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DEFYING EXPECTATIONS:
ONE FEMALE PREACHER'S EXPLORATION
OF PREACHING PERFORMANCE, LISTENER EXPECTATIONS,
AND EMOTION

by
AMY LEA WILES

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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ABSTRACT

Defying Expectations: One Female Preacher's Exploration of Preaching Performance, Listener Expectations, and Emotion

by

Amy Wiles

In this thesis, one female preacher explores preaching performance, listener expectation, and emotion. Using exploratory research methodology, the thesis seeks to answer the following questions in a particular context: What are listener expectations of sermon delivery? Do listeners hold differing sermon delivery expectations for female preachers? How does meeting or straying from these expectations affect receptivity of the message? Data was collected through interviews with pastors, focus group questionnaires, and feedback forms of respondents who responded to sermons preached with different performance choices by both a female preacher and a male preacher. The results revealed a bias around performances related to emotion. On this basis, preachers would benefit from further research in the areas of emotion and preaching performance for the sake of expanding interpretations of Scripture and performances of the Word.

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CHAPTER 1

THE LIMITS OF GENDERED PREACHING PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS

Introduction

In my ten years of ordained ministry, I have always felt accepted as a female preacher. My voice has been welcomed. My sermons have been affirmed. Listeners have been encouraging and supportive of my preaching. One might assume, then, that my ability to stand in the pulpit and preach unhindered has been evidence of listeners' full acceptance of my preaching performance.

And yet, comments over the years, often camouflaged in praise, have made me wonder about the boundaries of preaching performance for women defined by the listener. For example, I have preached a sermon about justice only to hear a listener say, "That was good! I like it when you get a little 'feisty.'" Another time, I preached a sermon about hope, only to hear a listener say, "I like to see a pretty girl bring a little 'hellfire and damnation.'" Another time, I preached a sermon about liberation, only to hear the listener express concern that I was about to "lose control" and wonder if I would be able to continue to lead the worship service. These comments did not address what was said but rather the way I said it and the emotions I expressed. Furthermore, they used language laced with female stereotypes. I wondered if hidden performance expectations and biases might be influencing the listeners' experience with the sermon.

I approached this doctoral thesis curious about these particular experiences. At first, I specifically wondered about women's performance of emotion in the pulpit and

how listeners' experience and expectations influenced reception of those performances. As I combed through literature exploring preaching performance and female preachers' experience, I found limited literature that answered my initial wonderings. No literature was found that specifically addressed emotional performances of women from the pulpit.

Therefore, my wonderings expanded. I began to ask broader questions so that I began from a posture of discovery rather than assumption. What are listener expectations of sermon delivery? Do listeners hold differing sermon delivery expectations for female preachers? How does meeting or straying from these expectations affect receptivity of the message? My growing curiosity compelled me to begin a journey of larger exploration that included not only emotion, but other aspects of delivery including voice, gesture, eye contact, pacing, timing, and body.

I was surprised, then, that in collecting and analyzing data from focus group that the research ultimately led me back to where I began. The research did, in fact, reveal a performance expectation regarding emotion held by the listeners. Furthermore, these expectations were different for women than men. In many ways, this thesis was the first step in confirming something that felt like a hunch—an experience that is rarely discussed by homileticians. The discoveries regarding emotion not only affirmed my hunch, but inspired me to embrace my own preaching performance choices regarding emotion, even if they might push beyond listener expectation.

Statement of the Problem

Proclamation is a performative event, where preachers' very bodies become the mediums through which God performs the Word. In this way, preaching is an event that includes not only aspects of the voice, such as pitch, volume, tone, and inflection, but also elements of the body, which include gesture, movement, facial expression, eye contact, and appearance. Therefore, faithful preachers tend to the way they perform and embody God's Word through public reading of Scripture and preaching so they can clearly communicate what they themselves have heard from God.¹

And yet, female preachers have been restricted in the choices they make when performing the Word. Women's preaching performance choices have been influenced by the listener's performance expectations. While women have found creative ways to perform in the pulpit despite these limitations, they have been influenced by what listeners will and will not accept.

At the same time, these limitations on women's preaching performance have hindered the listener's ability to experience the full range of possible interpretations of God's Word. If only certain tones of voice, volume, facial expression, timing and pacing, gesture, eye contact, appearance, and emotion are accepted in the pulpit, then the listeners also limit their ability to accept certain oral interpretations. Thus, they limit their ability to hear the Word from God.

Using exploratory research methodology, this thesis will research the following questions: What are listener expectations of sermon delivery in my particular context? Do

¹ Chapter 2 will expand on this theological understanding of preaching performance.

listeners hold differing sermon delivery expectations for female preachers? How does meeting or straying from these expectations affect receptivity of the message?

Preaching Performance Expectations

Throughout American Protestant history, preaching performance choices have been made in conversation with dominant expectations of masculinity. Accepted expressions of masculinity, particularly white, heterosexual masculinity, have defined accepted preaching performances. Many times, these masculine expectations have been enforced and reinforced covertly. As Roxanne Mountford writes in *The Gendered Pulpit*, the masculine tradition of preaching performance has been passed on “most often through the smooth surface of universal advice untroubled by the specificity of gender.”² Nevertheless, analysis of preaching manuals point to clear expectations and norms in regards to performance.

Mountford’s assessment of preaching manuals dating from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century articulates expectations from the Victorian era that still filter in to today’s context. Preaching instruction in America during the late nineteenth century sought to address two stress points in the nation: the slow disestablishment of the clergy from national life and the quiet gains made by women in education, publishing, and itinerant preaching.³ Homileticians bolstered the preacher by co-opting the ideas of “muscular Christianity” that was permeating the nation leading to the creation of organizations like the Boy Scouts, YMCA, Campus Crusade for Christ,

² Roxanne Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces*. Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 2.

³ Mountford, 41.

and the Promise Keepers.⁴ Muscular Christianity equated heroism with Christian virtue and became associated with “masculine expression of piety and with various initiatives designed to make Christianity more attractive to men.”⁵ Focusing on character, muscular Christianity encouraged dedication to Christ by being “manly.” As Billy Sunday, evangelist of the early twentieth century put it, “the manliest man is the man who will acknowledge Jesus Christ.”⁶

Homileticians gave instruction in preaching with muscular Christianity in mind, focusing largely on character as a key component of successful preaching performance. For example, Richard S. Storrs, Jr. in an address to the Porter Rhetorical Society of Andover Theological Seminary described a preacher as needing “a liberal, able, and manly character; comprehensive, not partial; vigorous and self-reliant, not dependent on others; masculine without severity, not effeminate or weak.”⁷ Manliness for Storrs was described as having courage, loving the outdoors, and being a chivalrous hero. As Mountford describes,

Storrs’s preaching is fundamentally a man at the height of masculinity: he is bold, gallant, natural, earnest, physically fit—a Christian soldier doing battle with the secular world and conquering whole cultures for Christ, yet full of sympathy for those around him. Storr’s preacher is a manly man in the American Victorian ideal, a man who, as Beecher puts it, “bring(s) his spirit to bear upon men” through the force of his personality.⁸

⁴ Mountford, 45.

⁵ Mountford, 45.

⁶ Mountford, 45.

⁷ Mountford, 51.

⁸ Mountford, 54.

Austin Phelps, the Chair of Sacred Rhetorical Society and Homiletics at Andover Theological Seminary, was another homiletician of that period who shared similar ideas to Storrs. He describes the importance of the preacher's character in masculine terms, comparing the preacher to a soldier:

The pulpit should be a battery, well-armed and well worked. Every shot from it should reach a vulnerable spot somewhere. And to be such it must be, in every sense of the word, well manned. The gunner who works it must know what and where the vulnerable spots are. He must be neither an angel nor a brute. He must be a scholar and a gentleman, but not these only. He must be a man, who knows men, and who will never suffer the great tides of human opinion and feeling to ebb and flow around him uncontrolled because unobserved.⁹

Phelps saw the preacher as a leader, a man of virtue, strength, and courage.

As accepted preachers and pulpits were described with accepted masculine traits, unacceptable preaching was described in unacceptable forms of masculinity or effeminate terms. Again, Phelps serves as an example, writing that the pulpit “must hold the place of chief honor in the policy of Christian effort, or it can hold no place in which it shall either command or deserve a pittance of respect.”¹⁰ He warned against the pulpit losing its “manly rigor” arguing, “Make it [the pulpit] subordinate and you make it effeminate.”¹¹ In his writing, Phelps gives characteristics that emasculate the pulpit, such as the image of the preachers as priest, the use of “poetic sentiments” in the pulpit, preaching to social ills as opposed to individual salvation, and preaching primarily to stir the emotions.¹²

⁹ Mountford, 56.

¹⁰ Mountford, 56.

¹¹ Mountford, 56.

¹² Mountford, 56.

