labor market could grow -- but this action *also* formalized and legitimized the use of incarcerated labor, so long as items produced were for state use.<sup>111</sup>

Now known as UNICOR, this government corporation continues to benefit from the 1930s legislation through military contracts. It is monopoly that undercuts private business and the civilian labor force, by paying 22,560<sup>112</sup> incarcerated workers as little as 23 cents an hour.<sup>113</sup>

**Exploited by their confinement prisoners pay exorbitant cost for basic needs like shoes, medicine, and telephone calls to family.**

**Their pennies a day wages are often garnished for** taxes, restitution, and room and board, *making saving impossible* – and forcing people who have served their time, back out on the streets with empty pockets and barred from many of the jobs they held in prison due to their felony status.

**Across the country today**, about half of the 1.6 million Americans serving time in prison have full-time jobs.<sup>114</sup>

Prisoners stitch American flags for state police, maintain waste treatment facilities, fight wildfires, staff law libraries, do data entry for Chevron, raise hogs, shovel manure, make circuit boards, limousines, and lingerie for Victoria's Secret.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Gottschalk, "Caught," 59.; Winner. "Labor in Prisons." Lecture notes, January 30, 2017.

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/prisonindex/prisonlabor.html>

<sup>113</sup> Gottschalk, "Caught," 49, 60.; Young. "Punishing Labor.," 49.; "FPI General Overview FAQs." Accessed April 25, 2017. [https://www.unicor.gov/FAQ\\_General.aspx](https://www.unicor.gov/FAQ_General.aspx).

<sup>114</sup> <http://prospect.org/article/great-american-chain-gang>

<sup>115</sup> <http://prospect.org/article/great-american-chain-gang>

-- all at a fraction of the cost of `free labour.'<sup>116</sup>

In Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, and Texas, incarcerated people are given no wages in exchange for their labor.

And because inmate workers are not considered “employees” under the law, they have none of the protections -- No disability or worker’s compensation in the event of an injury. No Social Security withholdings, sick time, or overtime pay.

This modern day slavery is hidden behind concrete walls and barbed wire, but as with any form of slavery its existence threatens the freedom and humanity of us all. \*

Because... when justice is just for-some-of-us, when we fail to work towards a just society, we deny our own humanity and reinforce a way of thinking that values what a person *does* instead of valuing each person.

This thinking seeps into our consciousness and tries to convince us that,

- We only deserve that three day weekend if we have cleared out our inbox at work.
- That some people only deserve to feed their family if they can hold down three jobs at \$7.25 an hour.
- That some people deserve to be punished, and that punishment includes denial of medical care, education, and even the right to vote.

You see, when we start to say that some are worthy and some are not, we start to questions everyone’s value – including our own.

We end up measuring our value by our GPA or Roth IRA,

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<sup>116</sup> Davis, Angela Y. Are prisons obsolete? an open media book. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010. [http://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Are\\_Prisons\\_Obsolete\\_Angela\\_Davis.pdf](http://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Are_Prisons_Obsolete_Angela_Davis.pdf)

and we forget that life and freedom are not something we secure for ourselves – but gifts from God.

Gifts we have made a commitment to respond to by partnering with God for the transformation of the world. \*

As I speak, prisoners across the country are on strike. Despite likely repercussions, inmates are using what little leverage they have through work stoppages, sit-ins, and hunger strikes — to demand prison reform and an end to modern-day slavery.

Like the Israelites who joined Moses and God in their struggle for freedom, the first thing strike participants are demanding **is recognition of the humanity of imprisoned men and women.**

And like the instructions found in Deuteronomy, they have detailed what recognition of humanity will look like including:

fair treatment for laborers,

limits on punishment for crimes,

and protection for the most vulnerable of society. \*

In my short time here at St. John's I have been blown away by all the ways this community is seeking to live out the commands of God. I have witnessed you dig into scripture and issues of injustice, move beyond the church walls, wrestle with difference, privilege, and power -- all while helping each other through life's challenges and pain.

This labor day weekend, I pray you drink in extra moments gazing upon your garden or your children... that you rest, knowing your value does not lay in what you produce, and that it is God, not you that holds the stars in the sky.

I hope you find comfort in the Eucharist, remembering that none of us have earned the Grace we have been given.

and I invite you to remember all God has done, and that God is **not done** what God is doing *in and through us...* we are still on the threshold of the promised land, the Kingdom of God is not yet here, and there are still captives to be freed.

Amen.

### Observations

Ms. Hutchins-Cabibi has a heart for social justice and a mind willing to be honest in the pulpit. She goes where many would fear to tread. She introduces the path she'll take in pointing out that "Labor Day is not about what any of us earn or deserve but about how God has commanded us to live." Pointing out that "freedom is God's long game" is encouraging in a world filled to overflowing with injustice. Like the people of Israel we are still learning to trust God. She shows us that it isn't easy to resist evil but invites the listener to do so. "To be fully free and fully human is to struggle for the freedom and humanity of all." Her choice of nouns includes the entire congregation. Her word-craft shows up in the use of 'justice' becoming 'just us.' This isn't an easy sermon to hear but she makes sure the listener knows "God is not done with what God is doing in and through us." She avoids the 'let us' or 'may we' ending, leaving us knowing there is ministry for us to pursue, "there are still captives to be freed." This is a powerful sermon in any context. Black and white theologians and writers to whom the preacher refers are adept at naming the harsh realities of life while making sure we know that God is still God, whatever circumstances surround us. Because this preacher has studied womanist theology, references could have been made to womanist theologians such as Delores

Williams, Katie, Cannon, or Emilie Townes, whose writings pick up the same themes of slavery (incarceration) and liberation and the hope for redemption woven in the sermon. The preacher affirms the listeners' habits of digging into scripture and taking the knowledge of justice beyond the church walls, while reminding them of the privilege and power some of those listeners enjoy. The sermon leaves me more sensitive to the plight of the prison population and the need to be vocal in response to abuses in the system.

The woman lived in the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem, in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank in Israel. She was skilled in embroidery and offered her wares to tourists who had come to see the legendary birthplace of Jesus, to touch the ground on which the great Shepherd of the sheep, the Son of Man, the King of Kings had been born.

I wondered about her story, her life and practice of faith. Had she ever retraced those steps of Jesus as he rode, a most unexpected king on a colt into Jerusalem? No. She replied flatly, “I’ve never been to Jerusalem.” This didn’t quite make sense to me. After all, Bethlehem is only about six miles from Jerusalem. You could walk there in a few hours. But she couldn’t. She talked about the separation barrier or security barrier (depending on one’s perspective). One’s id determined where and how one could move and how that movement was circumscribed. Passing through Israeli checkpoints was easy for me as a Christian with the right kind of paperwork—an American passport.

