

Emory University

**Rendering Visible:**

**Answering the Call to Preach Racial Justice in White Congregations**

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by

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To Kevin

**Rendering Visible:**  
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In August of 2014 an unarmed black teenager named Michael Brown was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri. The Brown shooting happened on the heels of the choking death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, at the hands of another white police officer. In November of that same year, after a grand jury chose not to indict Wilson of Brown's death, protests—both violent and non-violent—broke out in Ferguson and around the United States.

I was ten years into ordained ministry with an affluent, largely white, urban Episcopal parish when the Ferguson protests happened. I was deeply moved by the racially-charged, violent situation in our country but was unsure of how to address this topic with my congregation. I was convicted by the idea that something needed to be said from the pulpit and terrified to be the one to do it. Early in December of that year, I had a text conversation with another priest, a trusted friend who is an African American woman serving as chaplain at an

historically black university. I asked whether I could focus on the sanctity of all human lives rather than making the sermon—and the ensuing conversation-- about race in order to avoid alienating my congregation. She answered me very gently and compassionately, saying,

I guess I wonder about those people in your congregation who are conscious -- both whites and blacks who understand well the sanctity of the phrase "black lives matter." I wonder how they will feel to hear you say instead, "all lives matter." Will it isolate them in a time when we already feel especially isolated?... I haven't read a sermon yet that acknowledges the black people who were present [in worship]. In fact, in all of the efforts to "do the right thing" by challenging white people, [white preachers have] done a thing that black people have struggled with for centuries --- they ignored the black people in their midst. By failing to care/acknowledge the deep emotions being carried by the black people in their midst, they essentially rendered their black congregants invisible.

My friend's words touched me profoundly. Since that day, and through more social upheaval in our country, I have become interested in the challenge of preaching difficult messages of social justice, particularly racial equality, to white affluent congregations. This is not a new phenomenon. Preachers of all stripes have been railing against the various evils of their societies to varying degrees of success since Jesus began the movement and even well before, in the voice of the Hebrew Bible prophets. However, we are in a time of declining church attendance and for pastors and preachers, the pressure to perform in such a way that we draw people into our churches rather than run them off is having significant effects on how many of us view the critical time we spend in the pulpit. Leaving the numbers aside, those of us who take our multi-faceted jobs seriously must tread a delicate balance as we preach boldly on Sunday then visit hospital bedsides on Monday. It is easy—and arguably legitimate—to hide behind the need to keep the congregation happy in order that the finances stay balanced and the pastoral care needs can be met.

And yet, this is not the call of Christ in our lives. Our Christian scriptures call us into works of love, mercy, and justice. God's voice through the prophet Isaiah instructs the people that in order to heal their transgressions before God, they must, "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."<sup>1</sup> Our Proverbs plead for us to "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy."<sup>2</sup> The instruction to care for and defend our brothers and sisters extends throughout the Hebrew Bible and yet, in the New Testament when Jesus himself teaches in the synagogue in Nazareth "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,"<sup>3</sup> he is run out of the town by an angry mob. The mandate to preach and practice justice is a strong and ever-present theme in the New Testament but it is not universally popular. Jesus often finds himself on the wrong side of authorities who fight against his message of justice and mercy, of love over law, of abundance over scarcity. That fight that eventually leads to his torture and execution. Even with this strong tradition in scripture and even with the witness of Christ before us, the practice of preaching social justice and human rights is still not universally accepted in the Christian tradition, a fact which causes angst in preachers that want to turn that tide.

Walter Bruggemann, in his classic *The Prophetic Imagination*, says, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."<sup>4</sup> Bruggemann sees critique

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<sup>1</sup> Isa. 1.17 New Revised Standard Version

<sup>2</sup> Prov. 31.8-9

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4.18-19

<sup>4</sup>

of the culture around us as part and parcel to the preaching and pastoral life and that critique is precisely what makes the prophetic act so difficult. He offers, though, that the prophetic ministry has two parts: the critique of culture and the cutting away of brokenness but also the energizing of God's people and refilling them with the hope they need to accomplish the work.<sup>5</sup>

In light of his definition of prophetic preaching and his belief in the call to the preaching life, it is notable that in his book *Inscribing the Text*, Brueggemann argues that the balance between keeping the people in the pews content and challenging them with prophetic words is difficult if not impossible to achieve. He writes "The fact is that truth-speaking-to-power is a simple and perhaps simplistic model that almost none of us can readily embrace. When we preside over institutions with programs, budgets, and anxiety-filled members, we are not likely to practice, with any simplicity at all, the notion of truth-speaking-to-power-- not if we want to keep our jobs."<sup>6</sup> However, pastors in church communities throughout the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's lead their congregations through difficult homiletical conversations, sometimes challenging the way congregations saw themselves and their community positions. Churches shrank and grew in response to these challenges. Some pastors became known for their bold witness. Perhaps in contrast to—or perhaps in agreement with-- Brueggemann's observation, these preachers do not expect or practice "simplicity" when practicing "truth-speaking-to-power. It could be argued, just with a passing study of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible or by glancing over the earthly ministry of Jesus, that speaking truth to power is never simple, safe, or straightforward. On the contrary, speaking truth is inherently risky and, as such, is complex. I believe there are tools and techniques that modern pastors can use to motivate and inspire congregations into witness and action for change and do it in such a way that mitigates

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 20.

the risk of alienating their congregations, preventing them from providing pastoral and administrative care.

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, in *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach*, admits “sometimes when I attempted to preach a “prophetic” sermon, I did so with a significant amount of anxiety and even downright fear,” noting that she believes other preachers called into the tradition of preaching difficult social justice messages are also similarly challenged.<sup>7</sup> Tisdale cites seven reasons that pastors avoid becoming “prophetic witnesses.” Two of these are particularly relevant to this study. The first is “Pastoral Concern for Parishioners,” citing, “pastors rightly perceive that with prophetic preaching there is often bad news before good news. And the last thing we think our folk need is more bad news.”<sup>8</sup> A pastor in tune with her congregation knows the hurt and pain already present in the pews and could be hesitant to continue to pile on by bringing the specter of the world’s ills into the nave. Related to pastoral concern is the second reason for avoiding prophetic witness: “Fear of Conflict.”<sup>9</sup> In this era of declining attendance in mainline congregations, pastors have distinct pressure to keep the congregation “happy,” that is, keep people coming to worship semi-regularly and keep them continuing to pledge their time, talent, and treasure. Conflict in a congregation can be the kiss of death for a church whose finances are already a teetering balancing act which, in the current climate, is most mainline congregations.

