CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE FLESH BECOMES WORD: EMBODIED PREACHING AND CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT

Preaching is an embodied practice, bringing together in a preacher the life of the mind and life in the body. I serve a congregation of people who value preaching that is intellectually open and astute. There are also signs that the congregation is responding physically (i.e. clapping) and vocally (i.e. responding out loud to questions when prompted) during sermons. Meanwhile, I am feeling moved by the Holy Spirit to explore a dimension of my preaching that is intentionally aware of, and committed to developing the use of, my body as the primary means of communication. I call this "embodied preaching." Drawing upon the conversation between homiletics and performance theory, I want to explore the possibilities of embodied preaching within the context of my intellectual congregation through the discipline of listening to my body in preparing to preach and in performing sermons. I want to take noticeable risks to expand my repertoire of embodied preaching practices and to expand my congregation's repertoire of preaching responses. Finally, I want to explore whether embodied preaching lends itself to transforming the embodied work of the congregation in the world.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Two Lives

The subject of this project emerges, admittedly, from a personal quest to integrate two aspects of my own familial history. In 1940, my grandparents, Evelyn Handy and Charles Broadbent, met and fell in love while students at Chicago Theological Seminary. They represented, to a large degree, polar opposites coming together to balance and compliment each other. Evelyn was from Washington State; Charles hailed from New England. Charles lived a life of the mind; Evelyn's passion was the dance. The titles of their 1943 seminary theses belie the distinction between their particular views of themselves, the world, the church, and liturgy. In his thesis, "The Evangelistic Message in the New Testament," my grandfather attempted to reclaim the early message of the New Testament writers, which was, he asserted, concerned with the significance of Jesus' identity. The title of my grandmother's thesis was "The Use of the Dance in Religious Education." In it, she described her experience working with teenage girls to explore and retell biblical narratives by preparing and performing interpretive dances in the liturgical setting. A life of the mind. A life in the body. Both valid. Both necessary. Much to gain from one another.

Following seminary, my grandfather went on to become an ordained minister. My grandmother gave up the ordination process after having been discouraged from stepping on her husband's toes. The sexism that deterred the church from ordaining my grandmother's ministry is, in my view, the same sexism that valued my grandfather's life of the mind over my grandmother's life of the body. This is a bias deeply rooted in

Christian patriarchy, fought over in the battles over orthodoxy that followed the Reformation, and codified in the Enlightenment emphasis upon reason. Nonetheless, ministry is an embodied vocation; liturgy is an embodied occasion; and preaching is an embodied practice.

Elemental & Irreducible

Perhaps it could go without saying, but from my vantage point, embodiment is an elemental and irreducible aspect of the preaching craft. Yet, given its indispensible importance, embodiment is rarely mentioned – by this or another name – in reflections upon preaching by homileticians, preachers, and congregants alike. Even when embodiment is described, it is treated as an optional subcategory rather than as a necessary element in what preachers do. Save perhaps Moses at the bush, no one has ever experienced a sermon by a disembodied preacher, and even then there was a bush on fire.

My interest in this project concerns preaching as an embodied practice and my questions abound. What does "embodied preaching" mean? What does it look like? How is it different from any other kind of preaching? Is there such a thing as preaching that is *not* embodied? How has embodiment been explored and described within the field of homiletics? What are the scriptural and theological bases that support a homiletic of embodiment? How does embodied preaching change, improve, and deepen the impact of preaching upon a preacher and upon a congregation? Can awareness of embodiment inform the process of *preparing* to preach as well as the *performance* of the preaching act? How might a preacher's deliberate focus upon the embodied aspects of preaching form the experiences of a congregation during the preaching act? Might embodied

preaching transform the liturgical life of a congregation? Finally, on the horizon of this project is the question whether embodied preaching might encourage a congregation to embody more deeply the gospel as it serves the world in Jesus' name.

A Better Way

Looking for a better way to integrate the life of the mind and the life of the body within my own preaching, I sought to pay attention to the embodied aspects of preaching and to the effects these had upon my own experience of preaching, upon the experience of the congregation to whom I was called to preach, and upon the lives of those sent by Jesus to serve the world. My hunch was that it would change things. It did, in ways that I anticipated, and in ways I could not have.

II. CONTEXT

A Church Is Founded

The First Congregational Church (United Church of Christ) of Colorado Springs was founded in 1874 by a small group of Congregationalists who, in the tradition of Harvard, Yale, Oberlin, Grinnell, and Doane, also founded a college in Colorado Springs. We are a congregation that knew then, and knows now, that access to education is an important aspect of a free and open society. The first several ministers of the church were also faculty at The Colorado College. For 137 years, this congregation has created an intellectually open atmosphere to serve those who are hungry for knowledge, for new ideas, and for reliable ways of understanding and imagining the world.

This is a community that embodies the gospel multifariously. We are engaged in visible ways serving Christ and his "so-loved" world. A Prayer Shawl Ministry gathers people to knit as a practice of prayer and compassion. Our congregation gives these "portable sanctuaries" to those who are ill or dying, to those who are baptized, to orphans in Africa and cancer patients in our own city. The Moving Word is a program that provides an opportunity on Saturday mornings to respond to the hearing of scripture through music and movement. A new emphasis upon "outreach" involves members of the congregation serving together as the church on behalf of others. Monthly, we serve at the local soup kitchen, and we recently finished building a house along with 11 other churches in a Habitat for Humanity "Apostles' Build." This sort of "Engaged Christianity" is evident in other examples, including children creating body prayers, adults walking a contemplative labyrinth, healing services of Taizé worship, and teens braving sleet on a CROP Walk for Hunger.

Intellectual & Prophetic

I have served this congregation 12 years, including the past six as Lead Minister. There is a tradition of strong preaching here. This congregation is accustomed to preaching that is intellectually engaging and astute. Sunday morning congregations typically include at least a dozen retired or non-parish-based clergy as well as large numbers of Colorado College students, alumni, faculty, and staff. Preaching here has also been prophetic. In his Farewell Sermon of 1909, Rev. James Gregg preached:

> "You are the First Congregational Church of Colorado Springs. Aim to keep your church ever representative, not of any particular interests in the

> community but broadly of the city as a whole, including sympathetically in your fellowship all classes of the people, rich and poor, high and low, the learned and the unlearned. Do not allow this church ever to become in anywise an exclusive and therefore unchristian society, but keep it always as inclusive of all persons as is the grace of God made manifest in Jesus Christ."[1]

This vision of "including sympathetically in your fellowship all classes of the people" became further realized in the mid-1990's when then-pastor Rev. Dr. James W. White led the congregation to face the issue of fully including gay and lesbian people in the life of the church. I have endeavored to contribute to the tradition of intellectual and prophetic preaching through sermons that defend the right of women's reproductive choice, that argue the compatibility of Christianity and modern evolutionary theory, that resist war as a solution to international conflict, and that expand the scope of the church's welcome to include transgender people and bible-carrying Pentecostals, among others.