Preachers of the nineteenth century were not only encouraged to celebrate masculine traits and degrade feminine traits in regards to character, but they were also encouraged to extend this idea to embodiment and delivery choices. For example, Henry Ward Beecher in his *Lectures on Preaching* described the importance of coming outside of the pulpit so that people felt the “force” of the bodies and contested that preachers are more “manly” outside of the pulpit.¹³ Austin Phelps argued that a preacher’s power depends on his stature, both cultural and physical, writing, “Physical presence is an important factor in the creation of influence with the popular mind. . . . Men of large frame and erect carriage have the advantage over diminutive men in competitive labors.”¹⁴ John Broadus, another homiletician of the time, emphasizes the male body, encouraging strenuous exercise, “especially muscular exercise, and particularly such as develops the chest, and promotes an easy erectness of position.”¹⁵ Broadus wrote, “Let the physical condition be as vigorous as possible,” praising a “forceful voice with penetrating power.”¹⁶ Charles Spurgeon warns to avoid “the method of annunciation said to be “very ladylike [or] delicate.”¹⁷ He encourages preachers to “speak boldly and command attention at the outset by your manly tones.”¹⁸

¹³ Mountford, 67.

¹⁴ Mountford, 67.

¹⁵ Mountford, 67.

¹⁶ Amy P. McCullough, *Her Preaching Body: Conversations about Identity, Agency, and Embodiment among Contemporary Female Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 103.

¹⁷ McCullough, 103-04.

¹⁸ McCullough, 104.

Similar comments continue in preaching instruction by homileticians in the twentieth century as well. For instance, in the 1940s, Andrew Watterson Blackwood admonishes preachers to control their bodies, otherwise they “might sound like a girl in the first grade,” and Arthur Allen warns against displaying signs of “effeminacy.”¹⁹ In 1985, James W. Cox relays a student’s anxiety over his voice writing,

I heard of a male theology student who spoke in a feminine, falsetto voice and saw that as a formidable problem for his aspirations as a preacher. A speech therapist learned the student had affected his falsetto as a defense, from the time his classmates had laughed at him as an adolescent when his voice was changing. The therapist, by using special electronic equipment, enabled him to hear his true voice, and he was liberated.²⁰

As Mountford says, Cox describes the “true” preacher as being liberated from the feminine and goes on to quote Charles R. Brown in a 1922 Yale lecture who says that a man should occasionally quit the pulpit to be a whole man.

Through analysis of preaching instruction, it is clear that a particular expression of masculinity has defined preaching performance. Accepted masculine preaching performances have been described as physically fit, strong, using a low voice, powerful, tall, having a large body, and forceful. Preachers are encouraged to exude a character that is bold, gallant, courageous, self-reliant, impartial, and “manly.” Most notable for results of this research, preachers have been urged to guard against being overly emotional. To restate Phelps, preachers should not stir emotions.

¹⁹ Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit*, 3.

²⁰ Mountford, 67.

Navigating Male Expectations

History has shown that accepted masculine preaching performance expectations have overlooked, hidden, or omitted female preaching. As Mountford writes, “[Female] bodies are not anticipated in the tradition; indeed for centuries, their bodies have been explicitly excluded.”²¹ Relying on the work of Brekus, Collier-Thomas, Kim, and Kienzie and Walker, Amy McCullough also describes the dilemma of the female preacher, saying,

While women have been preaching since Mary ran from the empty tomb, the history of their preaching has been discontinuous, sometimes, hidden and filled with the struggle of bearing a female body in the pulpit. For centuries church tradition argued the female body was unfit for sacred space. Cultural messages in other eras argued a woman’s voice did not belong in the public sphere. When women transgressed the boundaries to preach, they received the criticism for behaving in unbecoming ways provoking impure thoughts in male listeners, looking out of place in the pulpit, and having quieter, higher voices that could not be heard.²²

And yet, female preaching performance has existed. Women have preached and their message has been heard. How did they do it when they did not adhere to accepted preaching performance expectations? How have female preachers navigated masculine expectations knowing that their bodies and performances did not meet those expectations?

Women have had to be intentional about specific embodiment and performance choices. In *Her Preaching Body*, McCullough describes these choices as preaching habitations. She writes,

Every female preacher has faced questions about how to clothe her body, how to speak in ways that garnished acceptance by her listener, and how to move in ways

²¹ Mountford, 3.

²² McCullough, *Her Preaching Body*, 3.

that were authorized for a preacher. Knowing that audiences had to “buy them” in order to “buy” their preaching, female preachers in all eras of Christian history have calculated what types of embodied presentations might strengthen their legitimization.²³

Preaching habitations are crafted over time through experiment and practice as female preachers attempt to gain access to masculine preaching space. While each preacher’s embodiment is based on personal choice, unique context, and understanding of identity, McCullough’s work describes four broad sets of habitations throughout history which were used as avenues to legitimize female preaching: transcending women, women who act like men, virtuous women, and transgressing women.²⁴ She goes on to describe how these four habitations can take form in female preaching choices today.

Habitation choices of “transcending women” have sought to minimize the body and emphasize the leading of the Spirit. Theological tenets that separate the flesh and spirit have been used to empower and authorize preaching through the Holy Spirit while denigrating the body. McCullough explains that transcending women have historically

neutralized the fear of female sexuality by stressing the Spirit’s purifying capacity, which emptied the body of its desires. Thus, transcending women viewed themselves as containers for God, in which their physical form was immaterial to proclamation.²⁵

An example of a transcending woman habitation is found in Jemima Wilkinson, an itinerant preacher during the Revolutionary War. Wilkinson claimed that her body died after a severe illness. When she awoke, she was resurrected as the Public Universal Friend, calling her resurrected body a “tabernacle” for God. She no longer saw herself as

²³ McCullough, 38.

²⁴ McCullough, 42.

²⁵ McCullough, 44.

a woman but called herself a genderless spirit inspired to preach. To emphasize her transcendence from the body, she did not use pronouns, she kept her body veiled, and she promoted celibacy.²⁶

Contemporary, milder choices of transcending women can be seen in choices to dress in ways that hide or minimize attention to the body. Today, preachers might also make references to the body as unimportant, merely extra in considering the work of God.²⁷

Habitation choices of “women who act like men” do not transcend the body. At the same time, these preachers have made embodiment choices that distance themselves from characteristics associated with femininity to present themselves as male.

McCullough writes,

Given a history of exclusion, it seems natural that female preachers would garner recognition by emulating male counterparts. Stepping into a male-dominated arena, women had virtually no other preaching forms to observe and broad encouragement to revere masculine traits.²⁸

An example is found in Elder Lucy Smith, a popular preacher in Chicago during the first half of the century. With the title of “Overseer,” Smith was regularly described as “somewhat mannish, overweight, and hoarse.”²⁹ She kept her hair short, wore men’s clothing, and was quite tall. She also sought to keep her femaleness out of the public eye by often leaving her husband at home.³⁰ As McCullough explains, “Although never

²⁶ McCullough, 45-46.

²⁷ McCullough, 45.

²⁸ McCullough, 47.

²⁹ McCullough, 48.

³⁰ McCullough, 49.

renouncing her femaleness, Smith led with the efficiency, confidence, and competency previously associated with male pastor-preachers.”³¹

Today, the most easily accessible way for women to act like men is dressing in ways that are viewed as masculine, a choice easily seen in women wearing albs, academic robes, and versions of male suits. Masculine mannerisms are also used, such as keeping hair short and using lower octaves in vocal ranges.³²

Habitations of “virtuous women” are unlike the first two habitations. While transcending women and women who act like men seek to deflect attention from their bodies, virtuous women seek to affirm female embodiment, finding ways to preach within their femaleness. This approach fell in line with notions of womanhood developing in the nineteenth century. McCullough explains,

Rather than being cast as the more base or immoral gender, women increasingly were viewed as the more praiseworthy sex, whose moral superiority granted them the authority to preach. Purity, once attained only through habits of transcendence, now became closely associated with the female’s embodied life. Linking outward behavior to one’s inner character, the properly presented and impeccably behaved woman served as a cultural model.³³

Women no longer preached despite their femininity but rather because of it. And yet, they had to adhere to social norms primarily reserved for upper- and middle-class white women. They were modestly dressed, with voices described as “pure, unstudied eloquence” and used gestures most linked with high social standing.³⁴ The virtuous woman was connected to the familial role of wife and mother and often preached from

³¹ McCullough, 49.

³² McCullough, 50.

³³ McCullough, 51.

³⁴ McCullough, 52.

the home. Adhering to these boundaries, virtuous women “embodied a certain goodness that symbolized spiritual authority.”³⁵

An example is found in Catherine Booth, who preached as part of a husband-wife team that founded the Salvation Army. Booth used examples in preaching drawn from her life as a wife and mother. She wore simple attire with a white ruffle at the neck and bonnet on her head. Even when arguing a controversial belief, she delivered her words in a body described as “becomingly attired, graceful in form, and pleasing in manners.”³⁶

Today, the habitations of the virtuous woman are made manifest in female preachers worrying about clothing seen as too low or too short. They might be concerned about their hair looking too long or about wearing makeup. They might also use stories from personal and family life to garner trust.³⁷ The virtuous woman is always looking for the “appropriate” choice of embodiment within cultural boundaries of womanhood.

On the other hand, habitations of “transgressing women” do not stay within cultural boundaries. Like virtuous women, they do not reject or distance the feminine but take strength from defying cultural norms. As McCullough says, “they preached in unexpected, often provocative, spaces or with wild abandon involving dramatic physical movements.”³⁸ Transgressing women spoke on the streets, shouting at detractors and embracing labels of harlot or heretic. They were known to preach in scanty clothing or even without clothing to draw attention to their message. They were seen less as mothers

³⁵ McCullough, 52.