There is evidence, however, from previous generations of pastors and congregations that bringing social justice messages into the pulpit and into the congregation can be freeing for congregations, can help people learn and grow in faith and in political acumen. Preachers in the

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<sup>7</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach*, 1st edition. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 13–14.



1950's and 1960's often lead congregations deeply divided over the current events of the Civil Rights Movement. While the most high-profile Civil Rights preachers, like Martin Luther King jr, Jesse Jackson, and Andrew Young, were preaching to congregations and gathered crowds that were largely already followers and believers in the messages they preached (even though wider culture was still skeptical and hostile), many congregations, particularly in the urban southern United States, were led by pastors who struggled with how to preach Gospel-centered messages of love and inclusion without dividing and alienating their congregations in the manner Tisdale describes above. Those like Frank Ross at All Saints' Episcopal Church in Atlanta and William Sloane Coffin at the Riverside Church in Manhattan, were preaching powerful messages that did indeed divide their congregations but also had a profound effect on the future reputations of those same congregations, which have become known as stalwarts of social justice in their own denominations.

In current conversations, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement—while less broadly systemic than the Civil Rights Movement—is making its mark on Christian social conversation and homiletics. Congregations are again divided on how and whether they are interested in hearing this movement discussed from their pulpits. Preacher-pastors, too, are divided about how and whether the movement should be preached. Many in mainstream liberal parishes see this as a modern-day opportunity to embrace human-rights preaching and already finding ways to challenge their congregations.

Here I want to note my awareness that this conversation is likely different in different denominations, in different regions of the United States, in congregations of different racial composition and different economic status. For the purposes of this essay, I am primarily concerned with how to translate Gospel-centered messages about human rights to largely white,

urban, Protestant congregations, those whose power structure has been historically the most threatened by challenging human rights conversations. In conversations with colleagues serving in different churches across denominations, affluent black congregations, rural white congregations and others, they report to me different challenges with discussing BLM and other matters of human rights “politics” from the pulpit, but for the limited purposes of this project, I will keep my focus closer to the congregations I am familiar with, that is, urban, Protestant, white, largely affluent congregations.

### **Preaching in the time of the Civil Rights Movement**

In the 1950's and 1960's and even into the 1970's, the Civil Rights Movement was sweeping across the United States. The primary goal of the Movement was to end racial segregation and discrimination against African-Americans in the United States and to promote equality among the races. The movement was as deep and complicated as the history of discrimination in this country was long and pervasive. The movement is largely and loosely believed to have begun officially in 1955 with the actions of Rosa Parks and Montgomery Bus Boycott and ended in 1968 with the signing of the Civil Rights Act. In reality, the seeds of the movement were planted long before, as with the actions leading up to 1954's Brown vs. Board of Education and the momentum and ripples of the Movement continued long after the ink on the Civil Rights Act had dried.

Like so many other social movements before and after the Civil Rights Movement (including abolition, wars and economic crises), the Civil Rights Movement made itself known in the pulpits of churches across denominations and across the country. Most famous and most certainly most notably, historically black congregations raised up preachers like Martin Luther

King Jr., Fanny Lou Hamer, Andrew Young, and Joseph Lowry that became political activists and leaders of the Movement.<sup>10</sup> In his article entitled “African American Religious Leadership and the Civil Rights Movement” historian Clarence Taylor notes, “In many instances, black clergy became the spokespeople for campaigns articulating the grievances of black people, and they became the strategists that shaped the objectives and methods of the movement that sought to address those grievances. Furthermore, they were able to win the allegiance of a large number of people and convince them to make great sacrifices for racial justice.”<sup>11</sup>

While many African-American preachers and pastors were preaching, strategizing, and giving voice to the voiceless in order to build the Civil Rights Movement from within the African-American community, there were a handful of white preachers in churches across denominations that also attempted to garner support for the Civil Rights Movement from within their own communities. They did so expressly to change the minds and attitudes of white Christians and to move them towards support of their African-American brothers and sisters.

The challenge for white preachers was a different one. White preachers were obviously not encountering the same brutal daily social injustices as their African-American counterparts. The challenge for those white preachers who felt called to preach a message of civil rights for all was found in congregations that reacted to these messages with fear and anger. As white people, their daily rights were not in jeopardy, but as preachers of a social Gospel that called for freedom and justice for all of creation, their livelihoods, their positions, their jurisdictional standings, their careers and their callings were in jeopardy, as were sometimes their lives depending on the force of the disruption caused by their words.

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<sup>10</sup> Clarence Taylor, “African American Religious Leadership and the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Gilder Lehrman Institute for History*, June 19, 2012, <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-rights-movement/essays/african-american-religious-leadership-and-civil-rights-m>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

*The Reverend William Sloane Coffin*

*New York, New York*

William Sloane Coffin was a white preacher and pastor who managed to build a successful career and powerful voice by preaching against social ills beginning in the 1960's. His preaching was particularly concerned with the Vietnam War, nuclear disarmament and Civil Rights during these decades. As an ordained Presbyterian minister, he believed that social justice and social activism were central to his duties as a cleric.<sup>12</sup> Coffin became the chaplain to Yale University in 1958. Early in his time as university chaplain, Coffin became engaged in the Civil Rights Movement as a Freedom Rider and as a protester against segregation. He traveled south to support the movement several times and was arrested in 1961, 1963, and 1964. Later at Yale, he assisted students in resisting the draft and preached vehemently against the actions of the United States in the Vietnam War. These anti-war activities caught the eye of the University administration as well as the eye of the Justice Department, who believed his counsel to students was illegal. He was threatened with imprisonment and convicted of conspiracy to encourage draft evasion (a conviction which was shortly overturned) becoming a national example of the primacy of free speech.<sup>13</sup>

With a move to the socially-progressive Riverside Church in New York City in the 1978, Coffin continued to use the powers of his pulpit and voice to preach against war and nuclear weapons, inspiring a generation of congregants in that place to work together for local and international causes including the Riverside Church Disarmament Program of the 1970's and

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<sup>12</sup> Marc Charney, "Rev. William Sloane Coffin Dies at 81; Fought for Civil Rights and Against a War," *The New York Times*, April 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/13/us/rev-william-sloane-coffin-dies-at-81-fought-for-civil-rights-and-against.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

80's, a vibrant Prison Ministry and Families Advocacy, and most recently participation in the New Sanctuary Movement to welcome refugees and immigrants into the country.