Perceptible Ways

Prompted by my own desire to express myself more fully, I had been begun experimenting with different forms of expression in my preaching. I found that the congregation was responding to me, audibly or physically, in perceptible ways. Some folks were vocalizing words such as "yes" or "amen" or "alleluia." Congregants were clapping during or at the end of a sermon. Listeners were disrupting the sermon with

[1] James Bartlett Gregg, "Farewell Sermon to the First Congregational Church of Colorado Springs, Preached June 6, 1909 by the Rev. James Bartlett Gregg, D.D." in *The History of The First Congregational United Church of Christ,* ed. Mary Elizabeth Burgess and Wanetta Draper (Published in-house by The First Congregational Church of Colorado Springs, 1999), 28.

laughter and I was feeding off of their enthusiasm. Several people made comments, such as, "I often *want* to respond to you while you are preaching, but then I decide not to. Maybe I will someday." As I began this program, I decided to explore embodied preaching with the following goal: "Relying on the Holy Spirit, I want to engage my body more fully in preaching, noticing effects upon hearers during the preaching event and upon members of the church community as they engage in the work of the church." Not only were members of the congregation indicating that they were looking for permission to respond more demonstratively during worship services, I also noticed within myself a desire to embody more fully the preaching task. That is, what I was being called to express could not be done through voice alone. It could not be done by merely adding a few hand gestures. It could not be done simply by pacing the chancel rather than standing behind a pulpit. What I was being called to express could only be done by *fully* utilizing my body as a resource of expression. My hypothesis was that embodied *preaching* would encourage embodied *worship*, which would create new ways for my congregation to respond to all of the elements of worship, including preaching.

III. THEORY

Stating the Issue

As I've mentioned, "embodiment" is rarely mentioned in reflections upon preaching by homileticians, preachers, and lay persons. Preaching is most often described and understood as an intellectual enterprise. In an essay on embodiment and evocation in preaching, Alyce McKenzie explains the history of this bias: "Traditional preaching was

governed by Aristotelian rules of rhetorical persuasion. The method was deductive, moving from general principles to specific applications. The goal was logical persuasion."[2] In this model of preaching, embodiment is viewed as distracting if not misleading. McKenzie points out that the "divide between rhetoric and logic deepened into a divide between imagination and intellect. Enlightenment philosophy considered the human soul to possess a number of attributes in an ordered hierarchy. The faculties of imagination and intellect were distinct, and imagination was inferior to logic."[3] In light of privileging the intellect over all other faculties, anything that did not support the primary claim of the intellect was seen as merely ornamental if not manipulative. In this view, the body is a liability, capable of getting in the way of communication rather than enabling it. McKenzie continues her historical survey of this privileging of the intellect over other faculties: "The three-point sermon increased in prominence around 1200 with the recovery of Aristotle and thus of empirical evidence based in reason."[4] Gesturing toward my own tradition, McKenzie describes the Puritan plain-style sermon which involves "exposition, doctrine, [and] application."[5] The impact of McKenzie's analysis is the realization that the deep-seated, historical emphasis upon the intellectual aspect of preaching has downplayed the role of the body in the preaching task when, in fact, without a body, there is no preacher to do the preaching.

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[2] Alyce M. McKenzie, "At the Intersection of *Actio Divina* and *Homo Performans*: Embodiment and Evocation," in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, ed. Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 54.
[3] Ibid., 55.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

Not Brand New

In his work on the preaching of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Richard Lischer brings the issue even closer: "Liberal Protestantism's embrace of higher criticism in the early twentieth century transformed Christianity into a set of universal principles – brotherhood, disinterested love, the sacredness of personality, and the like. What was lost to liberalism in this move was the *story* and its celebration in worship that had sustained the Negro church for generations."[6] The liberal Protestantism to which Lischer refers is my home tradition, a tradition which has tended to understand Christianity as a "set of universal principles" rather than a lived, embodied experience. Contrasting King to the white preachers who were his contemporaries, Lischer writes that "King never relied on a pattern of reasoning for the power of his preaching. Because of its intellectualization of the Bible… the white intellectual's closest parallel was a well-organized, written essay that was spoken by the preacher."[7]

As I explore the notion of embodied preaching, I am aware that my interest in this area, and its relevance to my context, is somewhat peculiar. But as Lischer points out, the performance and embodiment of the biblical story in and through the person of the preacher has been a given within the Black preaching tradition for generations. Henry Mitchell observes that "personal style" is a necessary feature of black preaching.[8] Undaunted by the criticism that mannerisms, for example, might be *distracting*, Mitchell counters that "mannerisms add interest and signal a freedom and authentic personhood in

[6] Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 52.
[7] Ibid., 65.
[8] Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 88.

which the congregation participates vicariously, by identification."[9] For Mitchell and the tradition he represents, embodiment through mannerisms is an indispensible means of communicating the message.

A Bigger Difference

I once asked a colleague who was both a preacher and an academic, "For you, what is the difference between a sermon and a lecture?" He responded, "About 45 minutes." This illustrated for me the need to understand preaching in my context as more than merely an intellectual exercise – a short lecture – but rather as a performed liturgical event that not only *means* something, but also *does* something. A sermon doesn't simply transmit information. A sermon performs a function and makes a difference. As Jana Childers puts it, "contemporary preaching has suffered from the fact that homileticians have sometimes paid more attention to sermon manuscripts than to sermons."[10] Another word for disembodied sermon is "manuscript." As soon as a preacher steps into the pulpit or onto the chancel, the manuscript becomes a sermon. As soon as she opens her mouth to speak, the sermon takes flight from the page and is set free into the assembly of God's people. This describes "a model of preaching that is by nature a creative event and whose purpose it is to open us to God's movement. Such a homiletic will need a method that can help preachers not only with words on a page but with performed words – the enlivened, embodied words that preach."[11] In this doctoral project, I have sought to experiment with some of the methods of preparation and performance to which Childers alludes.

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[9] Ibid., 89.
[10] Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 35.
[11] Ibid.

The Movement of Flesh into Word

What is the underlying scriptural and theological basis for this notion of embodied preaching? Embodiment is a useful and contemporary concept related to the Christian theological notion of the incarnation. The prototypical reference to incarnation in Christian scriptures appears in the prologue to John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God… And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John1:1, 14a NRSV). Jana Chiders, discussing the treatment of "performance" in the homiletical work of Charles Bartow, states that "[performance] is treated as a necessary element of sermon production, valued alongside other aspects of sermon preparation and delivery. To perform the sermon, however it is created, is to admit that God still uses a human person to proclaim God's message. Once, that person was Jesus 'who came and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14 RSV). Today, God's speech is incarnate in the lives, voices, and bodies of men and women who preach God's word."[12] This suggests a high calling, and therefore a humble attitude, among those who preach. God takes a risk in trusting that the Word will be made incarnate once again, in and through the embodied life and preaching of a person called to such a ministry. In this way, the Word that became flesh and lived among us becomes Word again through embodied preaching.

That the flesh becomes Word is a central and startling claim within Bartow's homiletic. It is central in that the Word conspires with the preacher in the flesh to

[12] Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit, "Introduction," in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, ed. Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 15.

communicate. No flesh, no communication. It is startling in that the preacher's embodiment of the Word of God *is* the Word of God. That is no small claim for the preaching task. Bartow puts it most memorably, "The God of whom the Bible speaks, and whom it addresses when it speaks, is present to the speaker in the text, and present with that speaker to us who read and hear what the biblical speaker says. Just so the human experience of the God of the Bible becomes our own. With startling clarity T.S. Eliot indicated what is going on in all of this when he remarked that it is the purpose of literature to turn blood into ink. William Brower was no less vivid and on target when he said that the purpose of speaking literature is to turn the ink back into blood."[13] Blood into ink and ink into blood. Word into flesh and flesh and into Word. Incarnation is the movement of Word into flesh. Embodiment is the movement of flesh into Word. The purpose of embodied preaching is to communicate God's Word in such a way that it becomes embodied, first in the performance of the sermon, and finally in the life of the congregation, including the preacher. This is what the church calls the "Living Word," God's communication that is not content to dwell as a disembodied concept, but that translates into lived experience and actual bodies.