And folks are sorted and sifted daily through hundreds of checkpoints- Jerusalem residency, West Bank ids, right down to the complexities of one Anglican priest Dr. Naim Ateek, being a Palestinian Christian with Israeli citizenship . Some could pass through; others could not. Individuals were separated and sorted. As a UN Humanitarian and Emergency Policy group noted the “barrier disrupts life from the same village and/or family. The barrier will separate children from their schools, women from modern obstetric facilities, workers from their places of employment and communities from their cemeteries.” Obtaining medical treatment is particularly problematic for pregnant

Palestinian women about to give birth, since the delivery date is largely unpredictable, yet the permits given are only valid for one or two days- leaving women to constantly renew their permits.

Renewing that permit every two days as a heavily pregnant woman, that certainly sounded to me like living an apocalyptic scene from Matthew's gospel today, where one is cast to where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth— and being there by virtue of circumstances far beyond one's own control.

Over the last three weeks in Matthew we've heard a theme of lost opportunity. In Proper 26, the religious leaders missed the chance to model humility to the people. The foolish maidens in Proper 27 had to forego the wedding feast because they had not taken the opportunity to prepare oil for their lamps. Last week we heard how the slave with one talent failed to take the chance to seize an increase of a talent that had been given to him by his master. And in today's reading from Matthew's gospel, the Son of Man comes in glory to judge nations and individuals in light of how they used opportunities on earth—how they responded to their neighbors. These stark, black and white contrasts are meant to make a point. The Anglican theologian Charles Gore, once Bishop of Oxford, remarked that “this description of the general judgement is not a parable but a prophecy, although to a great extent couched in symbolic language.”

In Matthew's gospel the prophecy, to use Gore's language, tells of a Shepherd sorting sheep and goats. For us who are non-herders, shepherds would have had their sheep and their goats mingling during the day while they were out grazing. But at night, the animals needed to be separated as the goats needed more warmth and protection than did the sheep, hence this image of separating would have made sense to first century ears.

Those who are at the judge's right hand, the great shepherd's right hand, are befuddled. Why are they chosen? They ask: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" The king answers, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' And those goats, those on the King's left hand are equally bemused. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or in prison or a stranger and did not take care of you?"

The separation for judgment and salvation is common in intertestamental apocalyptic literature. What stands out as unique in Matthew's story today is the shared ignorance of the sheep and the goats: they seem surprised at their fate and were not aware whether they had either neglected or responded to "the least of these." Most apocalyptic visions reveal (*apokalypso* = reveal); this one confounds both sheep and goat.

The starkness of the juxtaposition of sheep and goats belies the complexities of Christian servanthood. How do we live out our lives, fellow human beings whom we might notice or ignore; love and serve, or about whom we might remain indifferent. That indifference is the failed opportunity.

The story goes that the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish sculptor, Bertel Thorvaldsen made a clay model of a statue of Christ, meant to be a Christus Rex, Christ the King. The arms of Christ were stretched out high, commanding. And the head was held up, in a look of triumph. The form of Christ was molded and the soft, moist clay was left to harden. The next day, Thorvaldsen entered the studio to complete his work. And he was horrified—

the head, once held high, gazed downwards. And the arms, originally extended out, raised in triumph, had sagged and fallen low. Initially, the sculptor was disappointed, but ultimately the new posture and gesture revealed to him a loving welcome, an open forgiveness. This original of the sculpture, known as Christus or Christus Consolator, is in the Lutheran parish of the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen. Replicas can be found at numerous LDS church, in Norway, Czech Republic, Seattle, Johns Hopkins, even one made of 30,000 Lego blocks in Sweden.

The woman from the Aida refugee camp, who embroidered a black shawl in beautiful, brilliant blue geometric crosses. She talked about her deep faith in Jesus, in the gentle embrace of the shepherd. Of how the guards at the checkpoints were not bad or evil— but how they were not much more than children themselves, how they were doing their job. And how she prayed for them. She modeled for me an image of Christus Consolator enfleshed. Christ as King of our lives, Christ as the great shepherd king reaches out arms that create an abundance of space within their saving embrace. Arms of humility that yearn for us to draw more deeply into embrace with the living God. Arms of our shepherd king that draw us close in spite of or perhaps because of our sheep-ness and our goat-ness. Thanks be to God that our Shepherd King of Christ continues to stretch out his arms in gentle embrace, longing to hold all of our sheep/goat selves in the muddiness of discipleship and in the light of the resurrection. Thanks be to God that grace and accountability together make up the timbre of our Shepherd's voice.

## Observations

Through the eyes and story of a woman the Rev. Melchionna puts us front and center in the narrow gulf which lies between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The woman in the story stands in the breach and becomes a bridge to understanding the harsh realities of life in a land deemed sacred by many religious expressions. Using the example of the challenges the woman skilled in embroidery faces daily puts us on notice that all is not well in the Holy Land. Checkpoints and ‘the right’ identification are barriers to life. The visual image of a pregnant woman, of pregnant women, having constantly to renew permits to move across a human-made border hopefully shocks listeners. The political policies in place in the Holy Land stand in stark contrast to the openness of the scriptural stories of a welcoming God, protector of those most in need of protection. The preacher lets us in on Matthew’s theme of ‘lost opportunity’ in recounting stories leading up to this particular Sunday. There is one phrase she uses I would avoid: “stark black and white contrasts.” While it is descriptive of the problems the sermon addresses, the phrase is a stereotype we have yet to discard in our society. Perhaps simply saying “stark contrasts” works. Her pointing out that both the sheep and the goats are confounded by the position in which they find themselves is an effective image. Moving from ‘lost opportunity’ to ‘failed opportunity’ is actually an invitation to examine the ways in which we address the chances and changes of our lives. The preacher aptly describes and contrasts the sculptor’s work as it changes from Christus Rex to Christus Consolator which is the movement we need in our world today. The Christus Rex is a familiar, very masculine image in Christian art with eyes looking forward over the heads of viewers and with arms stretched out straight, stiffly dominating all within sight. In contrast, the sculpture of

Christus Consolator is a softer almost feminine depiction of Christ, with eyes looking into the faces of those who gaze back in return, and with gently curved arms inviting the onlooker to enter into a safe and loving embrace. The preacher describes the woman from the Aida refugee camp as one who embodies Christ – is consolation enfleshed in human form, an incarnation of the loving nature of God in Christ. Keeping in our hearts that the arms of God’s love are drawing us close leaves us hopeful and encouraged. The preacher leaves us called to mirror “the timbre of our Shepherd’s voice,” a loving call to relationship in the resurrection – a wonderful reflection of the preacher finding the pitch of her own voice in the sermon.