³⁶ McCullough, 52.

³⁷ McCullough, 54.

³⁸ McCullough, 54.

and wives and more as sexual beings. Preaching performance included shouting, jumping, groaning, or weeping.³⁹ Over time, the embodied choices of transgressing women helped change the expectations of womanhood. As they broke through cultural norms, their transgressing actions became more accepted. At the same time, McCullough explains a complication:

Transgressive behaviors lose their outrageous quality as the listening community grows accustomed to a preacher's repeated provocations. The woman who continuously employs the same actions risks becoming, like a virtuous woman, restrained in her established role.⁴⁰

An example is Aimee Semple McPherson, a traveling evangelist in the early twentieth century who eventually built a preaching ministry in Los Angeles. McPherson initially displayed habitations of the virtuous woman but later pushed boundaries by adding costumes and adopting tools of the dramatic stage, like props and music. As her ministry grew, she changed her physical appearance, losing weight and gradually came to look more like a Hollywood star. McCullough writes that “unlike the preacher who projected a purified version of wife and mother, McPherson placed her sexuality in plain view. Her positioning of herself as an object of sexual desire became a trademark of her preaching.”⁴¹ With her magnetic personality and charisma, McPherson tackled sexually explicit biblical passages, cast herself as the bride of Christ, and preached a sermon entitled “Be My Valentine.”⁴²

³⁹ McCullough, 55.

⁴⁰ McCullough, 56.

⁴¹ McCullough, 57.

⁴² McCullough, 57.

Today, it is harder to identify the transgressing woman because there is a variety of accepted forms of femininity. Preachers make a wider variety of choices involving anything from costumes and props to high heels, tattoos, and dyed hair. As McCullough writes, “With the witness of former transgressing preachers as foundation, female preachers track their own debatable boundaries, a moving target which can encourage experimentation, teach them limits, and enliven their preaching presence.”⁴³

As seen in the four examples of habitation, female preachers have made intentional performance choices so that the word of God is heard, despite masculine performance expectations. Throughout history, female preachers have used their voice, body, clothing, gesture, and more so that their preaching is validated. In many ways, these choices have successfully confronted the boundaries that have defined the pulpit as masculine space. Even as female embodiment and performance have been prohibited from the preaching space, the listener has received an authentic word from God. And yet, these choices have not obliterated limitations of preaching performance. Rather, they have provided the boundaries of female preaching.

Performances of emotions were not explicitly discussed in McCullough’s work, However, given the results of this thesis’ research, one would surmise that accepted performances regarding emotion have been among the performance boundaries in conversation with women’s habitation choices.

⁴³ McCullough, 58.

The Expectation of Natural Preaching

Along with instruction to be “manly,” an additional theme is found in preaching performance instruction. Preachers are commonly told to make choices that are natural and sincere. Again, analysis of preaching manuals and instruction confirms this idea.

McCullough finds the themes of natural and sincere performance in her analysis of instruction beginning in the thirteenth century and leading to the present. From the thirteenth century, Waley’s *Ars praedicandi* advised that the preacher “easily find language in which to express the gospel naturally and forcefully.”⁴⁴ O.C. Edwards, Jr. in *History of Preaching* cites how preachers of the Spanish Golden Age preached with a “kind of sincerity and plain-speaking.”⁴⁵ Later, in the eighteenth century, John Wesley told preachers to avoid “anything either awkward or affected in gesture, phrase or pronunciation.”⁴⁶ Charles Spurgeon, in his *Lectures to My Students*, said, “Our last rule is one that sums up all the others; be natural in your action.”⁴⁷

Contemporary instruction contains those same ideals. Ronald J. Allen says that “preachers should move their hands, arms, and the rest of their bodies in ways that enhance the content of the sermon and that are consistent with their personality.”⁴⁸ Charles Bartow reiterates the point saying, “The body should respond to what it thought and felt so that there may be congruence between the inner form and outer form of the

⁴⁴ McCullough, 100.

⁴⁵ McCullough, 100.

⁴⁶ McCullough, 100.

⁴⁷ McCullough, 100.

⁴⁸ McCullough, 101.

experience being shared.”⁴⁹ Todd Farley writes that the hands and face should “appear to be the mere, natural result, both of the things you speak, and of the affection that moves you to speak them” to reaffirm “that the gestures made while preaching should be so married with the words as to be true and sincere, and so as not to appear contrived or ‘affected.’”⁵⁰

On the surface, the call to perform naturally seems like a simple instruction applicable to all people. And yet, it creates a dilemma for women who have historically performed in ways to ensure first and foremost their validity as preachers and acceptance of the sermons. One might wonder: Are female preachers’ performance choices sincere and natural to their authentic selves encountering the word of God, or are their choices made primarily to validate the truthfulness of their preaching so that listeners can “buy their preaching?”

On one hand, embodiment and performance choices, even gendered choices, can reflect the authentic identity of the female preacher. Using Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical assertions, McCullough explains this type of identity-making as “lived body theory.”⁵¹ She writes, “Lived body approaches view embodied life as a constant becoming born of three intersecting threads. An individual’s particular physicality, specific cultural context, and unique exercise of agency interact together to shape the self.”⁵² In other words, the choices of embodiment and performance might be strategic choices to navigate

⁴⁹ McCullough, 101.

⁵⁰ McCullough, 101.

⁵¹ McCullough, 23-26.

⁵² McCullough, 27.

performance expectations, but also these choices shape the preacher's identity in ways that are true to herself. McCullough goes on,

A female preacher experiences herself as a body in situation. She navigates the facts of her physicality as her preaching style is shaped by her height, weight, vocal capacities, and perceptions of feminine beauty. She is shaped by the social factors of her congregation, tradition, and larger culture. She makes decisions in relation to those facts. Some decisions are conscious ones born from an awareness of her given situation. Some choices are more reflexive. Her particular choices may or may not correspond to another preacher's choices when faced with a similar set of facts.⁵³

Thus, as an example, a woman might use a soft voice and smile because she knows that her congregation accepts those choices as part of the community's definition of a virtuous woman. But at the same time, that woman may self-identify as soft-spoken and jovial based on a lifetime of those same choices. Therefore, she might describe her performance choices as feeling natural.

On the other hand, preaching performance choices have also been identified as unnatural to a woman's authentic identity and in some cases, even harmful. Nancy Lammers Gross, in *Women's Voices and the Practices of Preaching*, describes the damage that her female preaching students suffered due to feminine norms. In many cases, the result is loss of voice all together. She writes,

When our Voices, our truth, are not welcome, then our physical speaking voices become compromised or silenced altogether. . . . Time and again I have seen women who could barely bring themselves to speak above a whisper in class, and then I am stunned to hear them strongly singing solos, even belting solos, in chapel worship. . . . They have not received permission to speak their minds, and therefore they find themselves unable to claim the right to speak their minds. They find themselves unable to speak.⁵⁴

⁵³ McCullough, 27-28.

⁵⁴ Nancy Lammers Gross, *Women's Voices and the Practice of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 61.

Gross also describes the disembodiment that many women feel when their bodies do not or cannot conform to accepted versions of female bodies that affirm one type of beauty. In the case of body weight and size, for example, Gross says that some female preachers are constantly wrestling with an inner, false “Voice” saying they are “worthless, ugly, and unlovable, that the unreasonably low number on the scale is a lie, that food is inherently bad, and that eating at all indicates a lack of control.”⁵⁵ So, in instances like these, when female preachers deem their bodies as unacceptable due to social norms, she must journey to accept her body as a gift. As Gross says,

Women today have an enormous challenge to accept and love their bodies the way they are. One aspect of the gospel claim is that the culture does not have the authority or the right to set the standard for what the good body, the good person, is. If we want to speak with a full-body instrument, we need to inhabit the full-body instrument, inhabit the claim our bodies for the God-given gifts they are.⁵⁶

Gross goes on to explain an expectation placed on women that might influence their performance choice regarding emotions. Supported by the work of Brown, Gilligan, and Pipher, Gross explains that many women adapt to the need to “be nice,” starting from an early age. Girls learn the value of “calm and quiet” behavior to cover up strong feelings, which influence speaking and performance later in life.⁵⁷ She says,

The tyranny of nice and kind is reflected in vocal tone that is sweet and often high in pitch, and in the upward inflection at the end of declarative statements known as upspeak, or uptalk. . . . A constant laugh or chuckle when one would expect a woman to say something with conviction is an implicit asking of permission to speak.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Gross, *Women’s Voices and the Practice of Preaching*, 57.

⁵⁶ Gross, 59.

⁵⁷ Gross, 63.

⁵⁸ Gross, 65.

While Gross, does not expand extensively on this concept in relation to emotional performances, one can see how the expectation of “nice and kind” would hinder other emotions that come naturally to female preachers. For example, anger, indignation, and disgust do not call for calm, peaceful smiles, and quiet voices. If a female preacher feels she is not allowed to raise her voice, frown, or speak with conviction, then she might decide to perform in a way that is not authentic to her true emotions.