[13] Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 63-64.

IV. PROJECT

Overview

The Doctor of Ministry in Preaching program of the Association of Chicago Theological Schools is a three-year program. Each year begins with a three-week residency, which includes a 5-day Core Course, a 5-day Elective Course, and 4-day Colloquy. During the Colloquy week, students develop a Learning Covenant which outlines a three-sermon preaching project to be carried out over following seven months. The project includes the formation of a Parish Project Group (PPG) made up of participants in the preacher's ministry setting. Members of the PPG participate in the formation of and reflection upon each of the three sermons that make up the project. It is within this framework that I developed three preaching projects that inform the subject of this thesis.

At the beginning of the program, I chose to become more disciplined about paying attention to and developing the embodied aspects of my preaching, both in preparation and performance.[14] Over the course of the program, I became increasingly aware of various embodied congregational responses. I learned to discern the cultural edges of these responses, places where the congregation might go if offered permission, instruction, and encouragement.

Finally, the overall project begged the question whether intentionally embodied preaching lent itself to deepening the embodied *ministry* of the church. In other words, as

[14] I use "performance" where others might use "delivery" because delivery invokes a one-way communication image which I reject. To perform the sermon is to be fully present with and to the text, the Holy Spirit, one's own body, and the congregation in a co-creative act of experiencing the preached Word.

the preacher does work to bring forth embodied preaching performances, and as the congregation steps into a greater variety of embodied responses, does the week in-between Sunday morning sermons look any different? Does embodied preaching of God's Word change a congregation's life? Once a person experiences God's Word in an embodied and lively way, will she embody her response to that Word in her choices throughout the week? Will she "show up" in her relationships in a new way? Will she serve others in response to God's serving humanity in and through the incarnation? Can embodiment move the effect of preaching from the offering of interesting ideas for consideration to indispensible experiences that shape Christian life?

Year I – Engaging My Body

The title of my first year's preaching project was "Soulful Preaching that Moves Head, Heart, and Hands." I was responding to a desire to be less inhibited with the use of my body while preaching. Without reducing emphasis upon biblical scholarship and theological reflection, I sought to explore more deeply and master more fully the ways in which I used my body in the communication and performance of the preaching event. I stated as a learning goal for the year: "Relying on the Holy Spirit, I want to engage my body more fully in preaching, noticing effects upon hearers during the preaching event and upon the community as it engages in the work of the church."

This was a broad goal for a three-sermon project. I was aware that the third aspect – noticing effects of embodied preaching upon the community as it engages in the work of the church – lay beyond the horizon of my project. I could only gesture toward it. Nonetheless, I trusted that relying on the Holy Spirit meant being open to a variety of

possible outcomes, so why not think boldly? To accomplish the goal of "engaging my body more fully in preaching," I would need to begin by trusting in the prompting of the Holy Spirit and choosing to be vulnerable before the congregation as I took risks to try new forms of preaching performance. I would experiment with vocalization, use of gestures, posture, and dramatization. I would become characters and voices in the scriptural texts, not just speak about them. My first year's project concentrated upon form rather than content, though content is unavoidable and good content indispensible. My goal was to hone the *form* of my preaching performance to serve the *content* of the sermon.

Year II – Scriptural Themes of Embodiment

Having focused upon form the first year, I felt the need to explore embodiment as a scriptural theme. In other words, I desired the key lens of my homiletic to be conversant with and clarified by the Christian proclamation within the New Testament. The title of my second year's project was "Preaching the Themes of Embodiment: Incarnation, Resurrection, and Body of Christ." It seemed to me that the notion of embodiment was very much a central element of Christian life and belief. I did not want to describe and practice "embodied preaching" merely because I had a personal preference for and proclivity toward it. I understood embodiment as a fact of existence, a fact embraced and celebrated by Christian scripture and theology. The whole basis of the Christian witness is that the Word became flesh, definitively in and through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But the witness does not stop there. Christians also trust that God's Word vindicates the flesh in and through the resurrection and that the Word

becomes flesh again and again, even now, through the beloved community, the church, as the Body of Christ.

My learning goal for the second year project was: "Relying on the Holy Spirit, I will explore embodiment through the lenses of three theological themes: Incarnation, Resurrection, and Body of Christ. I will preach to move my congregation toward embracing the fleshiness of the Christian witness. I will more deeply embody the preaching task as a living out of these themes of embodiment." I took risks the first year to develop more fully my embodied preaching performance. The second year I risked addressing in my preaching the centrality of the body to the Christian witness. My agenda was to help myself and my congregation move beyond embodiment as an option and toward embodiment as, arguably, the central claim of the New Testament, that is, as God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, so does God redeem our flesh and live in and through our embodied lives. God does not speak to and love and save us apart from our bodies, but in and through them.

Year III – Still Experimenting

My third year project was an opportunity to experiment further with some forms of embodiment I had not yet tried. It seems to me that just as an actor can deepen the repertoire of characters played and personas adopted, so might a preacher continue to deepen the repertoire of scriptural voices, non-scriptural voices, positions in the sanctuary from which to preach, forms of presentation, use of literary forms and devices, humor, emotion, and many more aspects. In the third year, I sought in each of my final two sermons to explore a new aspect. Having developed a homiletical framework regarding

embodiment and preaching performance, my goal was to apply it practically in the formation and performance of, and reflection upon, the two preaching events.

V. RESEARCH METHOD

Pro-Active Research Method

In his book, *Research in Ministry: A Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program*, William R. Myers describes three research methods "to critically evaluate projects (their 'practice') in ministry."[15] The three methods are the Quantitative Research Method, the Ethnographic Research Method, and the Pro-Active Research Method. Myers is clear which of these he believes is most appropriate to Doctor of Ministry programs. "The pro-active research method," he writes, "goes further than [the qualitative method's and] the ethnographic method's attempt at description – instead of describing or understanding a phenomenon, it seeks to *stand with* the persons in the phenomenon, even as the phenomenon and the persons involved experience the process of transformation. The pro-active researcher, therefore, intentionally and actively engages in the experience that is being researched."[16] What Myers calls the Pro-Active Research Method helpfully describes the method I undertook in the development of my project on embodied preaching. It would not be fitting for a participant-researcher to attempt to quantify techniques used in embodied preaching nor the effects upon a congregation that experiences the preaching event. Nor would it be fitting to observe ethnographically as if

[15] William R. Myers, *Research in Ministry: A Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program*, *Third Edition* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 2000), 25.
[16] Ibid, 31-32.

an outsider, when so much of the symbolic communication that happens in worship is necessarily the work of insiders. As Myers states, the Pro-Active Research Method "positively emphasizes the subjective involvement of the researcher, promotes community interaction as part of all research, and seeks 'critical transformation' as a grounding premise."[17]

Subjective Involvement

In a very real sense, I have been studying myself in the course of this project. I have vested interests in the outcome of the project, first and foremost, to deepen my own satisfaction with my preaching. I am the primary actor and contributor to the project, as well as the primary person interfacing with others and reflecting critically upon the outcomes. I have paid attention to the effects this project has had upon me personally and professionally. I have noticed ways in which my preaching has improved, adjusted, and even faltered. The work of "taking note" of these effects upon myself as a preacher constitutes a significant portion of the research I have conducted. I have logged and recorded these observations in the form of journal entries, reflection papers, and integrative papers. My progress as a preacher through this program has been recorded in videos of my project sermons.