Easter – Yr. A – John 20:1-18 – The Rev. Sarah Hubinsky Phelps  
St. John’s Episcopal Church, Wake Forest – April 16, 2017

When I was growing up, my parents didn’t think much of religion. It wasn’t til in my late teens that anyone in my family took much interest in a church like this...and when they did, it was...me.

Nevertheless, my father showed me many, many truths. Much about the wisdom of God. My first church was shared with him out in the woods that surrounded our home in northern New York.

My father and I often went on long, rambling walks in those woods. We spent hours out there, poking around in ponds with long sticks, turning rocks over to see what was underneath, marveling at how the sun suddenly lit up a spider web that had been invisible to us just steps before on the path.

My father helped me to see hidden beauty in nature, things I might’ve never seen had my father not been there to point them out.

He showed me teeming colonies of bugs and worms hidden under piles of dead leaves, and explained how they would just keep on chomping and pooping away, until all those leaves were turned into new earth.

He showed me the stubbornness of basswood trees... how dozens of new shoots had grown from the roots of a tree that had been struck down by lightning the year before.

We walked and talked about the coming and going of seasons, the life cycle of plants, how seeds germinate underground. My dad taught me that in just about every living thing there is a dormant season when things *look* lifeless, but in fact, *that’s* the most active season of all: That’s when life is getting ready to “go public” in spring.

I especially remember my father and I poring over an encyclopedia one night after dinner, reading all about what happens inside a chrysalis. (Now, kids, you don't know what an encyclopedia IS, do you? But all of us old folks over forty...remember huge books, lines and rows of huge books.) My dad and I had been out for a walk earlier that day and had come across a tree whose leaves were almost entirely covered with cocoons. So after dinner we got out the "C" volume of the encyclopedia to see what we could find out.

Did you know – you probably did - that in the process of becoming a butterfly, the body of a caterpillar is almost completely destroyed? It's not just that body parts are simply re-arranged into a butterfly, with a few new little bits added here and there, and other little bits falling off and being left behind...

But in fact every cell of the original caterpillar is virtually *destroyed*.... broken down into smaller and smaller parts until what remains... is pretty much just a nutrient soup with a few germ cells floating around in it whose job it is to instruct the nutrient soup on how to build a butterfly.

I remember being completely stunned by this.....And, not just stunned, but *disturbed*. *Disturbed by the violence of it*. I could not understand why one creature had to be *destroyed*, especially a creature as harmless as a caterpillar, in order to create something new? To my 9 or 10-year-old self, it seemed like something was wrong with the universe that it could be *that* unfair.

Now, thirty-five years later, it's not the unfairness that surprises me, sadly. What surprises me now, over and over again, is that *destruction is not the end*.

As John tells it, it seems Mary Magdalene was surprised in much the same way I

was... that first Easter morning.

Before sunrise, Mary Magdalene visits the garden where the body of Jesus has been laid in a tomb after having been humiliated, mocked and tortured, and then brutally put to death...

But the stone has been removed from the tomb, and his body is *gone*.

She runs to tell the others that someone has taken him. What other explanation could there be?

Peter and another disciple come running, and then go home again in a rush, leaving Mary alone once again, grieving, in front of the empty tomb. One of them seems to have believed *something* miraculous happened – *he saw and believed*, we're told – But for Mary, as for most of us, perhaps, faith doesn't come so easily. We need someone to point the way.

At this moment in the story, all *Mary* can see in the empty tomb before her is violation. Insult upon injury. She assumes someone has taken his body for nefarious purposes. *Why couldn't those who killed him just let him rest in peace? What new atrocity are they subjecting him to now?! What more can they do to him? He's already dead! And to what end!?*

Mary is shocked at level of cruelty that has been heaped upon him by his captors. It shakes her to the core. How could such evil be allowed to exist in this world?!

Haven't we *all* been *there*, right where Mary is at this moment?

I think of Syria, the Sudan, Somalia...

I think of last week's attack on a church full of Coptic Christians gathered for Palm Sunday services in Egypt last week.

I think of 10 and 12 year old girls sold into slavery by the thousands in southeast Asia and Latin America to serve the twisted pleasures of foreign men.

I think of the 8 year old boy and his teacher killed by her estranged husband, his family, and the classroom full of beautiful young children who will forever have that violence etched in their minds and hearts.

The destructive power of human cruelty and of death itself... It can take our breath away....

But there was a *second* shock that first Easter morning: The discovery that even death is not the end. As our prayer book says it: to God's faithful people, [when death comes] life is changed, not ended.

What took me thirty years to learn, and in fact I'm still having to remember and remember again, Mary seems to have learned in the course of one morning: That it is God's *nature*, and it is God's power, to create life out of death, to make earth out of dead leaves, to create a butterfly out of a dark cocoon, to create the power for change out of tragedy, to be generative and re-generative and re-generative again and again.

If this is God's *way*, why do we have to experience the destructive side of life at all? I don't know. That's above my pay grade. But we all do experience it. Not one of us gets through life unscathed.

But... in the ground of every experience no matter how tragic, no matter how violent, or how deadly, God plants a seed of living hope.

I will never forget Robbie Parker, the Christian father of a little first grader who was killed at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012...who stepped out to a microphone less than 12 hours after he learned of his daughter's death, and he said: We cannot let the

violence that happened at Sandy Hook define us, but let it be something that inspires us to be better, to be more compassionate, and more humble people.” He told the world that night that it was his family’s faith in Christ that would redeem and re-purpose their grief, the destruction of death, and would turn it to good, somehow.

God raised Jesus from the dead, a spectacular sign of an eternal but hidden truth, that he shows us first in nature, and then most spectacularly at Easter: That God is in the business of bringing us through the destructiveness of death to the other side, which is always and forever, more life.

As it’s said in an oft-quoted line from a well-loved movie a few years back: “Everything will be all right in the end. If it’s not all right, then it’s not the end.”

If the pain and grief of your life and our world has not yet been redeemed and re-purposed for good... then it’s not yet the end of whatever story we’re in. Amen.