Given the problems and even danger in defining natural preaching performance by authenticity of self, perhaps a truer understanding of what defines natural preaching comes from identifying the experiences that happen over and over again, whether good or bad. As McCullough explains, reflecting on the work of Judith Butler, “‘the stylized repetition of acts through time’ come to appear natural even as they originate in social structures with organized expectations for male and female bodies.”⁵⁹ Of course, this means that the idea of natural performance is limited by the actions repeatedly performed. Repeated performance choices do not always represent a large variety of bodies or preaching performances. McCullough writes,

the ideology surrounding a natural performance has prevented the full performance of many women, who encounter a close link between male bodies and standards of performance. The task of performing a sermon—rather than simply writing a manuscript—is a task requiring diligent labor and no small measure of courage. Female preachers contend with concerns and comments about the distractive effects of clothes or adornments. They enter a space and a task that, until recently, barred their bodies from participation. To place their bodies in service of proclamation can be a loaded, risky endeavor. Any instructions to “be natural” in their performance classes with the crowded, contradictory preaching space they now occupy.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ McCullough, *Her Preaching Body*, 21.

⁶⁰ McCullough, 113-14.

Therefore, even the seemingly universal call for natural preaching performance is fraught with expectations that female preachers must navigate.

One would conclude that calls for authentic emotional displays from the pulpit are also fraught with specific expectations for female preachers. Understandings of “natural” emotional performances are influenced more by familiarity and listener experience rather than authenticity of feeling from the preacher. Accepted emotions in the pulpit are determined by what it repeated over and over.

The Effects of Performance Expectations on the Listener

When female preachers are limited by certain accepted performance choices, then listeners are simultaneously limited as well. Congregations who conflate preaching expectations with a particular type of embodiment and performance restrict the possibilities of the preaching event. Lisa Thompson, in *Ingenuity*, explains the danger of such limitations:

Preaching becomes an unimaginative practice. The fields in which proclamation may occur are now limited, narrowed, and confined. This mirrored illusion of preaching that is perpetuated by communal rigidity closes preaching off from its own possibilities—the free-expression, unlimited, and unrestrained encounter of sacred-in-breaking. The spirit of God that enables preaching through her free will has now been confined to a community’s terms and conditions.⁶¹

Limited expectations lead to limited experiences of proclamation.

This limitation does not only refer to definitions of preaching and preachers but also to oral interpretations of Scripture themselves, which is the very purpose of preaching. For example, the performance of “nice and kind” described by Gross above

⁶¹ Lisa L. Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), 16.

does not always adhere to the Word experienced by the preacher through Scripture or her intended interpretation for the listener. As Gross says, “There is no truth to your statement if you speak it in the habitual rut of nice and kind when what you are feeling inside is anger and betrayal. There is no truth for you, and there will be no truth for your hearers.”⁶²

In order to expand possibilities for truth and acceptance of multiple oral interpretations, a preacher must expand beyond prescribed types of performance, including displays of emotion. In doing so, she expands the listeners’ imagination concerning what is acceptable in the preaching event. This type of reimagining can only occur when the preacher is aware of listener expectations. Thompson explains that in the creative process of preaching, “the one who preaches is in constant conversation with a tradition, expectations, and hopes as they are both named and unnamed within a community.”⁶³ She describes the use of creative preaching choices in conversation with tradition as “riffing.” She writes, “A preacher riffs off the expectations of preaching for the sake of her message, her process of constructing meaning, and preaching in her context. This riffing is the work of every preacher.”⁶⁴

Therefore, it is vitally important for female preachers to make every effort to understand the expectations of performance in their context. This is not done to remain confined by the performance limitations of the listeners but rather to expand them for the sake of larger possibilities of oral interpretation. As Thompson says,

⁶² Gross, *Women’s Voices and the Practice of Preaching*, 121.

⁶³ Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 19.

⁶⁴ Thompson, 11.

Our hope in preaching is not replicating fixed patterns. Instead, our hope is to exchange fixed patterns for that which makes space for vibrant possibilities of sacred-in-breaking in our midst, as it echoes backward and forward to what we have known. As we make room for these reverberations, we make room for preaching to align with its greatest hopes—namely, the hope that we move closer in proximity to that which is most holy and most true.⁶⁵

In knowing the performance expectations of a congregation, female preachers have the capability of playing with expectations in imaginative ways in order to move closer to what is holiest and truest for a particular time, place, and people. In playing with known boundaries preachers have the capacity to expand possibilities of oral interpretation and create new opportunities for “sacred-in-breaking” of God’s Word. This is certainly true when specifically looking at the boundaries around emotional performance for female preachers.

⁶⁵ Thompson, 36.

CHAPTER 2
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Theological Grounding for Preaching Performance

There might be those who question the importance of focusing exclusively on the limits of preaching performance choices. Expectations might be seen as merely challenges to navigate. However, minimizing the importance of preaching performance expectations misunderstands the nature of preaching itself. Preaching is more than public self-expression or merely a transfer of information. Preaching is an event where the Word of God is embodied for the sake of the faith community and world. Preaching is a performative act that reflects the very nature of God's Word itself described in John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." In his seminal volume, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation*, Charles L. Bartow explains that the Word of God "is not *verbum* but *sermo*, not *ratio* but *oratio*. It is lively, face-to-face, oral-aural discourse and suasory action. . . . It is *actio divina*, God's self-performance."¹ Preaching is incarnational activity that occurs at the intersection of *actio divina* and *homo performans*."²

¹ Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 26.

² Bartow, 122.

Of course, the primary locus of this intersection of *actio divina* and *homo performans* is found in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who claims the preacher for the work of preaching. As Bartow puts it, “In Christ Jesus, God takes us as we are and presses us into the service of what God would have us be.” As such, God’s self-disclosure is a performative event characterized by call, choice, commitment, calculation, and a common goal.”³ Preaching, then, moves from merely talking about God to evoking God’s new possibilities, from the delivery of concepts to the embodiment of divine presence.

Preachers are caught up in this embodiment of divine presence. As Bartow further explains, preachers become “actors, too, in the ethical, not simply theatrical, sense of the term, taking action to facilitate other people’s enacted obedience. For God’s word heard means that you do not just stand there, you *do* something.”⁴ Therefore, preaching performance is not an additive thought to the preaching event but rather an integral, undeniable part of preaching the Word of God that influences the experience of preaching.

Scripture and the Performance of God’s Word

Chapter 1 discussed how expectations have dictated preaching performance choices for women. However, these expectations should not be the ultimate determination for those choices. Rather, Scripture first and foremost influences performance. Scripture is where the church experiences the Word of God in Jesus Christ.

³ Bartow, 122.

⁴ Bartow, 122.

As Augustine said, when we listen to the reading of Scripture, it is as if the Lord is present among us.⁵ Bartow explains further,

The Bible, like the preaching it enables (as God wills), is God's human speech. In it we encounter divine reality on the turf of human and natural history, and so we encounter ourselves as we are, as we would be, and as God would have us be. So, the Bible does not simply contain God's Word. It *is* God's Word, God's human speech *with* us, *about* us, and thereby *for* us.⁶

Through the words found in the Bible, preachers listen for the Holy Spirit and discern God's Word for a particular time, place, and people. This engagement takes prayer, study, questioning, and conversation with the world of the text, the world behind the text, and the world in front of the text.⁷

However, too, often the work of listening to the text is void of performance. Engagement with Scripture primarily occurs while reading at a desk and thinking about what has been learned. Jana Childers names the predicament quite well saying that the preacher's interpretation of the text is often a silent, sedentary exercise that knows the Scripture through the eyes. She writes that the preacher's anxiety is more about what the textual critic has to say about the text than what the voice of the text has to say.⁸

Focusing exclusively on interpretation as a silent, sedentary affair goes against the nature of Scripture itself. Scripture is an "arrested performance,"⁹ until the preacher gives

⁵ Clay Schmit, *Public Reading of Scripture: A Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 34–35.

⁶ Bartow, *God's Human Speech*, 43.

⁷ Mary F. Foskett, *Interpreting the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009). Foskett describes the exegetical process as exploring the world of the text (literary analysis), the world behind the text (historical background), and world in front of the text (how the text speaks today).

⁸ Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 50.

⁹ Bartow, *God's Human Speech*, 64.

it energy through reading it aloud. As Walter Ong points out in his analysis of orality and literacy, the Hebrew word *dabar*, which means word, also means event and thus refers to the spoken word.¹⁰ The oral nature of Scripture does not only include voice but the body as well. Again, Ong explains,

The oral word, as we have noted, never exists in a simply verbal context, as a written word does. Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body. Bodily activity beyond mere vocalization is not adventitious or contrived in oral communication, but is natural and even inevitable. In oral verbalization, particularly public verbalization, absolute motionlessness is itself a powerful gesture.¹¹

Therefore, engaging Scripture is a bodily event involving voice, sound, eye contact, facial expression, body image, gesture, and emotional expression. As Charles Bartow said, when preachers engage Scripture they are “turning ink to blood.”¹² So, it is important for listening and interpretation of Scripture to include performance elements. Again, to quote Childers,

It is appropriate for preaching’s creative process to start the way the text itself started. It is important for preaching’s creative process to start the way it hopes to finish—with oral “life.” There are aspects—important aspects of the meaning and the liveliness of the text that can only be known through speaking the words of the text aloud.¹³

The way we perform a text in the creative process of Scriptural interpretation directly affects the meaning that the pastor hears and feels for the sake of the preaching event. Preachers move as they seek to connect with the Scripture’s action. Speech flows

¹⁰ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1982), 75.

¹¹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 67-68.