Community Interaction

Unique to a Doctor of Ministry program such as this is the necessary degree to which a community is a part of the phenomenon studied. Because this is a *ministry* program, a community of faith is involved throughout. The community has a vested

[17] Ibid, 32.

interest in the outcome of the program because, as Karl Barth wrote, "Preaching is the attempt enjoined upon the church to serve God's own Word."[18] The congregation not only cares about what *content* a preacher is attempting to communicate, but also in what *form* the preacher is attempting to embody the communication. The "how" is as important as the "what."

In the course of this program, the Parish Project Group served as a focus group for the entire congregation. If this group responded positively to an attempt at embodiment, it is likely the rest of the congregation did too. If some on the PPG were confused or put off by something, chances are some among the congregation were as well. Members of the PPG participate in the research by offering input as part of the Sermon Formation Meetings. At least ten days prior to each project sermon, the PPG gathered with me to discuss, explore, and help form the sermon that I would preach. They often commented that they had no idea the degree of preparation that went into a sermon. They also noticed when something they offered influenced the form or content of a sermon. Having benefitted greatly from the Sermon Formation Meetings with the PPG, I felt and commented that I don't know how I write a sermon without them. Following each of the project sermons, the PPG would meet with at a Sermon Feedback Meeting me to watch a video of the preaching event and then to provide feedback. The group would comment on whether I achieved the goals outlined in my Learning Covenant. They would offer feedback, both critical and affirming, regarding the effectiveness of the embodiment techniques displayed in the preaching. Finally, they would share what effects the

[18] Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 44.

preaching had upon them personally. Because a goal of my project was to pay attention to the effects embodied preaching had upon the responses of the congregation, some members of the PPG would deliberately observe members of the congregation during the course of a preaching event. Observations and insights of the PPG are recorded in notes I took during the Sermon Formation and Sermon Feedback meetings. They are also incorporated into reflection papers and integrative papers.

Critical Transformation

A researcher working on a Doctor of Ministry project is not a disinterested observer, but rather an invested participant. A minister once said, "I love the church, but I've never been satisfied with it." Ministry is a labor of love that is never fully satisfied because ministry is the work of transformation, which will never be fully realized until Christ comes again in glory. The "grounding premise" to which Myers refers is the premise that *understanding* an aspect of ministry is only a beginning. The hoped-for outcome of the project is transformation, a new way of doing ministry in the world that more fully serves the kingdom of God. In the case of embodied preaching, transformation looks like a new-found freedom on the part of preacher and congregation, freedom to experience the Word, to participate in its communication, and to allow the power of the Word to change lives in significant ways.

Therefore, part of the Pro-Active Research Method I employed involves describing ways in which transformation began to emerge over the course of the research, and it involves gesturing toward future transformation that might be possible if the embodied practice of preaching continues to follow the trajectory initiated in the project.

VI. ANALYSIS

Outcomes: Year I – Engaging My Body

As I reflected upon my first year project, I developed a working definition of what I mean by "embodied preaching." I came to understand "embodied preaching" as *preaching that is fully aware of, and which fully utilizes, the body as the means by which to convey the good news of Jesus Christ.* Through embodied preaching, form dances with content to communicate the gospel. Through embodied preaching, the Word is no longer a "head trip" – something interesting to think about – but a fleshy journey which recognizes that the body as a whole "knows" more than the mind alone.

My first year project – "Soulful Preaching that Moves Head, Heart, and Hands" – took the shape of a clear outline. I preached three sermons with the following goals:

1. Preach with no manuscript. The sermons were well-prepared but not memorized. A simple outline in my head kept me focused.
2. Preach away from the pulpit. Instead, I stood in the center of the chancel with no physical obstruction between myself and the congregation.
3. Choose body-friendly scriptural texts that lend themselves to easily embodied illustrations.
4. Give special attention to these aspects of embodiment:
    i. Voice tone, volume, and inflection
    ii. Facial expression
    iii. Use of hands and feet
    iv. Conscious control of extraneous movement

v. Responding to congregational feedback during the sermon, including listeners' body language and vocal responses.

My plan to accomplish the goals for my Preaching Project depended upon a decision to risk engaging my body in preaching the Word.

1. In the first sermon, I endeavored to dramatize in body and voice a prepared "Incarnational Translation."[19]
2. As the closing movement of my second sermon, I choreographed an embodied celebration of the assurance of God's grace.[20]
3. In my third sermon, I planned to invite the congregation to respond physically to the message.

Within the first sermon of the program, I sought to employ embodiment techniques to perform an incarnational translation based upon the story of Jesus curing the blind man at Bethsaida in Mark 8:22-30. My incarnational translation drew upon the true story of my mother-in-law practicing healing touch on me to "cure" a kink in my neck. The story provided an opportunity to use humor and personal anecdote to create a sympathetic bond with the congregation, even as I revealed that I was not open to the possibility of healing by means with which I was unfamiliar. As I attempted to embody the preaching of this gospel story, I became powerfully aware of the embodied nature of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' messiah-ship was not ideological positioning, but embodied reality. His interest was not in political ideas but, quite literally, hands-on ministry.

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[19] Charlie H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton, *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching* (Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2007).
[20] Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1997).

My newly-formed Parish Project Group (PPG) reflected some of the diversity within my congregation. The group embodied a diversity of age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, and theological acumen. They were people who supported my role as preacher, and upon whom I could count for honest feedback. In the Sermon Formation Meeting, they engaged with me to craft a clear sermon purpose statement and asked questions to become clear on my goals for the sermon. At the Sermon Feedback Meeting, several members of the PPG commented on my use of humor and personal anecdote. One PPG member observed elements reminiscent of stand-up comedy in the sermon that made it enjoyable and engaging.

As I reflected critically upon the first sermon, I became more convinced that preaching is embodied activity. In their book, *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching*,[21] and in their course lectures,[22] professors Charlie Cosgrove and Dow Edgerton describe ten preaching shifts that have occurred in recent decades. The shifts they identify resonate with what I was trying to do in my project the first year. What I missed was the articulation of a shift *From* Preaching as Spoken Monologue *Toward* Preaching as Embodied Performance. Cosgrove and Edgerton get close in their discussion of ritual in the context of the shift "*Toward* Preaching that is Liturgically Integrated."[23] They draw even nearer in describing the shift "*Toward* Preaching that is Governed by the Dynamics of Speaking/Hearing."[24] Perhaps embodied performance is

[21] Cosgrove and Edgerton, *In Other Words*.
[22] Charlie H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton, "Preaching as an Interpretive Act" (Course lectures, A.C.T.S. DMin in Preaching Program, Chicago, IL, June 22–26, 2009).
[23] Cosgrove and Edgerton, *In Other Words*, 28-31.
[24] Ibid., 31-32.

what they have in mind when they speak of "the distinctive dynamics of orality."[25] They go so far as to say that "Good speaking needs the voice, the face, the body, the particularity, the presence, the relationship, the community, the situation, the time, the moment – it needs all that makes up the actual event of speaking and listening to say what it has to say."[26] They stop short of identifying a shift toward embodied performance, but what Cosgrove and Edgerton mean by the "event of speaking and listening" is what I mean by "embodied preaching."

While preparing to preach the second project sermon – a sermon on the story of Jesus people-watching in the temple place and teaching about the widow's offering in Mark 12:41-44 – I engaged in two new practices. The first was to develop a Behavior Purpose Statement as described in Dr. Frank Thomas's "The Preaching Worksheet."[27] The statement read: "I propose to show that God asks us to hold nothing back to the end that the people will experience overwhelming joy in dedicating the whole of their lives to God."