In a *New York Times* article published shortly after his death in 2006, Coffin is described as having “a distinctive view of his own role as a dissenter. His argument with American social practices and political policies, he said, was that of a partner engaged in a ‘lovers’ quarrel.’”<sup>14</sup>

Coffin once wrote in a sermon, “I believe Christianity is a worldview that undergirds progressive thought and action. I believe the church doesn’t so much have a social ethic as it is a social ethic.”<sup>15</sup> In an essay about Coffin’s preaching preparation, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale notes that “when Coffin preaches on a social issue, it is clear that he has done his homework and done it well. The result is that he is able to articulate the opposing point of view clearly and accurately. Even if you disagree with him, you know he has entertained and considered other points of view along the way.”<sup>16</sup> Coffin did not avoid difficult, charged topics in his preaching. On the contrary he embraced them as exactly what Christians needed to say, hear, and act upon as a matter of discipline and practice. But he did not tackle these difficult subjects lightly. His sermons were well-researched on both sides of the issue at hand. He was always well-prepared for continued discussion or challenge after the homiletical event.

Another tactic that the wise Coffin was known to use was that of pairing a difficult subject with one well-known to the congregation and close to its heart. Tisdale explores one of Coffin’s most famous sermons at The Riverside Church, “Warring Madness” in which he announced a controversial new nuclear disarmament initiative that the church was going to undertake. He did so by laying it beside the church’s history, specifically the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 49.

<sup>16</sup> Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 59.

Riverside's founder, Harry Emerson Fosdick. By quoting Fosdick's sermons in his own, Coffin was able to connect the church's present actions with its beloved past to much success.<sup>17</sup>

William Sloane Coffin was a prophetic voice. Much like the disciples reticence to follow Jesus' lead, Coffin was often chastised for preaching too far ahead of his constituents, faster than the movement of the political mechanisms of the day. But, like Jesus' response to his disciples, and like the responses of the earlier prophets before him, Coffin kept preaching radical messages of human rights and care for the other that pushed people out of comfortable ignorance and into action on behalf of the gospel.

*The Reverend Frank Ross*

*Atlanta, Georgia*

Meanwhile, during the same era of Civil Rights in the United States but in a very different part of the country, Frank Ross was also preaching challenging messages of integration and human rights. Frank Mason Ross was the rector of All Saints' Episcopal Church in Atlanta, Georgia, from 1961-1980. A history of the parish says that "Ross was courageous, outspoken, honest, and he inspired extreme reactions, one way or another, in most parishioners."<sup>18</sup>

The location of the parish, near the center of downtown Atlanta, gave the parish a conflicting self-identity. It was deep in the south, surrounded by racist and segregationist attitudes and agendas, but it was in the middle of a growing, bustling city trying hard to build an international reputation. The congregation at All Saints' at the time was solidly upper-middle-class and exclusively white, but it was in a city of mixed economic strata and complicated racial relationships.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Ellis Langford, *All Saints' Episcopal Church: To Seek, To Celebrate, To Serve* (Atlanta, Ga, All Saints' Church), 53.

Into this parish and community Frank Ross entered and built on his predecessor, Milton Wood's, nascent work of trying to nudge the congregation into committed social justice action. Wood and Ross both signed the 1957 Ministers' Manifesto, a document published in the city newspaper urging the governor to follow the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision to integrate public schools. The Manifesto included six principles "to be of basic importance for our thought and conduct," including "HATRED and scorn for those of another race, or for those who hold a position different from our own, can never be justified."<sup>19</sup> The Manifesto was signed by clergy from different denominations and races all over the city.<sup>20</sup>

Ross also arranged "pulpit exchanges" with neighboring St. Paul's, an African-American congregation, as well as round table dinners with members of that congregation. Ross marched in the Atlanta streets in favor of civil rights and desegregation, actions hitherto unheard of by a rector of that parish, actions that drew him much criticism. The criticism came in the form of angry telephone calls, letters to the editor of the city paper (who eventually became a parishioner and supporter of Ross's), decreased financial support and eventually decrease parochial membership. Ross' detractors were often indignant about the specter of politics in their church, as politics in general were an impolite topic to the parishioners in the impeccably polite southern United States. Ross continued in his mission to preach civil rights from the pulpit at All Saints' undeterred by his detractors and undeterred by the shifting sands of the congregation.

While the parish suffered ever-shrinking numbers during Ross' tenure, both the core and the mission of the place became refined and defined, setting the path for the congregation to be positioned as a stalwart leader for human rights in Episcopal churches of the south, with poverty rights, women's rights, and LGBTQ rights following along in their own times.

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<sup>19</sup> "80 Atlanta Pastors Sign Manifesto on Racial Beliefs, November 1957," accessed January 12, 2017, <http://rccapilgrims.ning.com/profiles/blogs/80-atlanta-pastors-sign>.

<sup>20</sup> Langford, *All Saints' Episcopal Church*, 63-64.

Ross' actions were given credence when, though the number of parishioners shrank, the social status of those that both remained and joined seemed to be on the rise. People were coming to All Saints' specifically to be challenged by Ross' words and to see how the church might follow his challenge. Of note, the editor of the Atlanta Constitution, Ralph McGill, joined All Saints' after leaving another Episcopal Church in anger when that church refused to allow Dr. Martin Luther King jr.'s children admittance into its private school.<sup>21</sup> Judge Elbert Parr Tuttle, chief judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit from 1960 to 1967, was known for a series of crucial decisions to advance the cause of civil rights. He was also a parishioner at All Saints' during Ross' tenure and served as a vestryman alongside McGill. The two of them expressed unwavering support for Ross that possibly kept him from the professional ruin that might result from his unwavering desire to preach prophetic messages despite the possible deleterious effects on the congregation in his charge.<sup>22</sup>

Parish historian Margaret Langford says of Ross, "He was disturbed by the war in Vietnam, by segregation and by racism. Not afraid to speak openly in the pulpit on these subjects each Sunday... Frank Ross did not mince words. Yet... there was an optimism that we were going to be alright, that we need not be afraid."<sup>23</sup>

In a sermon preached on July 5, 1964, the Sunday following the enactment of the Civil Rights Act, Ross preached boldly about his own understanding of how the Act would strike directly—and positively in his estimation—at the heart of "customs and traditions of long-standing."<sup>24</sup> Ross uses two thoughtful tools in this sermon that speak to his love and care of his congregation as well as his passion for the Act and its implications.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>24</sup> Frank M. Ross, "Sermon on the Sixth Sunday after Trinity" July 5, 1964.



First, Ross aligns himself with his congregation. Ross was keenly aware that while Tuttle, McGill and others had similar beliefs about Civil Rights, many others in the parish did not. By using the word “we” throughout, by reminding that he, too was “raised in the South—and not the New South of Atlanta either but in the coastal, rural areas of Eastern North Carolina,” Ross reminds the congregation that he is one of them, not an outsider critically looking in.<sup>25</sup> He mentions his lineage, grandfathers that fought for the south in the Civil War, farmers who were undereducated for lack of money. He reminds them he was once a member of the segment of the population that once saw segregation as useful. In this way he gives the congregation an opportunity to see that as his heart changed, so too can theirs.