### Observations

The Rev. Phelps opens with a creation-centered beginning and story about the preacher’s journey of faith which works to invite seekers into the sermon. A woman in search of faith has become the preacher, standing before a congregation as a bearer of what it means for women, as well as men, to search for the sacred. From the outset we are put on notice that in the Easter story we can expect the unexpected – woman, women as bearer(s) of exceedingly good news. The overarching question of why destruction has to take place for something new to emerge is a timely question with which generations have wrestled. Mary Magdalene’s presence is set up by the Gospel, but the preacher uses her to contrast how quickly the biblical woman learns about matters of faith and how slowly

we other humans learn. Mary bookends the interlude about acts of destruction taking place in our world, including violence against girls, as well as boys. This is an Easter sermon that brings the reality of what Jesus' first followers experienced and how closely aligned are our experiences in life. In the Johannine Gospel account Mary Magdalene is the preacher, albeit one who is not believed. The patriarchal order of the day is then turned upside down when the Risen Christ appears first to a woman! Mary is as surprised as we would be when the unexpected presence of God shows up in our lives. Saying it is in God's nature to bring life out of death invites us to stay the course and not give up. "God plants seeds of living hope," is a phrase that would stick with listeners. In light of the feminine images in the sermon, it would be great if referring even once to God as 'he' was changed near the end. I think quoting the movie more than once works well: "If it's not all right, then it's not the end." The stories of the listeners' lives remain open-ended as the sermon closes with the originally-unexpected-preacher and the listeners together in the shift from "your life" to "our world" and "whatever story we're in."

Epiphany 1C – Lk. 3:15-17, 21-22 – The Rev. Lorraine Ljunggren  
D.Min. in Preaching – January 13, 2019

The little girl stands just inside the kitchen door, muddy water dripping from her clothes. Her socks are no longer bright yellow; but, then, neither is her once-matching t-shirt. As she closes the door quietly she looks around anxiously, not knowing whether one of her parents is near the kitchen. If she's very quiet and very quick, she can make it to her room and stuff the soggy garments into the laundry basket. Of course, the trick is how to get from the kitchen to her bedroom without leaving squishy-wet, telltale tracks down the hall carpeting.

After listening breathlessly for a few seconds, she pulls off her shoes and sodden socks. Holding them under her arm, she walks deliberately -- and as quickly as possible -- to the safety of her room. With lightning speed she puts the muddy play clothes under a towel in the laundry basket in her closet, and is suddenly in dry, fresh clothes. The shoes, of course, are another problem. She studies the situation for a few moments and then decides the shoes will dry quickly enough at the end of the bookshelf closest to the window. "Wow," she thinks, "that was close!"

The excitement over, the girl gets distracted by a new book and is soon absorbed in reading a story. That means, though, she has forgotten the puddle by the kitchen door. Sure enough, with unfailing talent, one of the little girl's parents comes upon the circle of evidence.

At first the girl doesn't notice her parent standing in the doorway. But, when she does, she smiles her usual bright smile and says, "Hi!" Well, the rest of the story is rather short. When asked about the puddle in the kitchen, the girl, looking rather sheepish and a little guilty, explains what happened.

She and her friend from next door just wanted to play church. “Play church?” the parent asks. The child went on, “Well, yes, you see, we heard the story in church about Jesus being baptized in the river. And in Sunday school the teacher told us the water of the river was probably muddy. So, we thought it was okay to use the puddle behind the garage to baptize.”

“Baptize who?” the parent asks. Looking sideways, the girl answers, “Our neighbor’s new puppy. They baptize babies and children and even grown-ups in church. And it’s one of the most important things to have happen in your life. So we just thought....and, well, Jesus must have gotten a little muddy...and we....well, we thought it would be okay.”

Suppressing the laughter welling-up inside, the parent says, “I see. Well, you’re right. It is a most important thing to be baptized. And although I never thought about it, I would imagine Jesus did get a bit muddy.” As to the topic of baptizing puppies -- well, the parent left that one for another day.

The little girl in the story recognizes a truth -- a reality about Jesus’ baptism: yes, the river Jordan is just that -- a river. And Jesus probably did get a bit muddy. But, the young girl also recognizes that being baptized is one of the most important things we do.

At the beautiful baptismal font that sits by the doors in the corner of our church, many people – female and male, younger and older, of varying skin colors and ethnic heritages, of different sexual identities and physical capabilities – many people have felt the cool waters of Baptism poured over them. Many people have felt on their foreheads the slippery, fragrant Oil of Chrism mark them as Christ’s own for ever. Not just for a day or a week or a year – but for ever.

We as a congregation return to the waters of Baptism again and again. We welcome the newly baptized. We promise to support them in their life in Christ. We as a congregation return to the promises of baptism again and again, renewing a covenant we make with God and one another – a covenant meant to sustain us as a community of God’s people – a covenant meant to strengthen us in all the chances and changes of life – a covenant meant to reassure us that God is always a source of life and love and a companion on our journeys of faith.

Something also happens in Baptism which is perhaps beyond our ability to fully comprehend or at least to describe in words. Learning what it means to be baptized – living into the promises of Baptism is *a life-long endeavor*. The sacrament is not a magic formula for a quiet spiritual life; rather it is a turning point in which we are marked for mission and for ministry in a world full of hurt and need.

If we think about this baptism in the Jordan as the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, we see it sets the stage for what ultimately gets Jesus in so much trouble with those in positions of power.

In the Gospel stories, we see that Jesus doesn’t get elected to office and change all the political and social or even religious systems of his day. What Jesus does is get into life. God’s Own Anointed One does more than make gestures of inclusion to those on the outside. Jesus goes to where those outside are. Jesus ends up spending tremendous amounts of time with those not necessarily considered respectable. Jesus goes about assuring others – reassuring others they are loved by God – by the Creator of All That Is.

Truth is, though, the world Jesus inhabits has more in common with ours than we might hope. The empires of the first century aren’t so different than those with which

we're acquainted nearby and far away. The deep divisions that exist in Jesus' time – divisions of gender, race, class, economic standing, and religion – these same divisions exist today. It can be difficult to imagine ways to mend divisions that stir up angst and fear among and between peoples.

We're not immune to feeling angst and fear. As such we may ask what on earth we can do! As people who claim the name of Christ, who follow Jesus of Nazareth, we are called as people of faith to build up healthy bonds between *us* so that we can help heal divisions in the world outside our doors. We're to learn how to deal constructively with our own angst and fears, finding paths to peace and understanding which are positive and contagious, that will empower us to lead others to peace and understanding. We are to discover ways to talk to one another with respect so that we can show others there are more effective ways to communicate, without verbal or physical violence. We are to recognize our own frailty and failings, learning what forgiveness means so that we can help others learn to forgive as well. It isn't easy and it takes practice.

One important step we can take is to take to heart the promises we make whenever we bring God's own to the waters of baptism.

In a few moments we will baptize Elizabeth and Katie. Now, the water in which they will be baptized isn't from the Jordan River. And they won't be muddy when we're done. The water will be clear and cool. But it is one of the most important things we can do for them as God's people gathered here as the church.