A second practice was to participate in "The Moving Word," a program at our church in which participants are invited to "dance" the scripture which will be used in services the next morning. Along with 15 other people, I danced to Mark 12:41-44. The scripture was read several times, interspersed with music selected to convey five rhythms of life and dance identified in the work of Gabrielle Roth: flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical, and stillness.[28] It was during this practice that I realized the body can help the

[25] Ibid., 31.
[26] Ibid., 32.
[27] Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 74-80.
[28] Gabrielle Roth, "5 Rhythms," The Moving Center, www.gabrielleroth.com (accessed January 1, 2011).

mind access knowledge that the mind cannot arrive at on its own. It was not until I assumed the physical posture of the widowed woman that I began to understand empathetically what it meant for her to give "all she had to live on" to the temple treasury. I did not arrive at an historically definitive answer to the widow's motivations, but I began to feel a range of possible emotions that may have been a part of her action which Jesus noticed. I used this emotional information as a source of insight toward the theological conclusion of my sermon: "Jesus noticed in the widow a model of his own sacrifice, for he would soon give out of his poverty everything he had, all he had to live on, even his very life, for the sake of the God in whom he placed his trust."

Preaching this sermon gave me the opportunity to explore Dr. Thomas's notion of "celebrative design."[29] Celebrative design presumes that a sermon is an experience that leads to celebration. Celebration allows good news to travel from head to hands and feet. Celebration creates a bodily experience of God's grace in worship that leads to the transformation of lives. While celebrative design differs from context to context, the good news of God's grace remains the same, as does a people's ability to experience that grace through culturally-specific forms of celebration.

The questions I needed to answer as I used "celebrative design" to prepare my sermon (and some initial responses) were:

1. In what ways does my congregation *naturally* celebrate? (applause, laughter, head

[29] Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 4.

nods, hymn singing, some prompted responses, pregnant silence)

2. In what ways do *some* congregants celebrate that are *not* natural to the congregation as a whole? (saying "amen," dancing in the aisles, improvised singing within in a hymn)
3. How can I push the sermon enough to risk genuine celebrative response without attempting to coerce the congregation into celebrating through forms that are not part of its culture? ("Touch your neighbor and say, 'Neighbor, God wants all of you.'")

Having worked with the Parish Project Group in the Sermon Formation Meeting to explore possible elements of "celebrative design" for this sermon, I decided to use the following materials for celebration:

1. A lead-in story with good emotional content
2. A reference to I Corinthians 1:23 – "but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles"
3. A vocal prompt for the congregation to respond
4. An elevated voice and increased body energy
5. A transition into the Stewardship Hymn, "God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending"

"Celebrative design" provided me a framework within which to explore preaching in which my body was fully engaged. "Celebration" presumes a full-body experience. It's hard to imagine the mind celebrating all by itself. If preaching *is* celebration, then preaching is, by definition, an experience that happens in the body of the preacher and in

the bodies of the listeners. At the close of my second sermon, the organ began to play the great hymn, "God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending." I could feel in my own body, and could sense in the "body" of the congregation, a sort of uplift, a physical response to the embodied witness of the widow, who gave all she had, and to the embodied witness of Jesus, who gave his life on behalf of God, whose giving knows no ending.

The Parish Project Group responded very positively to this sermon. One person commented: "I could see how the structure of the sermon helped with the reception of the message." One member of the PPG took it upon herself to notice the effects of the sermon upon people in the congregation. "Many church members were moved to tears with this new approach to the 'same old story' of the widow's mites. What seemed to hit home was when the preacher spreading his arms as the widow 'giving it all' which also invoked an image of Jesus doing the same on the cross." Finally, another member of the group commented on the variety of dynamics in the sermon, from quiet, calm, and slow to loud, demonstrative, and intense. "It seemed to me that old and young responded energetically to changes in pace and volume."

In *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, Dr. Thomas does not use the concept of "embodiment" in his description of "celebrative design." He *does* assert that preaching involves cognitive *and* emotive elements that are distinct from yet related to each other.[30] Discussing the use of sense appeal, Thomas names the body as equal to emotion and cognition: "It is through sense appeal that the physical matter (body, thinking, emotions) of the preacher engages the physical matter (body, thinking, emotions) of the listener, and

[30] Ibid., 88.

the physical matter (body, thinking, emotions) of the text."[31] While he names the body as central to the preaching event, Thomas does not explore in his book what it means to fully engage our bodies to the same extent that he explores cognitive and emotive elements. In my opinion, he filled in this missing piece during a June 2011 lecture discussing "the performative tradition of African American preaching," in which he named the preacher's body as a primary tool in "the performed African American sermon."[32]

In my third project sermon, I learned that choosing the more challenging direction in a sermon can lead a preacher to a more embodied sermon. In the Sermon Formation Meeting, the Parish Project Group helped me arrive at this conclusion. I had chosen to preach on I Corinthians 12:1-11, Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts and unity. Having at first considered preaching on the "varieties of gifts, one Spirit" theme in the text, the PPG helped me realize the theme of "Jesus is Lord" had a much greater emotional impact for all of us and I decided to go with it.

The opening line of the sermon, "I'm nervous about this one," used words to describe emotion that I could feel in my muscles and on my skin. In other words, the nervousness I felt toward the subject contributed to the context of the sermon. By stating awareness of my own emotion, I created space for members of the congregation to honor their own emotional responses. Emotion, I became aware, belies convictions that are felt in the physical self. If a topic provokes emotion, I reflected, then it must be relevant.

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[31] Ibid., 42.
[32] Frank A. Thomas, "The Performative Tradition of African American Preaching: The Performed African American Sermon" (lecture, The Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, IL, June 28, 2011).

Difficulty suggests that something is important. A core belief or conviction is being tapped. A preacher can more fully tap that core belief by listening to and communicating through emotion expressing itself through the preacher's body.

In the Sermon Feedback Meeting, the Parish Project Group described the effects of the sermon upon the congregation. One member noticed that "People seemed very engaged from outset." One person pointed to my admission of nervousness as an effective tool to engage the congregation. "Benjamin signaled that he wasn't setting himself above his listeners. He was acknowledging a prevailing emotion that others felt as well." Another PPG member noticed my use of gestures, calling them "natural" and "not staged." Finally, someone pointed out the congregation's laughter at appropriate pauses and willingness to participate fully, "such as when the preacher asked for a show of hands."

Outcomes: Year II – Scriptural Themes of Embodiment

The purpose of the second year project was to extend the work I did in the first year. I now understood "embodied preaching" to be preaching that engages the preacher's intellect, emotions, and body to communicate with the congregation. My primary goal in the second year was to continue developing forms of embodiment while exploring the three great themes of Christian embodiment: Incarnation, Resurrection, and the Body of Christ.

Three goals for my first sermon were:

1. Do warm-up exercises before preaching;
2. Memorize and "perform" the scripture text; and

3. Preach a sermon on the "Body of Christ."

The warm-up exercises not only warmed up my body, but focused my mind. During the residency last summer, I become aware of a habit I have of excessive blinking. In his recorded response to my first sermon, Professor Ted Curtis lovingly observed, "I do not think your blinking is nervousness. It is a natural part of your unique embodiment and should be embraced." This comment impacted me greatly and gave me permission to embrace, what Curtis called, my "unique embodiment."