¹² Bartow, *God’s Human Speech*, 63-64.

¹³ Childers, *Performing the Word*, 50.

and the preachers may feel free to roam and explore. Discoveries and decisions made in this way have the “advantage of having been born in action.”¹⁴ Sermons, too, that come out of pacing, roaming, or even driving are likely to have an advantage.¹⁵ Performance during the initial listening stages is an important influence in discerning God’s particular Word of a particular time, place, and people. As McKenzie explains, “sermon delivery skill plays an important role in the homiletical process from beginning to end. They do not just enable preachers to say things well. They help preachers to determine what they are to say. Sermon delivery skills have epistemological and hermeneutical significance.”¹⁶

One can imagine, then, that performance choices are an important influence on how the preaching event is heard and received within the congregational worship itself. Performance is not only an important discernment tool for knowing what to say in a sermon. Performance is also a part of the Word communicated. There is no great divide between substance (what we preach) and style (how we preach). One influences the other in a continued process.

Therefore, it is imperative that we tend to all aspects of preaching performance within worship, including embodiment by means of face, gesture, appearance, voice, and emotion. This is not merely so the preacher can be heard by her congregation and accepted as one with authority but so that what the preacher has heard and experienced in

¹⁴ Childers, 53.

¹⁵ Childers, 53.

¹⁶ 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, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 61.

God's Word can be shared with the community for whom the preacher is preaching. Bartow encourages preachers to ask, "How does my embodiment of this sermon express the call, choice, commitment, calculation, and common goal of this act of divine self-disclosure?"¹⁷ This work is intended to help the preacher preach a word that is faithful to the interpretation that she has heard. Not doing this kind of delivery preparation has consequences for the preaching event, whether it is intentional or not. As Childers aptly says, "There is no noninterpretation option; there is only the choice between being in charge of the interpretation or hapless about it."¹⁸

Approaching the Word with Abandon

In the creative process of sermon performance, the preacher should feel free to explore a multitude of performance options both in the reading of Scripture and preaching event, regardless of whether they adhere to performance expectations or not. Charlotte Lee explains this concept in her instruction for reading Scripture. She says,

We cannot approach a reading of religious literature with a narrow, stylized pattern of vocal and physical techniques nor with a mind content with categories. Each selection must be analyzed for what it contains in terms of organization, style, and allusions, for variety and contrast, climaxes, sound values, and dramatic elements. There is no one way to read religious literature.¹⁹

Scripture dictates performance of Scripture just as it dictates performance of sermons. Sermon performance cannot be confined to only certain acceptable choices if the preacher wishes to express the potentially boundless messages from the Spirit for the congregation presented through Scripture.

¹⁷ McKenzie, "At the Intersection of *Actio Divina* and *Homo Performans*," 60.

¹⁸ Childers, *Performing the Word*, 80.

¹⁹ Charlotte Lee, *Oral Reading of the Scriptures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 7.

Many homiletics and oral interpreters encourage attitudes of experimentation and exploration that break confining habits or attitudes held by the preacher. They encourage, as I have, a commitment to the text for guidance in how to perform. Thus, homiletics might give instruction to set aside attitudes that would keep a preacher from this kind of commitment. For instance, Jana Childers encourages preachers to engage in a “stripping” process when interpreting Scripture—the setting aside of one’s idiosyncrasies, expectations, and habitual attitudes.²⁰ Clay Schmit explains this attitude as “abandon.” He writes that performance in Scripture and preaching are often difficult because there is a sense that all eyes are on you. The preacher is subject to the congregation’s judgment of looks, dress, vocal quality, and presence. The more a person is concerned about how they perform, the more they tend to restrict their involvement in the performance. However, he says that the more a person gives herself over to the demands of the Scripture, the better her performance of Scripture. He writes, “The abandoned performer lets herself go and uses all the capacities of body and voice in service of the task. She blends her whole being into the performance and becomes transparent in the role.”²¹ With the preacher’s abandon, she becomes a servant to the Word. Paul Scott Wilson echoes this idea as self-emptying, where the preacher “gives over himself or herself to the performance, that is to God. The proclamation of the gospel is the goal that overtakes all other performance goals.”²²

²⁰ Childers, *Performing the Word*, 53.

²¹ Schmit, *Public Reading of Scripture*, 42-43.

²² Paul Scott Wilson, “Preaching, Performance, and the Life and Death of ‘Now,’” in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, ed. Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 47.

The idea of “stripping,” abandon, and self-emptying promotes the idea that performance expectations should not define the choices made for the sake of the Word. Female preachers should explore beyond expectations in oral interpretation as they listen to the Word and perform the Word in the context of worship. The preacher is first and foremost the servant of the Word in her embodiment and delivery.

The Word for the Faith Community

With the limits of performance expectations and their secondary role as determinants for the performance of the Word, one might begin to encourage female preachers to disregard listeners’ performance expectations all together. One might start believing that the preacher should simply ignore listeners’ gendered expectations. This would certainly be one interpretation of abandon.

And yet, a faithful preacher cannot completely ignore the listeners’ performance expectations. Preachers listen to the Word not only for themselves but on behalf a congregation in a particular time and place. Preachers try to understand how the congregation will respond to what is heard in the text and incorporate their responses in the sermon. In this way, the sermon is not a one-way conversation where the preacher speaks only *to* the congregation. Rather, sermons are two-way conversations where the listeners find themselves in the Biblical narrative and listen for God’s response to their human condition. Therefore, the world of the listener must be taken into account when preaching. Bartow says, “Sermons are designed with sensitivity to congregations and contexts. As we have been told often enough, sermons are not stones thrown into a lake

of listeners. Listeners contribute to the shaping of sermons by who they are and by what they expect.”²³

Rather than ignore performance expectations, the female preacher must be in conversation with them for the sake of the faith community. She asks the questions, “What does the Word demand in my performance?” and “What embodiment and performance choices ring authentic to me?” while also asking, “What embodiments and performance choices will resonate with the congregation?” This is a conversation that happens from many different directions in an attempt to remain faithful to the Word in a particular time and place for a particular people.

It is a difficult conversation to navigate. On one hand, the female preacher does not want to be confined by performance expectations that limit the authenticity of truth and definitions of the preaching event.²⁴ On the other hand, the preacher strives to proclaim a Word that will open up possibilities for the listener to be transformed. The preacher does not want the listener to stop listening or become so distracted by unaccepted performances that the Word is ignored or dismissed out of hand. It is this difficulty that begs female preachers to intentionally discern listeners’ performance expectations in their particular context. Knowing expectations and how they influence the receptivity of the Word can help women more faithfully discern preaching performance choices.

²³ Bartow, *God’s Human Speech*, 113.

²⁴ Both of these ideas were discussed in the last section of Chapter 1.

Emotion and Preaching Performance

As with all preaching performance choices, performance of emotion is an essential component of performing the Word. Emotional performances do not merely add to the preaching experience. Rather they influence the preaching experience itself.

Performances of emotion influence the meaning of the sermon both in the interpretive process leading up to the preaching event and in the preaching event itself. Just as homilitecians have encouraged preachers to utilize other performance choices in the process of listening to the Word, utilizing emotions is an important step in the process of “turning ink to blood.” Preachers should feel freedom to experiment with different performances of emotion and play with a wide array of emotional choices. A feeling of abandonment, as described above, can create space for trying news paths of sermon delivery involving emotion.

At the same time, female preachers are in constant conversation with listener expectations, as has been noted above in several places. The preacher cannot merely ignore these expectations, because preaching is essentially a conversation with the faith community. Knowing listener expectations surrounding emotion can aid in this conversation and in preachers’ call to share a living Word with the church. Additionally, intentionally playing with these expectations can bring new insights of the Word that might have been earlier ignored or stifled by the listener.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature that explores the intersection between preaching performance, women's preaching experience, and listener expectation is quite limited. While there is a long history of thought and instruction around oral interpretation, preaching performance in general is a relatively new area of focus in homiletics when compared to other disciplines in the church. The field of homiletics has focused on preaching performance with theological importance in only the last thirty to forty years. In fact, some homileticians who focus on preaching performance still find themselves arguing the merits of specific instruction in this area when preparing people for ministry.¹

One might guess, then, that focus on specific elements of women's preaching performance has garnered even less attention. That being said, there has been progress in naming the experience of female preachers in the church and the academy. More and more, people are exploring how female preachers have occupied a "gendered pulpit"² through ingenuity and finding their own voice.

¹ Richard Ward, "Finding Voice in the Theological School" in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, edited by Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). This article serves as example that explores the myriad of challenges in academia.

² "Gendered" as here and throughout does not encompass the breadth of gendered studies work which is a vibrant and growing literature field.

At the same time, most of this work and research have been from the viewpoint of female preachers rather than the congregation. They have focused on the techniques and choices that women have made instead of the specific expectations held by the listener. Additionally, many of these works do not focus exclusively on delivery and embodiment but name content as the method for inclusion. I found little on solely the listener's perspective—their expectations, likes, dislikes, or implicit biases.

This lack of attention to the intersection between preaching performance, women's preaching experience, and listener made my curiosity about my own context's performance expectations even stronger. Nevertheless, even with limited literature, there were several published works I reviewed in preparation for this project that have helped me gain an understanding of the topic and make an argument for its importance. The literature has fallen into three loose categories.