For in the waters of baptism they, like us, will be buried with Christ in his death. And through these waters they will be reborn by the Holy Spirit and made new children of God. And, if we fulfill our call to be companions and guides on their journeys of life,

part of that commitment means doing all we can to see to it, as girls created in God's image who will grow into women, that they are treated with respect and dignity. We need to insure that they never have to become victims and have to cry out "MeToo!" or be paid three-fourths of the wages paid to their male counterparts. It is up to us to help shape and reshape our social, political, governmental, and religious systems to protect them the whole of their lives long. This is no small undertaking as we gather here together in the year 2019.

Today, Elizabeth and Katie, today is your second birthday. It is your day to be born again...to be born anew....to be named as God's own in a way different from your first experience of being born. And, no matter how many mud puddles you play in as you grow up, and no matter where life leads each of you, it means you will never be alone. God will always be with you – as God has been since you were born the first time. Today, with all these witnesses, you each will be marked as Christ's own forever. There isn't anything or anyone on this earth who can ever change that! You will now and for always be part of the Body of Christ!

And, to all the rest of us who surround these two very young women this day, if we do our job nurturing them in the faith and teaching them who this God in Christ Jesus is who loves them, they will grow to be all that God creates them to be. They will do more than talk about *God* loving all human beings – *they* will love all of God's people themselves because they'll see *us* loving that way!

That is our charge. We are to be their guides. In just a few minutes, we're going to promise them that. That is a weighty, but glorious, responsibility. Ours are the voices that Elizabeth and Katie will hear reminding them, "You are God's own, you are beloved..."

with you God is well pleased.”

So, with joy, on this remembrance of Jesus’ own Baptism, how about we do for these young women one of the very most important things we can do for them – witnessing the next step of their life in Christ Jesus!

### Observations

Our personal theology of baptism and of our baptismal promises shape what we think and believe about how women and girls are and need to be treated. Feminist and womanist theologies are grounded in the belief that all persons are created equal, including and especially women since patriarchy has stated flatly that women are not co-equal with men. The language of the baptismal promises as set forth in the Episcopal Church’s *Book of Common Prayer* is quite clear. There is no separation, no demarcation, no inequality, no physical sexual or socially-constructed gender differences in phrases such as ‘all persons,’ ‘your neighbor,’ ‘all people,’ and ‘every human being.’ When we come to the waters of baptism, we all come equal before our Creator God. We are all welcomed into the household of God. By whatever sexual personhood we identify, we are all told to confess faith in and proclaim the resurrection of Christ and to take our place as part of the priesthood of Christ. The whole body of Christ gathered for a baptism joins in receiving the newly baptized into the household of God.

Using a girl in the opening story for the baptism of two girls in this sermon is intentional. In a not so subtle way we are pointed towards the reality that little girls can grow up to be ordained persons who administer Sacraments such as Baptism. And there is the reality that the preacher in this case is also a woman. Examples of the recent

reemergence of the need for the #MeToo movement in response to abuses and the continuing inequities women face, are included as checks on the reality which the newly baptized children will face as they grow to adulthood. Reminding listeners that living into our Baptisms is a life-long endeavor is intended to provide relief to those who may judge themselves too harshly. Naming angst and fear and calling listeners to learn how to address those aspects of our humanity invite us to realize we are not alone and that, with God's help, we can make progress. Moving from talking about *God* loving to *our* loving so the newly baptized learn how to love is also an intentional move.

The theme of Baptism as 'one of the most important things we do' is woven in from beginning to end. The language for God is expansive, hopefully inviting everyone to know themselves as created in God's image. I avoid ever referring to God using traditionally masculine language. To my way of thinking God ultimately is not gendered in the way we humans often describe God. I find personal encouragement in the feminine images of God found in scripture because those images seek to balance our human ways of speaking and writing. Feminist and womanist theology has helped us reclaim those images as powerful messages about the inclusive nature of the Godhead. This sermon was a meaningful exercise in incorporating some of the themes of this project. I hope the sermon 'works.' I trust the contents of this project help shape the ways in which women and men approach the vitally important call to preach.

#### Concluding Observations

As the seven sermons examined above illustrate, a feminist preaching voice:

1. *Preaches justice as all-encompassing.* A Latina woman highlights race as a justice issue and the need to move from tolerance to acceptance. She engages directly a

congregation in the midst of discerning how to address issues of human sexuality within the sacramental life of the church. This preacher avoids traditional masculine language for God which is another way she subtly calls attention to God's hope that everyone has a seat at the table.

2. *Focuses attention on (black) women's bodies as exemplars of faith.* The African American woman preacher embodies the progress black women's bodies have made. In closing an African American church, she effectively includes references to women important in the history of that congregation. The preacher has studied womanist theology in her pre-seminary training as well as in her seminary studies. She is able to articulate the legacy of creating sacred spaces as belonging to the women as well as the men who helped build a black church a hundred years before. This preacher's language is expansive and calls for those gathered to view themselves as created in the image of God. In recounting the history of the parish many names of male clergy come forth from the mouth of a woman priest. She finds her voice.

3. *Draws attention to feminine images in scripture.* The woman serving as part of a large multi-staff, predominantly white church, uses stories of women of color and girls who are archetypes of faith. She presents a decidedly feminine image of Jesus as one who feeds God's people. The preacher closes the sermon with the words of a black female's blessing thereby leaving her listeners with an unmistakable picture of a woman whose witness today can be called womanist.

4. *Encourages men as well as women to active involvement beyond the church doors.* The parish intern preaches a unique style of sermon; her manuscript demonstrates a unique style of organization. While she does not directly use materials written by

womanist theologians, she does confront head-on injustices such as those found in the writings of womanists. The preacher uses as a topic the prison industrial complex. It is well known that the majority of the prison population in the United States is comprised of people of color. She uses black and white writers to unpack her message. Because this preacher told me she is drawn to womanist theology over feminist theology, I look forward to her utilizing their voices in other sermons.

5. *Offers concrete, traditionally feminine images of a loving God.* The rector of the Resource sized congregation opens with a woman's story. The sermon effectively weaves the movement from the idea of Christ as a king high above people to a feminine, inviting view of Christ as beckoning God's people to be embraced by God's love. The preacher wisely utilizes images of the sculptures of Christus Rex and Christus Consolator. The sermon helps listeners imagine women as representing in bodily form the Christ of God.

6. *Personalizes women and girls' quest to be heard and recognized as representing Christ's presence today.* The Transitional sized congregation's rector preaches an Easter sermon in which the good news of the resurrection is given to a woman in the person of Mary Magdalene. The use of John's Gospel in the sermon turns patriarchy upside down. The world is set right side up in sharing with a woman the good news of the resurrection.