In the first Sermon Formation Meeting of the year, the Parish Project Group, now with a few new members, engaged in a conversation about approaches to preaching. We discussed inductive preaching that engages the congregation in the process of exploring the text along with the preacher. This approach resonated with the group as a whole. The preaching text was Luke 14:25-33 in which Jesus turns to the crowd following him and says, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Members of the PPG admitted feeling uncomfortable with this passage, especially in a sermon intended to communicate what it means to be the Body of Christ.

In the process of preparing the sermon, I caught myself saying, "I might try to memorize the passage." With the encouragement of the Parish Project Group, I resolved, "I *will* memorize and perform the text." This decision caused me to practice voicing and gestures to bring the passage to life. This new method of sermon preparation helped deepen my understanding of the text.

I enjoyed evoking within myself and the congregation a bodily experience of belonging to the Body of Christ. I anticipated discomfort in the congregation when presented with Jesus' demands, but I believe that discomfort is important, even necessary, if we are going to welcome something new. That newness has a greater chance of being welcomed when it is experienced holistically, including body, emotion, and intellect. Feedback from the PPG included a comment that "There was little change in this sermon compared to those of the recent past." The same person who made that comment also observed that "innovation should be balanced with consistency." One member commented on the effectiveness of beginning the sermon with the observation of the diversity of bodies gathered in the sanctuary. "He started with the most basic premise, one which is easy to overlook. What is the Body of Christ? Look around at all the bodies in this room. This is the Body of Christ."

My second sermon of Year II was focused on "resurrection." I chose to preach on the lectionary gospel text, Luke 20:27-38, in which Jesus defends himself against the Sadducees. That fall, our congregation had been getting used to weekly announcements from the pulpit regarding the death of another member or friend of the church. Writers such as Thomas Long have been pleading with the church to move beyond memorial services that are merely anecdotal and toward services that become occasions both for mourning and for proclaiming the good news of the resurrection.[33] Furthermore, All Saints and All Souls Days preceded the preaching date of my second project sermon.

[33] Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

This context of the liturgical calendar influenced my approach to the sermon.

Drawing upon Professor Campbell's Course in *21st Century Preaching*, I had a specific goal in the second sermon of experimenting with Lucy Atkinson Rose's notion of "preaching in the roundtable church," or what she calls "conversational preaching."[34] Rose describes her proposal: "preaching's goal is to gather the community of faith around the Word where the central conversations of the church are refocused and fostered."[35] Rose's primary homiletical symbol is the round table. In Rose's view, "the preacher and the congregation gather symbolically at a round table without head or foot, where labels like clergy and laity disappear and where believing or wanting to believe is all that matters."[36]

Following Rose, I sought to feature voices other than my own and other than presumed dominant voices. This happened in two places. First, I voiced a variety of questions about life after death that I had heard at recent Memorial Services. Second, I considered what the text might offer to folks of differing perspectives – a child caught in a restrictive family system, women with limited options, and same-sex couples seeking marriage equality. The approach required empathy and I experienced the sensation of emptying as I laid aside my "vested interests"[37] and took up the interests of voices seldom heard. A preacher's authority, in this model, has to do with the willingness to

[34] Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 4.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Walter Brueggemann, *The Book That Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 38.

empty oneself of privileged authority[38] to give voice to diverse voices gathered at the round table.

In the Sermon Feedback Meeting, one member of the Parish Project Group said the technique of lifting up various voices was "very effective" and noticed that hand gestures gathered in each voice as it was invited to the table. "I sort of felt like you were gathering us all in." Members of the PPG agreed that they are seeing "enormous improvement in terms of Benjamin's fluidity and relaxation while preaching." During this sermon, we were in the process of restoring plaster and the sanctuary was filled with scaffolding. One person on the PPG said, "When I first came into the sanctuary after the scaffolding was put up, the breath was taken out of my chest. I certainly was more resistant to hearing the Word." The group agreed that the context of preaching affects its hearing. Another member commented that "the preacher effectively connected with the congregation in that setting because he stood on the sanctuary floor and could move enough to make eye-contact with those sitting behind scaffolding piers."

Preparing for the third sermon of the second year, I spent time with the Second Servant Song in Isaiah 49:1-7. In it, I heard resonances between the life of Israel at the time of Isaiah and the life of our congregation today. I began to discern a sermon that would allow the congregation to follow the inner logic of the song. Because most people hear scripture as a monotone, I wanted to "perform" the text, having internalized it myself, so that the text would come to life for and speak directly to those experiencing it.

[38] Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001).

From Stephanie Paulsell, I learned that the inner logic, or interior movement, of the text followed a four-fold path:[39]

1. The servant finds his/her voice
2. The servant expresses self-doubt ("Am I doing this for the right reasons?")
3. The servant remembers the primal origins of his/her call
4. The servant voices God's proclamation of an expanded call.

My sermon followed this four-fold movement, creating a contemporary Servant Song, sung first by the preacher and then offered to the congregation to complete.

Contrary to my initial intention, the sermon did not explicitly address "Incarnation." Rather, the sermon took on an incarnational *form* and asked members of the congregation "How, then, will God be incarnated in *your* life?" The sermon was a deeply personal and emotional one, but I was clear around my intentions in sharing a personal testimony. It was not to solicit empathy or concern for my well-being, but to model what it looks like to offer testimony to the ways in which God is incarnate in one's life. Preaching became the occasion for that personal testimony, perhaps the most embodied (and incarnate) form of expression.

While I was preaching, at two different points ringtones from cell phones interrupted the sermon. One PPG member noticed that "because you were preaching without a manuscript and because you were present in the moment, your ability to flow with the interruptions, to incorporate them into your preaching, made what could have

[39] Stephanie A. Paulsell, "Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Isaiah 49:1-7, Pastoral Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 242.

been a distraction into a further opportunity for the congregation to sympathize and engage with you." Another member commented that the embodied performance of scripture: "I couldn't even tell it was scripture. The words weren't ancient anymore. They were happening in front of me."

Outcomes: Year III – Still Experimenting

As a result of my experience in the Core III Course, *Preaching as Transformation*, I intended in my third year preaching project to place "embodied preaching" in the service of transformation. We people spend most of our lives not highly aware of our bodies. Even though we can't help but live in our bodies, we abide mainly in our heads. What new frontiers of the spirit are left to be discovered by healing the fracture of body, mind, heart, spirit, and soul? In the third year, I wanted to continue experimenting with methods of embodiment, and return to the original question of my first year project, by preaching a series of sermons that anticipate and encourage transformation, both personal and as the Body of Christ.

My first sermon of year three was based upon Jesus' parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard found in Matthew 20:1-16. As I prepared to preach this sermon, I decided that one possible interpretation concerned the Christian theological concept of "grace." The parable provided an opportunity to challenge commonsense ideas about the meaning of grace. I began the sermon by naming the prevailing notion that grace means "God loves you no matter what you do." I challenged this understanding by offering that grace has to do with "God demonstrating loving concern for those who don't deserve it." In the

course of the sermon, I pressed this notion of grace to suggest that grace might have a hard edge: "Sometimes God's grace is better news for somebody else than it is for you."

Drawing upon these theological reflections, I structured the sermon around five verses of the hymn "Amazing Grace." Each verse represented a different voice. In the first, I demonstrated that everyone knows and loves the concept of grace by inviting the congregation to join me in singing the first verse, which almost everyone knows by heart. In the next four verses, I adopted the voices of the landowner, the workers who came earliest, the workers who came later, and, finally, God. These verses helped form the narrative flow of the sermon and they allowed me to invoke the various perspectives of characters in the story.