Literature That Tends to the Theology of Preaching Performance

The first group of literature is concerned with the nature of preaching as a performed event. Charles Bartow's book, *God's Human Speech*, is a classic work that lays a theological foundation for the performance of preaching. Indeed, much discourse on preaching performance relies on Bartow's theological grounding for proclamation, as is also the case with my own thesis. Bartow explains that God is disclosing God's very self to creation through God's Word, disrupting and transforming to bring about God's purposes. God's Word is *actio divina*, God's self-performance, that meets *homo performans* and as such, deploys language and languages, silence and sound, stillness and

gesture, anything—even nothing to its ends.³ Throughout his book, Bartow examines how understanding God’s Word as a performative event influences the preacher, the listener, and the Word proclaimed. *God’s Human Speech* explains how preaching performance is more than an exercise to promote clear communication. Preaching performance has theological implications and therefore should be addressed with intention, care, and faithfulness.

Stephen H. Webb’s work, *The Divine Voice*, also supports the importance of preaching performance. He does so by constructing a theology of sound and how it relates to proclamation. He claims that God’s identity is most frequently described as sound in the Bible, particularly voice. That being said, Webb explains that sound is always intimately located in a particular history. He argues that “the biblical faith of Christianity is dependent on the claim that God has a voice and that the divine voice has a body in Jesus Christ. The biblical faith of Christianity is also dependent on our ability to hear the divine voice in the human voice of the preacher. Christianity and the faith of public speaking appear to be inextricably linked.”⁴ *The Divine Voice* complements the theological insights presented by Bartow that name the significance of body, voice, and delivery in proclamation.

Walter Ong’s work in *Orality and Literacy* tends to the oral nature of Scripture and how it differs from written words. He shows that oral literature, like the Bible, should be considered a communal event more than an individual transfer of knowledge. As such,

³ Bartow, *God’s Human Speech*, 26-27.

⁴ Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 36.

an oral/aural event is more than mere words. Oral/aural events include the body and voice. Ong does not limit his work to Scripture, but his arguments support the idea that reading Scripture, either for study or proclamation, cannot be merely a silent, visual endeavor. If a preacher is to return to the original nature of Scripture for proclamation, the oral/aural nature of Scripture must be taken into account.

Literature that Tends to the Word as Preaching Performance

The second group of literature is concerned with preachers' performance of the Word and decisions involving embodiment and delivery. Charlotte Lee, in both *Oral Reading of the Scriptures* and *Oral Interpretation*, helps preachers understand themselves as oral interpreters of Scripture. She not only gives specific help for discerning performance choice but also explains how different forms of literature in the Bible direct those choices. Her instruction supports the idea that Scripture must be the primary source for performance choices. She encourages intentional choices for oral interpretation while keeping the listener in mind.

Clay Schmit, in *Public Reading of Scripture*, gives practical guidelines to lay leaders for the public reading of Scripture. Building on the theology of Scripture as both oral and embodied, he helps readers see performance of Scripture as an interpretation. Even though his intended audience is lay leadership, his book is helpful to preachers as well. As already noted in previous chapters, he encourages a sense of abandonment so the preacher might "get out of the way" of the Word of God that speaks.⁵ He does not, though, tend to the difficulty preachers face when their very bodies do not adhere to

⁵ Schmit, *Public Reading of Scripture*, 39.

listener expectations. It might seem impossible in certain situations to “get out of the way.”

Jana Childers, in *Performing the Word*, compares preaching to an act of theater. She describes the creative process of interpretation and proclamation as an incarnational event that can transform the preacher and congregation. As such, preachers are encouraged to use intentional performance choices for the sake of proclamation like actors interpreting a script. Preachers embody Scripture and the sermon so that a transforming word is heard by the audience. She encourages the idea of “stripping” as mentioned earlier. She also, acknowledges the difficulty of stripping when the preacher runs the risk of sacrificing identity. She writes, “The limit of subordination [to the text] is reached when the reader’s integrity is threatened.”⁶ Her statement points in the direction of many female preachers’ predicament when navigating performance expectations. However, she does not name listener expectations as a specific threat to integrity.

Jana Childers and Clay Schmit have also edited a book on performance titled *Performance in Preaching*. Many of the articles in the book reinforce the thoughts already discussed in the literature reviews. For instance, Paul Scott Wilson speaks to the need for self-emptying in his article, “Preaching, Performance, and the Life and Death of ‘Now.’”⁷ Alyce M. McKenzie further explains Bartow’s theology of preaching as the intersection of *action divina* and *homo performans*, thus supporting the importance of preaching performance. However, the first article by Marguerite Shuster, “The Truth and

⁶ Childers, *Performing the Word*, 97.

⁷ Wilson, “Preaching, Performance, and the Life and Death of ‘Now,’” 48–49.

Truthfulness: Theological Reflections on Preaching and Performance,” names a unique perspective to the conversation by discussing performance and truth. She writes,

While faithfulness to the text is a *sine qua non* of preaching since the preacher does not speak out of his or her independent authority, faithfulness to one’s congregation in the sense of attending to what enables them to hear accurately (not to be construed as necessarily involving their liking what they hear) is of comparable significance, insofar as one holds a relational view of truth. Speaking Dutch to Koreans obviously won’t work. But neither will a certain sort of stiffness with most young people, or a certain sloppiness with most high-church Episcopalians. . . . To care about these matters is not to become captive to technique but simply to respect and care about other people and to try to speak in a way that makes it possible for what one says to be heard by those whom one is actually addressing.⁸

She does not mention performance expectations as one of her examples, and yet her logic about tending to listeners’ needs is applicable to this study. Preachers must tend to listeners’ expectations in order to be heard and offer a truthful experience of the Word.

Women and Preaching Performance

The third group of literature is concerned with preaching performance and embodiment specifically of women. Roxanne Mountford, in *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces*, describes how “manliness,” particularly white manliness, has remained a central concept in American preaching since the mid-nineteenth century. She looks at three women preachers’ approaches to transgress expectations of manliness in the pulpit. Her work reveals the importance of gender, space, bodies and rhetoric. Her review of training pamphlets concerning preaching has been especially helpful to this thesis. This thesis relies heavily on her work as the basis for accepted masculine performance expectation.

⁸ Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit, *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 32.

Amy P. McCullough, in *Her Preaching Body*, discusses the ways that women make choices about embodiment when preaching. Using “lived body approach” supported by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work and by reflecting on historic habitations of female preachers, McCullough explores how preachers choose certain ways of embodiment for identity and proclamation today. This thesis relies heavily on McCullough’s work as the basis for accepted female performance expectations. It also relies heavily on her survey of preaching instruction for understanding. Her book is the only one found that focuses particularly on female performance in preaching. While McCullough still focuses on the perspective of the preacher and not the listener, her work has been essential in gaining some overarching performance practices for female preachers.

Nancy Lammers Gross, in *Women’s Voices and the Practice of Preaching*, specifically looks at how views of women’s bodies affect a preacher’s voice and performance choices. Abuse, negative body image, and limited narratives of gender have resulted in a loss of voice for many women. She ends the book with suggestions empowering women to explore the full range of performance choices when interpreting Scripture. Her work shows evidence of the harm done by inconsistent embodiment of the Word and supports the idea that women must often move beyond performance expectations to preach an authentic Word.

Lisa L. Thompson, in *Ingenuity*, examines the ways that black female preachers have helped congregations reimagine the preaching event. She describes how congregations define preaching by experiencing the same patterns repeatedly. Preaching as outsiders, black women have had to confront expectations of both gender and race that

have defined preaching. Through different case studies she describes how black women preachers have “riffed” on the expectations of congregations in order to redefine what preaching looks and sounds like. My project builds on many of the ideas shared by Thompson.⁹

A Different Approach

The four works above describe the tension women feel when dealing with proclamation and expectations of performance and embodiment. However, they begin their study from the perspective of the preacher and how the preacher makes performance choices to cross limited expectations. I have used much of their work to support my research.

However, my study differs from theirs in that I will begin by examining the listeners’ expectations. It is important to get a clear picture of the expectations within a specific context before making intentional performance choices. Otherwise, the preacher makes uninformed decisions that could be ineffective and even dangerous.

Also, given the results of this research, it is important to note these books did not explore women’s performance of emotion and listener response. In fact, the specifics of emotional performance in preaching were rarely mentioned in any of the literature reviewed. This thesis differs from those in that it focuses on performances of emotion.

⁹ My class with Dr. Thompson on Gender, Power, and the Pulpit, in June of 2017, was where I first heard the idea of congregational expectations defining and even limiting proclamation and oral interpretations. I am grateful for this insight because it was the catalyst for my desire to explore my own context and listener performance expectation.

CHAPTER 4
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Methodology and Process

I approached the listeners of my particular preaching context with three questions: What are listener expectations of sermon delivery in a particular context? Do listeners hold differing sermon delivery expectations for female preachers? How does meeting or straying from these expectations affect receptivity of the message? I used exploratory research methodology in search for answers. Exploratory research does not seek to find definitive solutions to problems; rather, it explores a particular problem that has not been clearly defined yet in order to gain further understanding and insight. Qualitative methods were used, which included interviews of preachers, initial questionnaires of church members, and feedback forms in response to sermons. While similar questions were asked of all participants, the questions also evolved throughout the process, which is part of the iterative nature of exploratory research.