7. *Reinforces the need for full inclusion and respect for women and girls as bearers of Divine love and conveyers of sacraments.* My own sermon invites the congregation to contemplate their theology of baptism as the world of the sermon opens with a little girl standing in a kitchen. The girl has just come from reenacting the

sacrament of baptism. The listener knows from the pitch of my voice that women are among those who baptize in many places in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The sermon communicates to girls as well as younger and older women in the congregation, and to the boys and men present, that women are empowered to administer the sacrament of new birth. The age and the color of the girl's skin are never mentioned. But a girl or woman of color could just as well imagine themselves in that kitchen and then at a baptismal font. The sermon makes reference to injustices girls and women experience in this day and age – the journey to full inclusion and respect is an on-going experience. The hope of the sermon is that all of God's people know themselves to be beloved of God.

#### The Preaching Call to Partnership

Readers of the project may have noted that each of these sermons could be preached by men. The hope of feminist and womanist theologians is that men would become or continue to be witnesses to the inclusive nature of God. That means men can use the expansive language which feminists and womanists advocate. I believe men who preach benefit from stretching their tried-and-true images of God to include decidedly all-inclusive images some examples of which are included in Chapter 1 of this project. To me it makes sense that men serving congregations most likely made up of half-or-more women members would want to encourage those members' faith journeys.

#### An Important Note for an Expansive Future

This project has focused largely on the voices of ordained women. But there are many lay women who preach and many lay women who use their voices in other ways to witness to their faith. Proclamation and testimony are not limited to the voices of ordained persons. As noted earlier in this project, finding the language that gives voices

to one's own relationship with God is vitally important to God's people everywhere.

Locating the grace of God in one's own everyday life brings that grace into the lives of others whom we meet. We all benefit from the practice of articulating our personal ways of naming and knowing God. Each of us is invited to locate our unique pitch, to find and use our own unique voice. In the event of doubt, scripture reminds us:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. (1 Cor. 12:4-11)

## Appendix A

### Gender, Patriarchy, and Power: Lessons from Feminist Theology

There may be women and men today who have not studied in depth the history of women's voices. As in all generations, we ignore history at our peril. Articles and books abound on the three waves of feminism as well as the current movement that appears to be unfolding, what is being called 'the fourth wave' of feminism. The women and girls in our pews and chairs on Sunday morning deserve to have well-informed preachers, aware of the struggles women have and continue to face in society as well as in the church. The stories of our forefathers in the faith and in society-at-large merit a place in our sermons as we work to point the way toward the freedom and hope God intends for the whole of creation. What follows serves as an introduction or a review of lessons from feminist theology.

One of the premier feminist theologians of the 1980's, and whose work is still a go-to text, is Rosemary Radford Ruether. Her work, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, was ground-breaking for its time. Her work is the basis for analysis and support for subsequent women theologians and preachers. Ruether writes,

Pauline theology, as it came to be interpreted by Augustine and his successors, saw the Adamic fall as obliterating human freedom to choose good... Thus, the scapegoating of Eve as the cause of the fall of Adam makes all women, as her daughters, guilty for the radical impotence of 'man' in the face of evil, which is paid for only by the death of Christ. In the words of the Latin Church Father Tertullian:

*You are the Devil's gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die. (de Cult Fem 1.1)*<sup>117</sup>

This is enough to take away one's breath. It may be near the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it remains important to recall vividly the attitudes and teachings about women in the first centuries of the Church's history. These writings have done and continue to do great harm because they impact culture, language, political, bodies, social relationships, and theological principles.

Male mythology not only makes women responsible for the advent of evil in the world, but it also translates female evil into an ontological principle. The female comes to represent the qualities of materiality, irrationality, carnality and finitude, which debase the 'manly' spirit and

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<sup>117</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 167.

drag it down into sin and death... Stories like the myth of Eve also enforce the continued repression and subjugation of woman, as ‘punishment’ for her primordial ‘sin’ in causing the fall of ‘man’ and the loss of paradise.<sup>118</sup>

Gender is not an issue which concerns only the half of the human race which is female or identifies as female.

Social sciences tell us that definitions of masculinity and femininity and the roles and social places associated with them are gender constructs, i.e., social creations rather than necessities of anatomy. Thus *notions* about differences must be contended with, and these can be seen as functioning ideologies rather than changeless givens from God or nature.<sup>119</sup>

Traditionally gender differences have been accorded the status of ‘givens from God or nature’ rather than constructs of a social nature. These ‘differences’ have been used to limit women’s access to social and economic power. Women have been given a ‘place’ in society and have been denied resources which could provide them a ‘way out.’ “By the time a child is about eighteen months old he or she can differentiate between pictures of people of different sexes, and by the time they can talk clearly, they are explicitly aware of their own gender.<sup>120</sup>

Pauline Webb’s article discusses the impact of gender in the nursery, school, workplace, sports, religious community, living room and bedroom. She discusses the problems of discrimination based on physical factors and concludes,

And it is the privileged group that finds [affording equal value and opportunity to different kinds of human beings] the most difficult to do, because they are the ones most threatened by any change in the present order of things – which is why I think gender is an issue even more challenging to men than to women.<sup>121</sup>

Interestingly enough, Webb’s findings from the late 1980’s are similar to the findings of studies conducted in the 2000’s. A peer reviewed article by Carol Lynn Martin and Diane N. Ruble, writing for the *Annual Review of Psychology*, entitled

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 168-169

<sup>119</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Women, Men, and Liberation: Old Issue, New Conversations,” *Quarterly Review* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 78-79.

<sup>120</sup> Pauline Webb, “Gender as an Issue,” *The Ecumenical Review* 40 no. 1 (January, 1988): 5.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 6.

“Patterns of Gender Development” is of interest and can be found on the National Institute of Health website.<sup>122</sup>

Of continuing interest in the years to come is the importance of children’s personal gender identification and how their understanding is received by the world-at-large. Current political, social, and religious pressures are strong on children, youth, and adults for whom gender identification is emerging and may stand in opposition to expected “norms.” The scope of that inquiry is beyond this current writing, but is of interest to preachers seeking to use their voices in the life of the Church on behalf of God’s people in all their diversity.

It is not unusual for persons in positions of power or privilege to resist granting authority to those who are, in some way considered ‘other’ or ‘different.’ Differences are a matter of perception. The most easily recognizable difference among humans is skin color followed by perceived gender or sexual appearance. But also quickly recognizable are ableism and age.