Along with the overall goal of performing a sermon that demonstrated what I have been calling "embodied preaching," I identified three goals that were particular to this sermon:

1. Perform the sermon without notes. In the sanctuary of the church I serve, there is almost no bad place from which to preach. I preached this sermon from the sanctuary floor, right behind the altar table. Preaching without notes from that position creates an element of intimacy between preacher and congregation. I was able to make eye contact and connect with almost every congregant.
2. Find ways to prompt the congregation to respond. I did this in three ways: First, I prompted the congregation to join me in singing "Amazing Grace" at the outset of the sermon; Second, I asked the congregation to respond by raising hands to the question, "Who among you would have been upset if you had been one of the

workers who had toiled all day only to watch the landowner pay the same daily wage to those who had worked only an hour?"; Third, I prompted the congregation to laugh in various places, including when I observed what a disastrous business plan the landowner had.

3. Offer the challenge of the gospel without trying to "make it okay." I wanted to let the performance of the sermon convey the same challenging impact embedded in the structure of the parable. Jesus' parables are sometimes hard to swallow, and yet therein lies their power. What would happen if I proclaimed: "No, God's grace is not fair. It is better than fair"?

In the Sermon Feedback Meeting, the Parish Project Group agreed that it was an effective and challenging sermon. One PPG member said "I was impressed by how Benjamin found ways to prompt responses in the congregation that weren't threatening. The congregation spontaneously sang 'Amazing Grace' with him. They raised hands when prompted. They were encouraged to ask questions about the meaning of grace in their own lives." Another person said "I liked how Benjamin asked questions and then answered them. It made me feel more involved in the sermon. And the sermon challenged me personally. I realized how self-centered I can be and realized that God's grace can feel unfair, but then it made me think about how I could be more gracious with others." Finally, one PPG member said, "Your embodied preaching has become a lot more natural than when you started this program." Another added, "Your efforts at embodiment that seemed studied in the first sermons three years ago, now are natural and authentic. It's wonderful to see that progression."

The final sermon of the program was, in many respects, the most difficult sermon I've ever prepared to preach. I chose to preach on Jesus' Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1-13. The sermon was an attempt to preach from a feminist perspective as described by Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad in her course on "Feminist Perspectives in Preaching." While it had been normal and easy for me to incorporate female images of God into liturgies and to proclaim the Gospel as a liberating Word for women, the course challenged me "to value women's experience as a resource for preaching."[40] From the point of view of embodied preaching, this sermon required me to see the Gospel through a new set of eyes and to interpret a difficult parable through an imagined experience, that of a late first-century woman who belonged to the Matthean community as the Gospel was being composed.

At first, I intended to preach a sermon that highlighted the need for the church to be prepared. This changed when a woman in the Parish Project Group expressed in the Sermon Formation meeting her discomfort with the parable: "This parable seems so black and white, so judgmental." Her conviction prompted me to remember to take women's experience seriously. I decided to preach from the point of view of a first-century woman by means of a narrative sermon that used story-telling, imagery, sensory appeal, and embodiment practices.

To add to the challenge, this sermon occurred in services on the first Sunday of the month, which are, for our congregation, intentionally multi-generational. Children of

[40] Barbara K. Lundblad, "Feminist Perspectives on Preaching" (Course lectures, A.C.T.S. DMin in Preaching Program, Chicago, IL, June 27–30, 2011).

various ages were present in the sanctuary and I wanted the sermon to be accessible to them as well as to the adults. Adopting the voice of a story-teller was an attempt to draw the entire congregation into the narrative. While the focus of my project, and of this thesis, is not "narrative preaching," I learned that narrative preaching that is deeply embodied can be a powerful tool to communicate with a congregation made up of multiple generations. Further, I found that embodiment practices can assist a preacher who intends to value the perspectives of marginalized people, including women. It is one thing for a preacher to say "this text is good news for women." It is another thing for a preacher to *embody* a narrative of that good news that respects the text while honoring the varied experiences of women.

At the Sermon Feedback Meeting, a woman on the Parish Project Group said, "I think Benjamin did a great job of compiling the 'layers of story-telling,' including body movement, voice inflection, and drawing in listeners. I was impressed with the feminist twist that was created from a very 'man-driven' text." Another member noted that "Benjamin incorporated a 'masterful bit of theater' into the sermon, drawing in the congregation in by using various vocal intonations, volumes, and gestures." Finally, one member thought that "the sermon effectively included all members of the congregation, including children who were present. Benjamin did this by making eye contact with the congregation, by incorporating the names of some of the children present, and by preaching a narrative sermon that was easy to stay interested in and to enjoy."

VII. INSIGHTS

When I consider possible applications of this research, I think of five categories: sermon preparation, sermon performance, congregational response in worship, congregational response beyond worship, and preaching as spiritual practice.

Sermon Preparation

In his book, *Speaking the Holy: The Art of Communication in Preaching*, Richard Ward begins his description of "Preaching as Embodied Proclamation" by observing that "body and voice are ways of expressing, but they are also ways of knowing. When one is preaching, one is 'thinking' with the body."[41] I experienced this "thinking with the body" at various points in the course of the program. On various occasions, I "danced" the scripture upon which I would preach. The Moving Word practice at First Congregational Church provided an opportunity to move my body in conversation with a text and with other dancers. In response to a variety of musical rhythms, I was able to explore an array of new, felt responses to the text. This got me "out of my head" and "into my body," enabling me to access new insights that I am convinced I would not have accessed without experiencing the text through dance. It seems to me that the division between body and mind is a false one. What we call the "mind" includes all of the faculties of knowledge accessible to the body. Another way to state this would be to observe, along with neurobiologists who study the brain and theologians who assert the incarnation, that the mind is meat. That is, there are no ideas that are not, finally, dependent upon flesh,

[41] Richard F. Ward, Speaking of the Holy: The Art of Communication in Preaching (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 37-38.

matter, and lived experience.

The observation that "one thinks with the body" has applications to the processes of sermon preparation. New interpretations are available when a preacher allows the lived experience of her body to inform her understanding of a text. I experienced this as I engaged in a three-fold process of memorization, internalization, and performance of a text. *Memorization* began when I printed the text on a piece of paper, folded it up, and put it in my pocket. At various times from that moment until the moment of the preaching I event, I would take out the paper, unfold it, and engage in the work of memorizing the text, repeating the words over and over again until they became familiar, even effortless, to recite. *Internalization* began less predictably. As I went through the course of my days, I would take out the paper in any number of circumstances: standing at the kitchen counter making my kids' lunches, sitting in my car at a stoplight, walking through the grocery store, entering a hospital to visit a critically ill member of my church. As I memorized the text within the contexts of my life, the text began to speak to me, to my life. In this way, the text became relevant because it revealed to me new insights about myself and the world. This internalization was a sign I was beginning to understand the text, that is, to "stand under" it, and to realize that it was interpreting me even as I was interpreting it. *Performance* began as I made deliberate decisions about how to share my own process of internalization with the congregation in ways that would help the Word communicate with members of the congregation and move them to respond by performing/embodying the Word in their congregational life. The degree to which the

preached Word makes a difference in the life of a congregation is tremendously difficult to quantify, but moving a congregation to embody/perform new, Gospel-centered patterns of being remains the ultimate goal of embodied preaching.