The effects of preaching expectations were explored in four congregations of the Presbyterian Church (USA) located the Waterloo/Cedar Falls area of Iowa: Unity Presbyterian Church, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Cedar Heights Presbyterian Church, and First Presbyterian Church of Cedar Falls. These congregations represent the current context where I am preaching. All four churches are in the same presbytery, the pastors and congregations work closely together in shared ministry, and the congregants

represent the members of the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) and the residents of the Cedar Valley in Iowa.

I included all the PCUSA churches in Waterloo and Cedar Falls except my own. I feel that my congregation might be hesitant to give candid feedback about female preaching performances because of my personal and pastoral relationship with them. In addition, I am already familiar with the preaching performance with which they are accustomed, seeing that I am the regular preacher.

I began research by interviewing the pastors of each congregation, asking questions about their own preaching style along with how that style has been received. Pastors shared which preaching performance techniques have both enhanced the listeners' experience and have hindered it. They also shared about the history of the church and the congregation's experience with female preachers.¹ The interviews with pastors gave insights into the current practice of preaching performance in each church. Their answers gave a sense of the congregations' experience on a regular basis. To reference McCullough's work, they helped me understand what the listener might see as "natural." These interviews also helped identify places where intentional performance choices were used and why. Preachers sharing their congregation's responses helped identify potential boundaries that might make listeners uncomfortable were they crossed.

After interviewing pastors, congregants were invited to participate in a focus group. The pastors were asked to recommend participants that represented a wide range

¹ Interview questions are found in the appendices. The term "delivery" was used in the interviews rather than "performance." This was to avoid the negative response that some people attach to the word performance when talking about preaching. For this thesis's purposes, the terms "delivery" and "performance" have been used interchangeably when collecting and reporting data.

of ages², genders, theological and political views, church participation, education, and socioeconomic backgrounds. At the same time, the makeup of the group was determined by invitees' willingness to participate. The focus group consisted of 21 participants: 4 from Unity Presbyterian, 5 from Westminster Presbyterian, 6 from Cedar Heights Presbyterian, and 6 from First Presbyterian Church, Cedar Falls.

Once church members agreed to participate, a questionnaire was distributed that gathered demographic information and helped me gain preliminary ideas about listeners' expectations.³ Filled out before the meeting, the questionnaires provided an opportunity for individuals to describe their own experience with female preachers. Their descriptions helped me get a simple understanding of what they saw as "natural." I also asked about their expectations of preaching delivery and their expectations of female preachers when they step into the pulpit. Finally, I asked questions about what was helpful and not helpful about preaching performance along with preferences to discern any potential boundaries that might speak to expectation.

I analyzed the data from the interviews and questionnaires to discover relevant concepts, themes, and examples that emerged from listeners' responses. The data from both the questionnaires and pastor interviews influenced the sermon text and preaching performance choices for the focus groups.

² Participants under the age of 18 were not invited to participate.

³ Questionnaires are found in the appendices. The term "delivery" was used in the questionnaires rather than "performance." This was to avoid the negative response that some people attach to the word performance when talking about preaching. For this thesis's purposes, the terms "delivery" and "performance" have been used interchangeably when collecting and reporting data.

Next, participants were asked to listen to three sermons: two preached by a female, one preached by a male. The two sermons preached by a female preacher were in contrasting performance styles. The first adhered to listener expectations; the second strayed from expectations in some respects. The sermon preached by a male preacher also strayed from listener expectations in the same way as the woman's second sermon. Feedback forms were completed after each of the three sermons. The participants were asked similar questions each time about their impressions concerning the message and performance of the sermon. They were also asked to speculate, as much as possible, about their congregation's responses to the sermon.⁴

After listening to all the sermons, the participants were given a final feedback form asking them to compare the female preacher's sermons, comment on familiarity with certain delivery choices, and share their personal preferences. The feedback forms captured participants' responses to sermons. The participants named what was both typical and surprising about the performance, shared elements of delivery that were conducive or not conducive for listening, and described their response to the interpretation of Scripture and message of the sermon.

Again, I analyzed the data from the feedback forms, looking for relevant concepts, themes, and examples. I compared and contrasted the responses so that I might discover potential expectations that were not voiced. The data was sorted and resorted in a variety of ways in order to find similarities and differences between the sermon

⁴ All feedback forms are found in appendices. The term "delivery" was used in the forms rather than "performance" as explained in a previous footnote.

responses and gain insights into expectations particular to performance of female and male preachers.

Procedures Due to COVID-19

Foundational to my research is the theological claim that preaching is an embodied experience. However, during the time of my research, COVID-19 sent preaching online and restricted in-person gatherings and travel. These restrictions directly impacted the research process and necessitated protocols that would have otherwise been unusual or unwanted. These choices warrant mentioning.

The original plan was to recruit a female preacher that listeners did not know. Asking two female preachers to preach who embodied different preaching styles was also considered. Hopefully, the anonymity and lack of pastoral relationship with the listeners would encourage respondents' unfiltered, straightforward, honest feedback. At the same time, I recognized the potential for listeners to respond in hurtful even damaging ways if expected performance boundaries were crossed. Therefore, the participating preacher(s) would need to understand the risk involved and be aware of their own delivery choices. Put succinctly, not just "any" female preacher could do what was needed for this research.

Additionally, all preachers, both male and female, would need to work closely together. Delivery choices and sermons would need to be developed together so that the listener was offered intentionally similar preaching performance styles that could then be compared between genders. So, again, not just "any" male preacher could do what was needed for this research.

With travel restrictions, time restraints, limited choices, and varying needs due to preachers' health, I made two decisions that would potentially make analysis of data cloudy and complicated. First, I decided to preach the two sermons assigned to women myself so that the listeners could have an in-person experience with a female preacher. I was not serving as any of the participants' pastor at the time. However, several—not all—of the participants knew me before the study and had heard me preach. Their comments might be influenced by our relationship, even though none of the participants are particularly close to me. Second, I decided to recruit a colleague on the East Coast to preach a sermon online. The listeners did not know the preacher personally, so their feedback was not influenced by a relationship. However, preaching on a screen is not the same as preaching in person. Again, the listeners' comments might have been influenced by a more curated, disembodied experience of preaching.

Besides choices of preacher and preaching format, the worship environment was different from what is typical. The focus group gathered in person and sat six feet apart in a large multipurpose room rather than a sanctuary. I preached behind a table with a plexiglass barrier rather than a pulpit. All participants wore masks, refrained from congregating, and entered and exited the building single file. Thus, the environment could have influenced listeners' comments.

That being said, I believe that the participants' responses and the analysis of the data collected still offer insights pertaining to my research questions about the intersection of preaching performance, female preachers' experience, listener expectations, and emotion.

Inherent Limitations of Context

It is important to note that this research involves unique individuals in a particular context. I identify as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, upper-middle class, American woman. While I know the challenges of preaching within and against performance expectations, I also recognize that I benefit from systems that privilege me and oppress others. I also adhere to many dominant performance expectations by the very nature of who I am and the body I inhabit.

Furthermore, the context in which I am preaching is also privileged. While I do not know all of the ways the listeners identify, I do know two ways that they did identify from data collected: all the participants were white, and all the participants either identified as male or female.

My research with the focus groups does not explore all the ways that performance expectations intersect with other identity markers, such as race, sexuality, transgender identity, ethnicity, economic status, and nationality. My research uses the simple, and admittedly problematic, categories of male and female along with men and women.

Additionally, the focus group was largely older in age. All but two were over the age of 50. Age might have played a factor in the listeners' experience, understandings, and responses. If a younger focus group had participated, they might have responded to questions about expectations and experience differently than previous generations.

Therefore, my research is not intended to serve as a defining norm for all people or contexts. To do so would be counterproductive to the project's aim. This project explores a particular setting with the aim to uncover further questions and areas of research.

Scope of the Thesis

The questions used in initial questionnaires, interviews, and focus group feedback forms covered a broad range of aspects concerning preaching performance. It comes as no surprise, then, that large amounts of data were collected. However, not all of the data lent itself to answering the exploratory research questions. While informative, much of the data collected will not be reported in this thesis. For example, participants made several comments about performance choices regarding body and clothing. They named that preachers should dress “appropriately” to the worshipping situation. They also talked about distractions of the body, such as piercing and hair in the eyes. However, it was impossible to analyze this type of data given the current situation. First, COVID-19 created an abnormal worshipping experience. So, much of my attire and the attire of my colleague were excused by the listeners because of the unique space where the preaching event took place. Second, due to COVID-19 19 restrictions, I was the only female preacher. I do not have unexpected body markings such as tattoos and piercing. Adding these elements to my body would come across as unauthentic, serving as more of a costume than a choice of identity or Scriptural interpretation. Given these two circumstances, performance choices around attire, body markings, or body image will not be included in this thesis.

Rather, this thesis will focus on the main theme that arose from analysis of the data: listeners’ expectations around performance choices that connect with their ideas of emotional performance. This was the original wondering when approaching the thesis and the research that emerged brought clarity and answers to those original questions. Data analysis that did not inform this dominant theme is beyond the scope of this thesis.