The second tool he uses is to name the fears of his congregants. Having lived and served his people for four years at that point, Ross knows his congregation and he knows why the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is frightening to them. He names it: “We have lived in the south for many years with a different way of doing things,” “this... will demand of us a major re-adjustment in our way of living.”<sup>26</sup> He uses these fears as a launching point to help them understand why they must continue to move forward, both in society and in the Kingdom of God, reminding them in the end that Christ died to free us from death and that because of this freedom, we have nothing to fear.

Theologically speaking, at the risk of elevating him beyond his station, Frank Ross’ attempt to remind his congregation that he is with and among them follows well God’s choice to be among humankind in the person of Jesus Christ. By reminding his congregation that he is from among them, that he speaks and thinks as they do, Ross homiletically lives out a notion of community that puts pastor and people on equal footing. He is a leader among rather than a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

leader over in a way not dissimilar to God's choice to lead from among. Ross models good discipleship in this way, drawing people along by convincing them of how similar their paths and lives are. Notable to Ross' preaching life was his tenacity in continuing to preach these difficult-to-swallow messages, even when it became clear that his parish would prefer him to return to comfortable words.

During his time as the pastor of a church in Detroit, Reinhold Niebuhr kept a journal that was later published as *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, a book intended for clergy struggling through their early calls. In an entry from 1926, he talks about a local pastor who has "lost his pastorate". Niebuhr's reflections on the reasons for the man's dismissal speak directly to the point of both knowing one's congregation and presenting difficult messages in a way that the congregation, of differing opinions, can understand and take in. Niebuhr addresses the notion that it is not always easy to do when a preacher is full of conviction and passion for Gospel-centered truths.

You can't rush into a congregation which has been fed from its very infancy on the individualistic ethic of Protestantism and which is immersed in a civilization where ethical individualism runs riot, and expect to develop a social conscience among the people in two weeks... Of course it is not easy to speak the truth in love without losing part of the truth, and therefore one ought not to be too critical of those who put their emphasis on truth rather than on love... Perhaps if [pastors] would learn nothing else but to be less emotional and challenging in the pulpit and more informative and educational not only in the pulpit but in their work with smaller groups, they could really begin to change the viewpoints and perspectives of their people.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, Harper's Ministers Paperback Library ; RD 311 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 85.

Niebuhr's observation is both wise and difficult for a passionate preacher to accept. For many preacher-pastors who feel strongly about Gospel-based lessons on human rights, prophetic preaching is dramatic and should carry its own weight. The congregation should believe and be changed by the words of the message. But herein lies the crux of preaching these difficult messages: more often than not, as in the case of Niebuhr's colleague, the congregation is not immediately changed. Furthermore, the congregation is angered or frustrated by vehemence from the pulpit that appears to devalue beliefs they have upheld for generations. Walter Brueggemann makes a similar claim to Niebuhr's, though in different language. He says, "the preacher's task, I submit, is to *re-text* this community: to turn the imagination and practice of the community back to its most elemental assurances and claims... the task of re-texting requires us *to attend to listening to the congregation in a particular way.*"<sup>28</sup> In both cases, and in the sermons of Coffin and Ross, the dialogue with the congregation was exactly that: dialogue. Preachers, in order to continue in pastoral relationship with their congregation and indeed, in order to effect real, lasting change, must commit to knowing and listening to the congregation, to offering a difficult message in ways that the congregation can be both challenged and nurtured. It is a process that is lengthy and requires mutual trust.

### **The Black Lives Matter Movement**

Following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014, a grassroots movement came together to ensure that in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of the general public, the lives of African-American men and women would be as valued as the lives of other human beings in the United States. The movement, known as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, began as the Twitter hashtag #blacklivesmatter in 2013 after the acquittal of police officer George

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<sup>28</sup> Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text*, 13. Italics original to the text

Zimmerman for the killing of African-American teenager Trayvon Martin. Black Lives Matter was organized as a movement by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in 2014 after the Brown and Garner deaths in order to bring together people across the country to protest discrimination and police brutality against African-American people. Blacklivesmatter.com defines the movement as “a chapter-based national organization working for the validity of Black life. We are working to (re)build the Black liberation movement.”<sup>29</sup>

Preachers responded to the BLM movement from pulpits around the country as pastors recognized the movement and the violence and death that birthed it as events that might inspire congregations into honest conversations about race and class in the United States. While leaders of African-American denominations are not themselves in agreement regarding the movement, a recent *Huffington Post* article interviewed several of these leaders about their reactions and their congregations’ reactions to the movement. Reverend Jennifer Bailey, AME pastor and founder of the Faith Matters Network, responded,

I think American Christianity has been slow to get on board with the message of BLM out of fear and uncertainty. The gospel message of Jesus was, at its core, about embodying God’s love through affirming the inherent dignity of all peoples in general, and of marginalized peoples in particular. I believe BLM is issuing a challenge to the Church to enter into a deep sense of collective lament for the loss of life, repentance for our complicity in systems of white supremacy and courage to be led by those who may not fit our “traditional” models of leadership.<sup>30</sup>

Much like in the Civil Rights Movement that preceded it, African-American pastors are not of one mind regarding the nascent Black Lives Matter movement, but as constant recipients of both overt and institutionalized racism, African-American pastors and their congregations are

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<sup>29</sup> “Black Lives Matter: Freedom & Justice for All Black Lives,” accessed August 16, 2016, <http://blacklivesmatter.com>.

<sup>30</sup> Anna Blumberg and Carol Kuruvilla, “How The Black Lives Matter Movement Changed The Church,” *The Huffington Post*, August 8, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-the-blacklivesmatter-movement-changed-the-church\\_us\\_55c4f54ce4b0923c12bcc8c0](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-the-blacklivesmatter-movement-changed-the-church_us_55c4f54ce4b0923c12bcc8c0).

preaching messages significantly different than their white counterparts. While the actual Black Lives Matter movement is not universally popular in historically black churches, the acknowledgement from the pulpit of culturally rampant racism and racial division is neither new nor surprising.

Again, as during the Civil Rights Movement some pastors of white churches are addressing the Black Lives Matter movement to varying degrees of success and to congregations with varying degrees of hostility toward the subject and the preacher. Again, as during the Civil Rights movement, these white preachers are working to bring the hearts and minds of their congregations to a place of understanding, to be supporting allies in the struggles that their African-American brothers and sisters face. The challenges faced by white preachers in preaching difficult messages of social justice to their congregations are temporal and often limited to the scope of their congregations, in contrast to the systemic, daily challenges African-American people in the United States experience.