Sermon Performance

Another application of this research concerns the *means* by which sermon is embodied or performed. In this book, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy*, Charles Rice laments "The American Situation" and the "problem of the disembodied word."[42] In his book, originally published in 1987, Rice laments the reduction of the sermon to yet another commodity, something to be consumed rather than experienced. Twenty five years later, the screen is supreme and some churches in my city have established satellite churches with "live sermon feeds" rather than new churches with flesh-and-blood preachers. While new economic realities and technological capabilities influence these decisions, I can't help but lament the loss of three-dimensional flesh to the flat screen.

In the meantime, many churches such as my own without resources for or interest in high-tech worship depend upon highly intellectual presentations of the Gospel. Without taking anything away from good scholarship and clear thinking, there is much more to preaching than well-articulated ideas. Arguably, more is communicated through the *means* of our preaching than through the *content*. Good content is indispensible, but so is mastering the *means* of communication and performance. This is why it has been so

[42] Charles L. Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 39.

important for me to deepen into and develop what I have called "embodiment practices" which include attention to posture, feet placement, self-awareness, breathing, arm, hand, and finger gestures, facial expressions, positioning in the worship space (i.e. pulpit, chancel, altar, floor), letting go of erroneous physical affects, and embracing physical affects that are unique to my embodiment.

Is this only possible for a preacher who is talented and/or trained in the performing arts? By no means, though I would argue that preaching *is* a performing art. There are embodiment practices and performance techniques that should be developed and improved upon by every preacher. Necessarily, this work is done within the context of a preacher's unique embodiment and within the context of a congregation's unique culture. In other words, a preacher in a wheelchair has a unique set of embodiment possibilities and limitations and his congregation should expect him to speak the Word from and through those particularities. Further, the preacher should help his congregation become aware of its own boundaries of comfort and expression, that it might increase its capacity for accepting God's Grace as well as for expanding its repertoire of responses to God's Word.

Congregational Response in Worship

In her book, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale introduces the concept of "Exegeting the Congregation."[43] This work, according to Tisdale, "requires of the pastor skill in interpreting the texts of the Christian tradition,

[43] Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 56-90.

skill in interpreting the texts of congregational life and activity, and skill in bringing the two worlds together in seriously imaginable and transformative ways for a local community of faith."[44] Congregations are embodied cultures existing at a particular time and place for a particular purpose. A congregation may not be aware of these particularities, but one task of the preacher is to pay attention to them, to speak to and through them, and to challenge them. A preacher should expand her or his own repertoire of embodiment practices, but always in conversation with the embodiment practices present in the congregation to whom she or he is preaching.

For example, I am personally quite taken with various performance strategies within some African-American preaching traditions. I have, over the course of the past three years, attempted to "try on" some of these strategies. Despite the comment of one retired pastor that "you don't do it well," I have found the use of alliteration, the varying of vocal volume, and the rise and fall of moments of sermonic intensity to be effective in communicating what is on my heart and in soliciting a perceptible reaction from my congregation. However, the retired pastor was correct in asserting that "the sky is *not* the limit." Exegeting the congregation is a necessary skill. In other words, every culture has boundaries which define possibilities and limitations. Powerful preaching understands those boundaries, is comfortable working within them, and can effectively work along and press the edges as a way of challenging the congregation to expand its theological self-understanding. For example, in a sermon that addressed Christian regard for the neighbor, I employed the African-American preaching technique of inviting folks to

[44] Ibid., 56.

"touch your neighbor and say…" This pushed against the boundary of our worshiping culture without leaping over it and invited the congregation to embody the content of the Word being preaching, namely, "Christian regard for the neighbor requires us to risk leaving our comfort zones."

Congregational Response Beyond Worship

When I began this program, one of my initial questions was whether intentionally embodied preaching leant itself not only to expanding the repertoire of congregational responses within the context of worship, but to the lived life of the congregation beyond worship. That is, does embodied preaching have the ability to transform the life of a congregation in the way it serves the world throughout the week? This question arose from my own need to believe that my preaching makes a difference in the lives of those who grant me permission to be their preacher.

As Charles Campbell writes, "the practice of preaching involves an *ethical performance* of the story of Jesus… the Christian interpretation of this story requires its *performance*."[45] The ultimate goal of embodied preaching is an "ethical performance of the story of Jesus" that not only communicates the Gospel but models its performance. In this way, the Word of God is communicated and performed first within in the act of worship and eventually beyond the walls of the sanctuary. The performance of the Word spills out the doors of the church. Michael Pasquarello asserts that "God's self-communicative activity through the incarnate Word and indwelling Spirit [must be]

[45] Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 79.

allowed to be primary in preaching."[46] It is not the preacher's Word; it is God's Word. The preacher allows the Word to be primary by embodying it fully and then by trusting the Spirit to complete the communication, moving the congregation to perform the Word in its communal life.

In his study of Martin Luther King, Jr., Richard Lischer observes that King "later came to understand call and response as but a dress rehearsal for the community's social performance of the Word of God."[47] King was not content to move a congregation to exuberant response within the preaching event. Instead, "he shifted altered his definition of preaching by subtly shifting the criterion for its authenticity from eloquence to its potential for enactment."[48] In my view, this is not a subtle shift. I am convinced that "potential for enactment" is the ultimate criterion of embodied preaching. Embodied preaching and embodied congregational response must eventuate in "social performance;" otherwise, the *full* performance of the Word, its enactment on behalf of God in the world, will be stilted. Embodiment begins with response and ends in enactment.

Preaching as Christian Practice

Finally, as I conclude this project, I have a hunch that embodied preaching is a practice undertaken by *all* Christians. As Campbell asserts, "the most important

[46] Michael Pasquarello III, *We Speak Because We Have First Been Spoken: A Grammar of the Preaching Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 146.
[47] Lischer, *The Preacher King*, 219.
[48] Ibid.

interpretation of the story of Jesus takes place in the performance of that story in the life of the Christian community."[49] Perhaps preaching is not only a highly specialized form of Christian communication, but also the most commonplace form of it. Perhaps any form of embodied Christian witness could be described as "preaching" and maybe the church would do well to recognize it as such, both for the sake of the Christian life that communicates the Word made flesh and for the sake of preachers, through whom the flesh becomes Word by the power of the Holy Spirit.

VIII. CONCLUSION

As I conclude, I am struck, even alarmed, by the vulnerability of God's Word. Vulnerability is the means of God's self-communication. Christians would like to imagine, and preachers sometimes pretend that it is otherwise, but the Gospel story is conveyed through less-than-ideal means. Consider the Christmas story: a pregnant teenager, a righteous man bucking cultural expectations, a truck-stop town called Bethlehem, a baby born into poverty and laid in a feeding trough, a flight, a massacre, a childhood in dusty Galilee. This is no hero's tale. This is the story of Word made flesh, of God made vulnerable, of divinity emptying itself to be in relationship with humanity. It is the story of the cross, of defeat, of violence and death, the story of the darkest day when the universe was empty of God. And then, a surprise: an empty tomb, frightened questions, terror giving way to joy. The Risen One, firstborn of the dead, going on ahead

[49] Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers*, 79.

to Galilee, back into life, proclaiming freedom and joy. The vulnerable Word prevails and the world is renewed.

In the late 1960's, my grandfather and grandmother engaged in faithful responses to God's claim upon their lives. On the steps of the State Capital in Concord, New Hampshire, my grandfather spoke out against the war in Vietnam. The ideals of his heady faith embodied in direct protest. One Holy Week, my grandmother choreographed a passion play. In the face of racial prejudice in her day, she cast an African-American man to dance the part of Jesus and made a bold theological statement about incarnation.

The Word became flesh and came to dwell among us. And now, among us, God calls those through whom the flesh becomes Word once again.

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