Feminist theologians attempt to bridge these perceived distances. They do so by reconstructing symbols and images to reduce or eliminate the alienation which occurs at an overt physical level:

The new importance of the concept of gender emerged in two ways with the development of feminist criticism and women’s studies. The first was the discovery of androcentrism, the male-centered character of scholarly disciplines in their Western context... Second, when women’s studies began its effort to right the imbalance of traditional scholarship, gender emerged as a category for exploration of the meaning of women (and men) in different historical and cultural contexts. For women were/are always there.<sup>123</sup>

These discoveries led to the conclusion that both women and men must be studied to paint complete pictures of any given society. Historically, studies of men have served as normative for all human beings. Fortunately progress has been made and works written by and about women continue to form and shape our common lives:

Gender is thus an analytic category for dealing with a universal social reality. Like rank, class, kinship, it should be included in the study of any culture... The cultural notion of gender, as distinct from biological sex, is as conventional and arbitrary as grammatical gender: it is not derivative from natural facts but varies from one

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<sup>122</sup> Martin, Carol Lynn and Diane N. Ruble, “Patterns of Gender Development.” *Annual Review of Psychology*. 61, January 10, 2010: 353-381. Accessed October 1, 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3747736/>

<sup>123</sup> Carr, 76-77.

culture to another.<sup>124</sup>

Carr warns us, though, not to allow gender studies to become yet another example of dichotomous thinking. This would lead to the woman-centered paradigm many feminists seek to avoid.

Gender studies name clearly the androcentric ordering of state and church. Some basic definitions are important for women, and men, who use their voices in the public arena, keeping in mind that the pulpit exists in a public arena that is the church. These definitions are timeless in that they describe succinctly words which are foundational to feminist theology:

*Patriarchy* means the rule of fathers. As the dominant political, social, and familial structure in Western Christian history, patriarchy has served to stabilize a Christian church and social order that is both hierarchical and androcentric.

*Hierarchy* designates a sacred order or holy pattern of ruling relationships that are ordered according to status, as over and under, higher and lower. Thus they are actually or potentially dominating relations in which one person or group rules over another.

*Androcentrism* is intrinsic to patriarchal hierarchy and means male-centeredness. It indicates a worldview in which men possess all dignity, virtue, and power in contrast to women who are seen as inferior, defective, less than fully human, the alien or “other” in relation to the male human norm.<sup>125</sup>

Only a naïve reading of the history of the Christian church could avoid running headlong into these three modes of thinking and acting in history. Those who took over the formation of the institutional structures of the church quickly, probably by the end of the first century, succeeded in excluding women from many, if not most, of the leadership positions in the young church. By excluding women from these positions of power, the images and symbols which came to be normative in the life of the church became more and more androcentric until one could ask, where did women disappear in the order of creation?

Jennifer E. Copeland, Executive Director of the North Carolina Council of Churches and former United Methodist Chaplain and instructor at Duke University, reminds us,

As far as preaching was understood within the church during the first few decades, it appears that women participated in this role.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>125</sup> Carr, 135-136.

As preaching became more circumscribed by place and time, preachers began to be identified by roles and titles. Gradually these roles and titles excluded women. Women continued to find niches for proclamation, however, even while the official channels narrowed through the centuries. Church documents and letters from church officials from the fifth and early sixth centuries censured those who allowed women to serve at the altar, a censure that would have been unnecessary unless there were some women practicing it....A trajectory of escalating resistance to the witness of women can be traced from the early writings of the New Testament to the later writings. For example, in spite of the undeniable presence of women among Jesus' inner circle, fixation on "the Twelve" eventually led to the elimination of women as primary recipients of the gospel message.<sup>126</sup>

Paul Tillich speaks of those who are 'in power' and of what they 'do' in the exercise of that power: "Those who are in power always do two things: they express the power and justice of being of the whole group; and at the same time, they express the power and claim for justice of themselves as the ruling group."<sup>127</sup>

What failed was the expression of power and justice of being for and on behalf of the whole group. Women found themselves on the 'outside' of the very structures they supported. Women have passed the faith on to their children and their children's children. Women fill church pews and chairs on Sundays. The irony would merit laughter were there not so much historical and contemporary pain involved.

Power. There are various types of power, some exercised personally and some exercised systemically: political, economic, military, social, mechanical, and ecclesial, to name a few. Until recently women have been denied direct access to the earning side of economic power. Traditionally, women gained economic security through inheritance or through the status afforded a wife. It is still the case today that the largest segment of the world's population which is economically disenfranchised is women.

Ernest Becker discusses how evil evolves when economics as power becomes part of the sacred system in a society.<sup>128</sup> Becker cites Norman Brown's view of power, "All power is...sacred power, because it begins in the hunger for immortality; and it ends in the absolute subjection to people and things which represent immortality power."<sup>129</sup>

Humanity exists in concrete form in concrete history and in that history is a finite being. The threat of mortality is one impetus to make power sacred. When the sacred

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<sup>126</sup> Jennifer E. Copeland. *Feminine Registers: The Importance of Women's Voices for Christian Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 14-15.

<sup>127</sup> Paul Tillich. *Love, Power, and Justice* (London/New York: Oxford University, 1954), 97.

<sup>128</sup> Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 29ff.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

structures do not succeed in insulating “man” from “his” mortality, the result is oppression.

The power of Christianity in its original form was an equalizing force in society and in a Platonic culture there emerged in Christianity some assurance of immortality. But the democracy of Christianity did not withstand the assaults of political power structures. Becker writes,

Actually Christianity was harnessed by the state, and its power was infused into the institution of kingship to keep its authority; the attack on the fatality of biology, the accidents of heredity, was put into the service of the ideology of the family, and it reinforced patriarchy... Christianity failed to establish the universal democratic equality that it had promised historically...<sup>130</sup>

Said another way, Becker points out this ‘kingship’ authority was one tool in patriarchy which herded women into a submissive role in the church. In rediscovering women’s history, biblical scholars and theologians have found evidence that women were actively involved in the very early church in leadership roles. A study of Pauline materials and the Gospels’ preservation of stories about women and Jesus are part of this evidence.

In her article, “On Power and Gender,” Daphne Hampson discusses three paradigms of power:

...powerfulness, powerlessness, and empowerment. I suggest the first two paradigms, powerfulness and powerlessness, particularly in the form of powerlessness through the abnegation of power, are major paradigms in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and reflect a male structuring of reality.<sup>131</sup>

It is important to understand the ways these paradigms are applied and which paradigm appeals to feminists.