Many white people of faith are actively addressing this divide, commonly called “all lives matter,” the refrain offered in response to “Black lives matter” by white people who feel disenfranchised or left out by the BLM movement. Mark Wingfield of Wiltshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, writes about the need for white Christians to step up and heal the divide. He says, “This is a moment when white Christians must finally and fully acknowledge the ongoing sin of racism, both in our history and in ourselves. It is not enough to say racism was America’s original sin -- though it was. We today must confess our own biases and seek to create new patterns of thought and behavior.”<sup>31</sup> The Reverend Michael Kinman, formerly Dean of the Episcopal Cathedral in St. Louis, was a powerful voice and leader of white advocates in the

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<sup>31</sup> Mark Wingfield, “Why White Clergy Must Say ‘Black Lives Matter,’” *Faith and Leadership*, accessed August 16, 2016, [https://www.faithandleadership.com/mark-wingfield-why-white-clergy-must-say-black-lives-matter?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=content&utm\\_campaign=fl\\_feature](https://www.faithandleadership.com/mark-wingfield-why-white-clergy-must-say-black-lives-matter?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=content&utm_campaign=fl_feature).

BLM Movement during the civil unrest in nearby Ferguson. In an interview by the *St. Louis American*, Kinman said, “We are just beginning to wake from a decades-long slumber...In the last year, so many issues have been raised. Police violence was the presenting issue, and it must be dealt with, but as we look into the history of these issues we see they are incredibly complex. Our entire economy was first built on the backs of black bodies that were stolen from their homes.”<sup>32</sup>

There are several challenges inherent in studying the effects of BLM-related sermons. The primary challenge is that we are currently in the midst of the movement. We will not know the long-term effects of social justice preaching in this decade until long after the decade is behind us, just as we will not understand the full scope of the movement until it is in the past. The near-term alternative is to hear the words of the sermons and see what tools preachers are using to help turn move the opinions and actions of their congregations toward Wingfield’s call for “new patterns of thought at behavior.”

A second challenge to studying the effects of preaching sermons related to Black Lives Matter to white congregations is that there are not many to choose from. Noting the thousands of sermons preached in the United States each week, few of them are readily accessible. Among the handful that can be accessed via internet, word of mouth, or direct ask, I found that in the three years since the movement took root, few white preachers have attempted to bring the subject of Black Lives Matter into their pulpits in any meaningful way.

The third challenge is perhaps the most significant. While BLM is a national movement designed to bring awareness to the entire country about the plight of African-American men and women, it is not a universally accepted movement. There are many who do not even accept it as

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<sup>32</sup> Chris King, “Rev. Kinman Says St. Louis is ‘Blessed’ by Young Black Lives Matter Leaders,” *St. Louis American*, accessed January 26, 2017, [http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local\\_news/article\\_ce201bf6-3eac-11e5-8574-4bee28b3dc54.html](http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/article_ce201bf6-3eac-11e5-8574-4bee28b3dc54.html).

a movement but as a flash-in-the-pan that will quiet down over time. Again, only time will tell how much effect this movement has on the country as a whole. In the meantime, pairing BLM sermons with Civil Rights era sermons as conversation partners to glean wisdom for preaching human rights is a worthy exercise. It is also to be noted that there are many good sermons and worthy preachers addressing human rights and social justice without using the phrase “black lives matter.” At this stage in its existence, preaching BLM is not a litmus test for appropriate congregational social justice response, it is a movement that has inspired some thoughtful political and theological discussion.

*The Reverend Casey Kloehn*

*Monterrey, California*

In December of 2014, as BLM was beginning to gain momentum as a social media movement, Casey Kloehn was a seminarian and candidate for orders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America living in Davis, California, serving as the Lutheran Campus Minister for University of California Davis. In a sermon that she preached for a local congregation, Bethlehem Lutheran in Monterrey, California, she used homiletical tools very similar to those used by preachers mentioned above during the Civil Rights Movement.

Beginning with Isaiah 40.1-11, Kloehn teaches her congregation about the power of lament, and specifically listen to the lament of African-American men and women as they cry out about their lives lived under oppression. Kloehn is a young woman and a daughter of the congregation and uses both of these facts to her advantage. She reflects back to a former beloved pastor from the parish.

I grew up in those pews while Ray Hartzell stood here. And if word got back to Pastor Ray—let alone Jesus—that I had the privilege to stand before you this morning and I did

not cry out in mourning about the depth of the racial injustice that has been and is being perpetrated in this our great nation, I would be mortified. Pastor Ray stood here and proclaimed the good news of Jesus the Christ while never letting me forget that, once I'd heard it, I could never be the same.<sup>33</sup>

With this short paragraph, she reminds the congregation that she “sits” among them and places herself within the collective history of the church. She reminds them that they are known. She also reminds them that the parish’s history is rooted in Gospel-based justice work.

From this place of familiarity, Kloehn is able to push harder with the congregation on the realities she understands as counter to that Gospel-based work. She details the four most recent incidents of police violence and the outcomes of the trials, interlacing that reality with a well-researched quote from Martin Luther King jr, effectively connecting the Black Lives Matter to the Civil Rights struggle, with which many congregants would likely be familiar and in agreement.

From here, Kloehn charges the congregation to be bold in their voice and actions, reminding them that “there is going to be work. There are going to be tears. There is going to be discomfort. But there is going to be life.”<sup>34</sup>

The theological implications of the movement of Kloehn’s sermon could potentially contain some pitfalls but, because of her careful attention, appear to have worked out in her favor. The Biblical images that come to mind are first of the young Jesus teaching elders in the Temple in the second chapter of Luke. This reminds the congregation that—much like Frank Ross—she is one of them, not separate or above, as Jesus does as he teaches in his “Father’s house.”<sup>35</sup> Treated carefully, this biblical model of the young child coming home to teach the

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<sup>33</sup> Casey Kloehn, “What Shall I Cry?,” *Casey and the Sunshine*, December 8, 2014, <http://caseyandthesunshine.blogspot.com/2014/12/what-shall-i-cry.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Luke 2.49, NRSV



elders can work well. Treated clumsily, the model moves more toward another image, this from all three synoptic Gospels. Jesus is run out of his hometown, unable to teach or perform miracles there, and declares, “Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house.”<sup>36</sup> While it is unlikely that the congregation would literally run Kloehn out of the nave, reminding the congregation of her childhood and connections to the parish’s recent past could potentially serve to discredit in the minds of the congregation her due to her own youth and inexperience.

Through these techniques, situating herself within the congregation, connecting with a familiar past, and offering a word of hope alongside the reality, Kloehn could effectively move the congregation closer toward an understanding of their own complicity in and possible response to racism in common culture. She appears to navigate the waters of her youthful connections with the parish gracefully, thereby successfully becoming a prophet in her own hometown.

### *The Reverend Stephen Muncie*

#### *Brooklyn Heights, New York*

Stephen Muncie is recently retired from 12 years as the rector of Grace Church, Brooklyn Heights, New York after a 34 year career in ministry in the Episcopal Church. Grace is a nearly 170 year old historic parish in Brooklyn. The December 2014 rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement coincided with the parish's annual foundation celebration, two seemingly disparate facts that Muncie wove together in his sermon for the day.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Matt 13.57, NRSV

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Muncie, “Our Deadly, Immoral Wilderness,” accessed March 2, 2017, <http://www.gracebrooklyn.org/serve/sermons/our-deadly-immoral-wilderness/>.

Muncie begins with the story of the parish's founding 166 years before, weaving in the parish history with the nation's history, reminding the congregation of milestones of the Mexican-American War, the cholera epidemic, Civil War, abolition of slavery, women's suffrage. When he gets to the present day, "still here on these beautiful heights still opening our doors for worship", he notes that "the world around us is not as different as we might imagine," reminding the congregation that the United States is still fighting wars and epidemic disease and we are still fighting for equal rights for oppressed people, particularly African Americans.<sup>38</sup>

From here, Muncie moves into the Gospel for the day, Mark 1.1-8, John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness. Again playing with "then and now," Muncie describes John the Baptist as "all those street preachers the New Yorker likes to poke fun at – a cartoonish figure whose religious rants are meant to be ignored. But in today's Gospel, John is not ignored. He is not passed by. He is not the object of society's ridicule but the focus of his nation's deep longing for change."<sup>39</sup>

Muncie's estimation of John's proclamation and fate continues to parallel throughout the sermon, interspersed with powerful images of recent young men felled by police violence. The turning point of the sermon comes when the preacher asks the question, "You may be thinking, what does any of this sad history have to do with Advent, or John the Baptist, or baptism, or me?"<sup>40</sup> and then promptly answers it with both a call to action and reminder of baptismal vows.

I am here to tell you, everything. Everything we claim to believe in this church today is an affirmation that God is always calling us to repent, always calling us to change direction, always calling us to respect the dignity of every human being. We cannot do this if we do not hear the crying in the wilderness, the crying of protesters on the streets,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

the crying of mothers, and fathers, and children – and of an entire nation - who have lost black men to untimely, unnecessary death.<sup>41</sup>

In his sermon, Muncie literally practices what he is preaching, while he is preaching it. He becomes the prophetic voice in the wilderness, crying out about those things to come. His voice offers both a bleak picture of death in the nation and also the hope of what can come if people listen to those prophetic cries. Muncie embodies the figure of John the Baptist in his own pulpit, imploring people to repentance, turning back toward God and a better, more Gospel-centered way of being.

Stephen Muncie's sermon was given to a congregation that he had served as rector for 10 years, and whom he knew well. At the time of the sermon, the congregation had recently completed a renovation and restoration of their historic worship space and were looking toward the future of their congregation. Muncie appropriately capitalized on both the relationship and the forward movement to challenge the congregation into new visions of how they would serve the people and the Gospel in their next chapter.

### **In the Preaching Toolbox**

Several homiletical scholars have written on ways in which the preacher can approach the task of challenging congregations with difficult truths. These writings are tools for the preacher to pull from her toolbox when needed.

*P.T. Forsyth: "Take home anew the Gospel"*

P.T. Forsyth, congregationalist pastor and theologian, in the 1907 Beecher Lecture at Yale University, says "[the preacher] is not a mere reporter, not a mere lecturer, on sacred things.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

He is not merely illuminative, he is augmentative. His work is not to enlighten simply, but to empower and enhance. Men [sic] as they leave him should be not only clearer but greater, not only surer but stronger, not only interested, not only instructed not only affected, but fed and increased."<sup>42</sup> Forsyth's order is a tall one and may be in line more with the expectations of a homiletical-pastoral leader than the reality of the position is really able to hold. It is, however, an expectation that many-- if not all—preachers rub against in the expanse of a preaching career. Self-differentiated preachers, those who can appropriately separate their emotions surrounding themselves and their vocational calling from their observations about how to do the job set in front of them, are often able to understand that changing the hearts of the people, to leave them clearer, stronger, instructed, and increased is a goal to strive toward, though not a measure of self-worth or professional prowess.

The stakes are higher and the task at hand more difficult when the preacher is trying to move the needle of a congregation in a controversial or socio-political subject. As discussed previously, preachers who aim directly for the goals P.T. Forsyth outlines without better understanding the nuances of both subject and congregation may find themselves quickly relieved of the burden of a congregation to whom they might preach.

In the same lecture, Forsyth also addresses the problem of preachers who preach their own agendas, without paying attention to the agenda of the Gospel or the needs of the congregation, a danger for preachers who believe too deeply in their own voice rather than allowing the voice of the text or, indeed, the voice of God to ring through her words. Forsyth warns preachers that “[t]rue preaching presupposes a Church, and not merely a public. And

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<sup>42</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pastor: A Reader for Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 137.

wherever the Church fades into that of a mere religious club or association you have a decay in preaching. Wherever the people are but a religious lecture society the pulpit sinks.”<sup>43</sup>

Forsyth implores preachers to remember their task, both the task named above, to empower, enhance, effect and increase, but even more than that, to do so with the Gospel, the weight and power of which will do the work it is intended to do if the preacher brings it to the people. The preacher, says Forsyth, must be engaged in constantly bringing the Gospel to people and opening it for them. “[The preacher’s] power lies not in initiation but in appropriation. And his work is largely to assist the Church in a fresh appropriation of its own Gospel... The preacher is not there to astonish people with the unheard of; he is there to revive them with what they have long heard... The church, by the preacher’s aid, has to realize its own faith, to take home anew its own Gospel.”<sup>44</sup>

### *Kelly Miller Smith: Pre-Proclamation*

Given nearly 35 years ago, Kelly Miller Smith’s series of Beecher Lectures, published as *Social Crisis Preaching*, continues to offer advice relevant to preaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Smith offers a four part strategy for the creation of the social justice sermon. The first of these parts is the most relevant to this conversation. Here Smith offers what he calls the “‘pre-proclamation’ function of the preacher.”<sup>45</sup> Perhaps the most complicated part of Smith’s strategy, “pre-proclamation” calls for the preacher to be involved in constant social justice and social crisis work. A preacher who is involved in the work and also well-studied in the issues around the causes she is involved in will, according to Smith, find better reception for her words

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>45</sup> Kelly Miller Smith, *Social Crisis Preaching*, Lyman Beecher Lectures ; 1983 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 80.

by the time of the homiletical event. “Communication begins not when the text and sermon title are announced,” posits Smith, “but when the minister functions in the community in relation to critical social circumstances and shows social sensitivity prior to proclamation.”<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps another way to understand Smith’s notion of “pre-proclamation” is as a solid reminder to the preacher to avoid blindsiding his congregation. A pastor who is actively and publicly involved in the social activism of the local community and well-read on national and international struggles of the least, the lost and the lonely, will find those things naturally extended into his preaching. The congregation that has watched him engaged in these ministries and knows that he is paying attention to world events will expect such things to be present in his preaching. In this way, both preacher and congregation are receptive to the way the Word of God will be naturally woven to those things foremost in the mind of the pastor.