In her first paradigm of powerfulness Hampson turns to the idea that God is powerful. “God’s powerfulness is related to the fact that God is seen as separate, different and alone. God is said to have aseity: he [sic] is entire unto himself [sic] and did not have to create anything in order to be complete.”<sup>132</sup>

This way of expressing God’s power is mirrored in the social way in which may

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>131</sup> Daphne Hampson, “On Power and Gender,” *Modern Theology* 4, no. 3 (April, 1988): 234.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 235.

men exercise power. Hampson paraphrases Carol Gilligan's book, *In A Different Voice*, by saying, "Men think in terms of an isolated self. They see themselves in competition with others... They are at the centre of their world..." Hampson counters writing, "By contrast women see themselves in relation to others."<sup>133</sup>

The second paradigm of powerlessness in the tradition is that which,

...has been reached through abnegation of powerfulness. God through *kenosis*, self-emptying, divests power and comes as a human man. Christ's death is often understood as an abandonment of power... the refusal to come down from the cross. It is not... simply a model of powerlessness, but of powerlessness voluntarily embraced when by right there should have been powerfulness.<sup>134</sup>

This voluntary powerlessness is not a paradigm usually embraced by men. Yet it can be helpful for a man's reflection since a sin of men includes oppression of women. A gospel which preaches self-sacrifice and self-abnegation has been used historically to create and then justify the position of women in society – a position deemed lesser than that of men. Hampson states emphatically,

The gospel of powerlessness has been appropriated by those to whom it should never have been directed... Moreover if the doctrine of self-sacrifice and the paradigm of powerlessness are held up as exemplary before those who are struggling to change their lot, it may serve to undercut them. For resistance to injustice then comes to look un-Christ-like.<sup>135</sup>

In this circumstance women find themselves in a 'catch 22.' Powerlessness does not offer women a way out of the patriarchal systems, secular or sacred. Hampson goes on to point to the great difference between those women who suffer by choice to serve Christ versus those women who are systemically oppressed. Opportunity to choose makes all the difference in the world.

This brings Hampson to the third paradigm: empowerment. She points to women's groups as the place in which this empowerment began to take place in recent history. The way in which women relate to one another in these groups is a contrast to the male-centered hierarchy. She argues that groups of women attempt to be more open and supportive and interested in sharing leadership:

Not for nothing do women speak of 'hearing one another into being.'

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 239.

Empowerment means coming to new perceptions...Empowerment means coming to find yourself. Women, say Sheila Ernst and Lucy Goodison, “contact the power locked in ourselves.” It means being surprised at yourself for what you dare say, be, and do.<sup>136</sup>

To Hampson this way of empowerment has existed for centuries as women have talked on front steps and interacted in an extended network of women relatives and friends. In this day and age women also talk one another into being on the steps of courthouses and city hall, in an extended network of business associates, and in the hallowed halls of churches small and large.

Anne Carr addresses empowerment in arguing, “Feminist understanding of power in relational terms, as empowerment of the other, corresponds to process theology’s distinction between two kinds of power, coercive power and persuasive power.”<sup>137</sup>

Finally, Hampson offers a lasting critique, “Empowerment implies a different understanding of the self from either the self-enclosed self which dominates others, or the destroyed self which lives outside itself in a mistaken service to others.”<sup>138</sup> One has only to look at current events in society, politics, and even the church, to see so-called leaders whose speech and actions point to self-enclosed selves intent on dominating others.

Tillich offers us a view of power which is firmly related to love and justice. His language is, unfortunately, male-centered, but women can claim the essence of his thoughts. “Power is the possibility of self-affirmation in spite of internal and external negation. It is the possibility of overcoming non-being. Human power is the possibility of man to overcome non-being infinitely.”<sup>139</sup>

Tillich’s concept of power does not mean the negation of others in order to affirm the self. It is in relation to others that Tillich grounds power along with justice and love. This power, he proposes, must serve the whole:

The centre of power is only the centre of the whole as long as it does not degrade its own centrality by using it for particular purposes. In the moment in which the representatives of the centre use the power of the whole for their particular self-realization they cease to be the actual centre, and their whole being, without a centre, disintegrates.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>137</sup> Carr, 151-152.

<sup>138</sup> Hampson, 246.

<sup>139</sup> Tillich, 40.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 45.

That the hierarchy of churches have abused their positions as the center of power in the institution seems clear to those who are marginalized. Although the church has not collapsed as a result of the sexism which continues to exist within many of its structures, the church without change may no longer feel centered and whole to many women.

Those who hold power in ecclesial bodies must relinquish some control in order to re-center the church in its original mission to preach the Gospel to *all* people. An imbalance of power distorts the potential that exists unless all people find a ‘seat at the table,’ a place in which their voices may be heard and respected. This applies to making available to women as well as men calls to serve in faith communities of all sizes and demographics. While we are making progress, it can still remain challenging for women to be called to serve as rectors, or senior ministers, in larger churches. In some geographic locations women can still be overlooked or denied opportunities in the search for clergy to fill pulpits in churches of any size. The very sounds of women preaching can bring to listeners new perspectives on what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God. The presence of women in pulpits makes abundantly clear that God’s call is not limited by social constructs of gender, but extends to all of humankind.

It is important to realize that empowering women does not mean men lose all the power they currently possess. The image of ‘taking away’ power is, historically, a male image. A new image of ‘sharing’ power may help to alleviate the fear any group in power experiences when those ‘outside’ ask to be admitted in equal partnership. The margins are a soul-draining place in which to dwell.

As one who claims to stand in the margins of feminist discourse, Rebecca Chopp writes,

[T]he language of marginality suggests the systemic devaluing of women wherein women are valued less than men; women are, in one sense of the word, more ‘marginal,’ meaning they are less than, they do not have as much importance. But marginal also means the effacing of women, for women are not men, and hence are not really present and can be overlooked: in this sense marginal means having no substance, containing nothing, the emptiness of the margins. ...Feminism is not somehow just about women; rather, it casts its voice from margins over the whole of the social-symbolic order, questioning its rules, terms, procedures, and practices.<sup>141</sup>

Feminist theologians continue to seek ways in which those who stand at the margins have opportunities for their voices to be heard, whether the margin is delineated by sex, gender, race, culture, or religion.

If we take this seriously, it becomes imperative that we value all human beings alike – female or male identified, rich or poor, people of all colors, LGBTQ+ or straight, religious or non-religious. If we take this seriously, then our preaching will make clear

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<sup>141</sup> Chopp, 15-16.

God creates *humankind* in the divine image, with all the glorious and challenging implications accompanying that theological understanding.

Gender, patriarchy, and power strike strong notes in the quest to uncover and set free women's voices in whatever public arena they seek to be heard, particularly that of the pulpit in the public arena which is the church.

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