*Tony Campolo and Michael Battle: Modeling truth before preaching*

In their dialogical exploration of racial reconciliation in mainline churches, *The Church Enslaved*, Tony Campolo and Michael Battle build upon this idea that theology of liberation and reconciliation must be lived before it can be preached. “We must first model truth before speaking about it,” they offer, “We must worship truth before doing theology.”<sup>47</sup> For Battle and Campolo, this argument is centered largely on how white congregations can approach the process of becoming congregations of true racial reconciling and healing, but the theory stands for the preacher of social justice as well. The old adage “practice what you preach” applies here, but only inasmuch as one practices first. A preacher who is modeling practices of social justice for and with the congregation might find much more traction when it comes time to speak a

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Tony Campolo and Michael Battle, *The Church Enslaved: A Spirituality of Racial Reconciliation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005), 126.

difficult word from the pulpit. “The model,” Battle and Campolo posit, “becomes a prophetic framework for understanding the sacred.”<sup>48</sup> The sermon becomes the flesh on the framework.

*Leonora Tubbs Tisdale: Speaking Truth in Love*

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale outlines ten sermon design strategies for preaching difficult “prophetic” messages. She opens the chapter with an admission from her early preaching experience, “I... quickly learned that the prophets’ style of confrontational, head-on witness didn’t play very well in the parish. Indeed, if I addressed my congregation as “you cows of Bashan” (Amos 4.1) or ‘you brood of vipers’ (Matt 3.70), I doubt they would have listened to me at all.”<sup>49</sup> All ten of her strategies are well-presented and highly relevant to any preacher attempting to preach hard truths. Three of the strategies are particularly applicable here.<sup>50</sup>

Tisdale reminds her readers about “Speaking Truth *in Love*.”<sup>51</sup> Building trust between preacher and community helps the preacher gain traction when it is time to bring difficult messages of social justice. Much like Tisdale’s example, a preacher who comes only with words of challenge without first establishing a rapport of love and trust with the people he serves will find sermons falling on deaf ears. Casey Kloehn’s sermon to the church of her youth has many elements of speaking truth to love in the way she connects with the parish as one of their own, raised up to both do the work and to bring the word.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 41.

<sup>50</sup> Tisdale’s other four strategies are “Starting with the Familiar and Moving toward the Unfamiliar,” “Standing in the Shoes of Another and Viewing the World from a Different Perspective,” “Standing *With* the Congregation Rather than *Opposite* the Congregation,” and “Inviting Someone Personally Involved in the Concern to Participate in Preaching on It”, 41-55.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 42. Italics original to text.

Another strategy offered by Tisdale is “Using a Congregation’s History as a Bridge to a Prophetic Vision for its Future.”<sup>52</sup> “One of the realities of congregations is that people are often far more likely to embrace a new vision for the future if they see it as being in continuity with valued traditions of the past.”<sup>53</sup> In addition to being good preaching strategy, this is good pastoral strategy. Continuity with the past missions of a congregation as well as continuity with theological and biblical values provides a way for generations to support each other as the torch is continually passed. The natural extension of this into the pulpit provides the groundwork for preachers to offer difficult truths to their congregants with connection to who they have been over those generations. Stephen Muncie's connection of “one hundred sixty-six years of faithful worship in this beautiful place of grace” is a bridge reminding the people in his congregation that those 166 years were both preparation and nourishment needed to respond to the difficult truth of police violence against African-American people.<sup>54</sup>

A final example from Tisdale's ten strategies is “Using a Congregation's Current Mission Involvement as a Bridge for Prophetic Witness.”<sup>55</sup> In this strategy, Tisdale reminds the preacher that yet another way to build a bridge is by reminding the congregation of its current commitment to mission and outreach and how that commitment is deeply connected to other social justice needs for alleviating pain and suffering.<sup>56</sup> Making connections to what the parish is already doing, according to Tisdale, has several good possible outcomes. First, it affirms the congregation's current good works, reminding them that they are already engaged in difficult problems. Second, it helps them entertain larger ideas by reminding them of any smaller local ideas they are already successfully tackling. Finally, says Tisdale, people need reminding of the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>54</sup> Muncie, “Our Deadly, Immoral Wilderness.”

<sup>55</sup> Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 53.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



direct link between works of charity and activism in the public arena. In this way, they can begin to understand activism as extensions of their charitable works, and vice versa.<sup>57</sup>

### Conclusion

In his ruminations about Christianity and ministering early in his career, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote,

Modern Industry, particularly America industry, is not Christian. The economic forces which move it are hardly qualified at a single point by really ethical considerations. If, while it is in the flush of its early triumphs, it may seem impossible to bring it under the restraint of moral law, it may strengthen faith to know that life without law destroys itself. If the church can do nothing else, it can bear witness to the truth until such a day as bitter experience will force a recalcitrant civilization to a humility which it does not now possess.<sup>58</sup>

Niebuhr presents painful though powerful lofty vision of the church as the one bearing witness of the truth and a very low opinion of “recalcitrant civilization” and its lack of humility. Niebuhr's assessment of the role of the church in America early in his ministerial career, while bleak, speaks to the fact that role of powerful homiletical voices for social and civil rights have been a necessity in our country for some time. But while the necessity of that role is not in question, the practicality of it is not always so obvious. To keep a church running, a pastor can often feel like she must keep the peace among members of the congregation. She must not ruffle feathers of large donors or offend the parents of young children. There is an added pressure of the need to be able to pastorally care for congregants whose opinions differ. It is not uncommon for a pastor to find herself at the receiving end of personal ire from parishioners who disagree with a difficult message from the pulpit. Providing pastoral care to those who are in deep disagreement can be a

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 153.

painful or impossible task if the recipient of that care is not willing to allow those bridges to be crossed even in times of crisis. If the pastor gives a difficult, politically minded message on Sunday morning, will he still be welcome at the bedside of a congregant with different opinions the next afternoon?

New Testament scholar Brian Blount, in a sermon to Princeton Theological Seminary students, said to graduating students, ready to move into professional ministry,

Believe me, there will come a time when you start to worry in the same way. Worry about offending parishioners, threatening the budget, offending powerful people on the session, in the presbytery, on the deacons' board, in the bishop's office, in the mayor's office, on the school board, on the chamber of commerce, in the PTS community, and you start to think, you know, "I've got a family. I want to have friends. I want people to like me. I want to keep my job or secure it for a long time." ... if that's what you've graduated to do, then maybe your presbytery can use you, maybe your bishop can use you, maybe your church can use you.

But I'm not so sure God can use you.

... God needs soldiers, not used up followers.<sup>59</sup>

While Niebuhr and Blount agree on the necessity for this prophetic witness to both the transformative power of God at work in the world and also to the broken world that needs that transformative work so desperately, the reality that Blount outlines and Bruggemann echoes still lingers: someone must still keep the church open and full of people so that there are people to actually hear the message that needs to be heard.

It is a dangerous conundrum that sits heavy in the heart of the most committed pastor-preachers. Our vocations require many hats, to be many things to many people. The balance is neither easy nor obvious, though the challenge of it is what keeps many pastors committed to the work.

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<sup>59</sup> Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 50–51.

Recent conversations with theologian Robert Franklin of Candler School of Theology have helped identify a metaphor that serves as a better descriptor of this challenge. What if, rather than trying to strike Bruggemann's suggested balance, pastors are looking instead to weave a tapestry from the influences of Gospel, parish, and society? Attempting to achieve balance within a system that is out of balance by its very nature-- that is, money and social influence have always held more political power than Gospel and social justice—might be an exercise in constant frustration and capitulation. Attempting to achieve balance within this framework might turn Gospel work into compromise. If rather, pastors are working within their congregations to talk about the warp and weft of what matters to them, we might find ourselves able to move further toward a purposeful *imbalance* that favors both prophetic preaching and prophetic action.

Through this study of some foundational white preachers during the Civil Rights Movement and how preachers during the recent Black Lives Matter Movement have used similar tools, a few key similarities have arisen that can help the modern preacher in her quest to bring a social justice Gospel to her congregation.

First, take time to know the people. Movement toward human rights and the opportunities to stand up for social justice are, at this point in history, myriad and neverending. While the desire to move into a community and quickly change the course of an ambivalent, lax congregation is intense, particularly for pastors new to ministry or new to church leadership, there will be crises in the future that will need the church's attention. In order to preach—and to hear!-- difficult messages from the pulpit, the preacher and congregation need to have mutual trust established. If humanitarian crises are immediate and need the church's attention before that rapport is developed, the clergy can take the opportunity to find sympathetic congregants

that will develop on-the-ground responses that help the church community move towards a better understanding of the activism or values that support the work they are doing.

This community of mutual trust is vital to maintaining healthy clergy-congregation relationships and crucial to the clergy's ability to lead the congregation into a better understanding of the Gospel as Forsyth reminds us, not to teach them something completely new, but to teach them how to see the work of the Gospel with new eyes, in this case, eyes of compassion and justice.

The second similarity follows on the heels of the first. The preacher needs to take time to know the material, including the full political picture of the social justice crisis at hand, local actions already underway, both sides of the difficult arguments. In addition to this, the pastor should be well versed in what scripture and theologians have to say about the issue and where any factions in the parish stand on the issue and whether denominational boards and hierarchies have made statements on the issue.

Being well-prepared and well-versed in the full scope of the issue helps to establish that trust mentioned above. The preacher who is speaking a message of truth that is supported by thoughtful preparation and able to withstand scrutiny should find himself in a position to continue to stand up for the principles he preaches. This kind of careful preparation helps the preacher move the needle of the congregation from skeptical to convinced to actively working towards reconciliation.

I continue to find assistance in the metaphor of weaving. Before a tapestry is created, it is little more than a pile of string, minimally useful on its own. When the warp is loaded onto the loom, string begins to take shape. When the weft is added, string becomes tapestry. Within the tapestry there is art, color, design, beauty and usefulness.

When our congregations believe that only string or even only warp is necessary for Christian community life, we miss the opportunity to become tapestry. Weaving the weft into our communities takes time and patience. Through that careful work, done together, our congregations can begin to see the value of being more than a pile of string. The weft unites us, makes us more beautiful, and makes us more useful at Gospel work.

At the risk of overplaying it, the weaving metaphor can be taken a step or two further: Even a well-woven tapestry can lose strings from time to time. A lost string or two in a strong piece might not affect the integrity of the whole, but it might alter the design or weaken the structure. The loss of many strings, as a congregation or pastor loses its vision or begins quarreling about the work at hand, can ruin the whole in both art and structure. This work of weaving is not one time work for congregation or congregational leadership, completed and cut off the loom. The work requires constant reminding, re-teaching and recommitting to the Gospel principles woven into it. More plainly: Pastors that do the work of helping their congregations commit to social justice will lose congregants who disagree or do not approve of the direction of the church. Every person that leaves a community leaves a hole with her absence. The holes need attending to by the pastor. Prophetic work is more than a sermon or even a sermon series. It is a constant process of teaching, listening, learning, and loving the people of the congregation into a new vision.

The weft of preaching will not weave well without strings of deep pastoral attention woven in right beside. The pastor attempting to do this work must be attentive to the needs of her congregation even while the work of moving the congregation toward a deeper understanding of the social call of the Gospel is happening.

On a personal note, while researching and writing for this work, I stumbled into an almost embarrassingly obvious reality that to my dismay did not appear in any of the texts I was reading. In my opening paragraphs, I mentioned a trusted colleague that helped open my heart to the reality of the sermon I needed to preach in light of BLM. At other times, colleagues and ordained friends have encouraged my ministry and lovingly criticized it, lifted me up and took me to task. My advisers tell me the truth in kindness, even when it is hard to hear. It is an obvious reality that must be constantly borne in mind: the value of trusted advisers from outside the parish, be they friends, professional colleagues, or mentors, cannot be overemphasized. Anecdotal evidence tells us that time and time again, clergy who “go it alone,” particularly through congregational change, find their work harder and sometimes even impossible. Those who are isolated have higher rates of burnout and failure. As people of Christ, we are called to be part of a Body and never called into this work alone. If we believe in the social justice call of the Gospel, as pastors, our advisers should be as diverse a group as we can muster so that we can constantly be attentive to the full spectrum of human need and constantly be refilling our wells with new information for how to lead in grace, strength, and humility.

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