CHAPTER 5
ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Initial Questionnaires

Demographics, Experience, and Predictions

Initial questionnaires gathered demographic information from the focus groups and helped me gain preliminary ideas about listeners' expectations and their experience with female pastors. Questionnaires were given to 21 respondents from four different churches in the Cedar Valley: Westminster Presbyterian Church, Unity Presbyterian Church, Cedar Heights Presbyterian Church, and First Presbyterian Church in Cedar Falls. All respondents were white. Eleven identified as male; ten identified as female. Two were in the age range of 30–49 years of age. Eight were in the age range of 50–69 years of age. Eleven were in the age range of 70 years of age or older.

The first set of questions in the questionnaire asked respondents to gauge their experience with women preachers: How much experience have you had with female preachers? Do you see women preach on a regular basis? Nine respondents, nearly half of the focus group, had regularly experienced female preachers. It is no surprise that these respondents were from the two congregations where women were the regular preachers for the congregation.

Eleven respondents' experience with female preachers was more sporadic. At one church, many of the members pointed to the fact that their congregation had women

pastors in the past. One member, while joining the church after these women pastors served, still pointed to his previous church as having a “female senior pastor.” The respondents from another church all named occasional opportunities to see female preachers. Some also mentioned that their incoming pastor was a female.

Only one participant said that he had very little experience. He explained, “One church I attended for six months had one female and one male pastor.” When asked if he watched women preach, he said that it was “rare.”

The second set of questions asked respondents to consider what they might expect when considering sermon delivery¹ from a woman: If you heard that a woman was going to preach this coming Sunday, and you were forced to make a prediction, describe how the woman would deliver the sermon. What would her voice sound like? How would she gesture? How would she look? What emotions would she exude?

Five respondents did not answer the questions. Four of those denied answering by explaining that it was too difficult to predict a female preacher’s performance choices. One commented that his church’s female and male preachers delivered sermons the very same way, saying, “Both our preachers are the same except she has a higher voice.”

Seven respondents named the difficulty of making a prediction about female preaching performance choices but still tried to answer the question. For example, one said, “It’s hard to describe a person’s voice. But overall, I believe that her voice would be

¹ The term “delivery” was used in the questionnaires, feedback forms, and pastor interviews rather than “performance.” This was to avoid the negative response that some people attach to the word performance when talking about preaching. For this thesis’s purposes, the terms “delivery” and “performance” have been used interchangeably when collecting and reporting data. However, the use of “delivery” does not change the theological understanding or definition of preaching performance as explained in chapter 2.

compassionate, strong, emotive. She would be expressive with her body; she would make eye contact with members.” Another said, “It would depend on who the woman was and if I knew her previously. If it were someone I didn’t know, I would predict that she [would] use a calm voice without dramatic gestures. I would expect her to express herself in a caring and empathetic way.” Another said, “[It] depends on the person. I would expect it to be an informative and sincere manner. . . . [She would exude] compassion, empathy, (and) sincerity.”

Two of these seven respondents recognized expectations in the general public that might be stereotypes. One said, “The stereotype is that females are gentler and perhaps less forceful, but the most soft-spoken professor I know is male.” The other remarked as follows:

She would display emotion appropriate to the preaching, as I think that could be a criticism of women, that they are too emotional. However, almost all preachers I have heard have some emotional times. Situations and circumstances that hit them particularly hard—human moments. I do not find this a problem in listening or relating to them.

Nine respondents answered the question with no caveat about the difficulty of the prediction. The following responses reflect key descriptions from their comments:

- “She would have an air of confidence.”
- “For her to be heard easily she may feel the need to speak with more effort than a male. . . . I assume she would be more direct than coy in her speech and mannerisms.”
- “Voice would be clear, more crisp than usual conversation voice. Gestures would be to make a point, not large sweeps unless needed but also not slight hand movement. [She would exude] confidence, empathy, approachability.”
- “She would speak confidently. Her tone and emotions would be sincere and compassionate.”
- “Speaking from the pulpit with a calming voice, her palms open and turned up. She would look confident and reassuring. Joy and understanding.”
- “Pleasant and loving.”
- “Her voice would be calm and gestures would reflect the emotions she wanted to stress. Her topic would affect her emotions, I feel.”

- “I would probably expect a woman’s strong voice with appropriate gestures to enhance her delivery. . . . Her emotions would reflect the topic that is her sermon.”
- “My experience would lead me to believe it would be more like reading a report.”

In summary, twelve respondents, over half the group, named the difficulty of predicting a female preaching performance, or they refused to make a prediction at all. There was even some identification of false stereotypes by respondents who said that female preachers might be assumed as “gentler,” “less forceful,” or “too emotional.” At the same time, however, the respondents’ attempted predictions painted a consistent picture of female preaching performance based on their own experience or female stereotypes.

The compilation of descriptions creates the following description: The female preacher’s voice would be higher than a man’s, which might mean she has to speak at a louder volume. That being said, her voice would be strong and carry well so that she is well understood. This means that she might need to speak more “crisply.” Her voice would be “calm,” “compassionate,” “strong,” and “emotive.” Her gestures would be appropriate to enhance delivery and “reflect emotions she wants to express.” And yet, those gestures would not be “dramatic.” They would “be used to make a point,” and they would be “more direct than coy.” The female preacher would be “confident,” “warm and welcoming,” “pleasant and loving,” “caring,” “empathetic,” “approachable,” “sincere,” and “reassuring.” Emotions would “express the topic”; however, the words most used to describe that emotional display were “compassion,” “empathy,” “caring,” “calm,” “joy,” and “understanding.”

Even though the literature reviewed in preparation for the research did not specifically address emotion, the respondents often mentioned emotions when describing

female preaching performance. Respondents, named that emotional displays were expected, even if women could be seen as overly emotional. Furthermore, several comments aligned with Gross' work naming the expectation of female preachers as calm and nice.

Accepted Preaching Performance Choices

Next, a third set of questions asked respondents to name preferences of sermon delivery in general: When you consider all preachers, what aspects of preaching delivery make the sermon easier to hear? What makes the preacher enjoyable? Are there certain aspects of delivery that are especially important when a preacher is giving the message? These questions were asked to discern expectations that might apply to all preachers.

Many of the answers pertained to the message of the sermon or the listener's response to the sermon rather than to the delivery of the sermon itself. These answers had a bearing on the selection of Scripture as well as the focus and function of the sermon for the focus group later. Nevertheless, a few comments about delivery were still given.

When respondents spoke about specific performance choices, most of the comments simply remarked that certain elements were important but did not specify why. When explanations were given, they named clarity and connection with the listener as important, with the predominant comments focusing on the voice. For example, one person said that sermons were easier to hear with a "crisp clear voice that draws one into the sermon." Thirteen respondents commented in a similar way regarding the voice. In addition to voice, some commented on gesture/movement, body, and eye contact. For example, one said that hand movements are an important delivery choice "so that there is life in the presenter." Another said that the preacher needs to have the ability "to connect

to the congregation with her/his eyes and body language.” Still another said, “Speaking with a spontaneous style rather than reading the text would appeal to me.”

More often, respondents shared their preferences for preaching performance in emotional terms. Eleven respondents spoke about displays of emotions specifically naming humor as a positive delivery choice. For example, one respondent said that sermons were easy to hear if they were “provocative” and included “passion.” Then, she went on to say that “a sense of humor is vital. Another respondent said that the preacher is enjoyable when she “feels things deeply and is passionate . . . and there is also a place for humor!” Still another said that a preacher is enjoyable when they are “calm and have a sense of humor.”

Even more interesting, twelve respondents answered the expectation questions regarding delivery in terms of personal pastoral attributes. The following responses reflects key descriptions from their comments:

- “Being personable [makes a sermon enjoyable.]
- “[A good sermon is] one that makes me feel he/she is speaking directly to me.”
- “Frankly, being a ‘good’ preacher means showing how sermons connect and are stimulating and inspiring and being a neat person committed to service.”
- “[An enjoyable preacher is] personable, sincere, humble, and a good listener.”
- “[A good preacher is] articulate, obviously well educated, doesn’t waste words, also confident but not overbearing.”
- “[A good preacher is] spiritually honest [and] “self-assured.”
- “I need to feel that the delivery is not only true but real What makes a preacher enjoyable is a connection with the congregation, having fun, and being a regular human being.”
- “[Preaching is enjoyable] when they feel comfortable in front of the group.”
- “[It is important for preachers to] be upbeat, and speak from their heart, not read from the notes.”
- One respondent said that authenticity is important and named the preacher’s “personality” as an important factor in sermon enjoyment.
- “[The preacher is enjoyable when they are] identifying with the listeners in the difficulty of handling life’s problem . . . identifying *with* rather than accuse or blame the audience. Confess to the difficulty in understanding some concepts.”

- Another said that a pastor is enjoyable when they are “friendly” and “confident.”

In summary, several similar themes emerged when listeners spoke of the preaching performance choices that were helpful or enjoyable. Preachers should speak clearly, paying attention to pacing and volume. Preachers should “look up and project outward,” not only to be heard but to “connect” with the listener. They should use “appropriate gestures” that do not appear “artificial.” The preacher should be “personable,” “sincere,” “humble,” “authentic,” “spiritually honest,” and “confident.”

As with the first set of questions, emotions were discussed when describing desired preaching performance. Preachers should feel “passion” about their sermon, and a sense of humor is appreciated, even celebrated. However, unlike with female preachers, descriptions of calm and nice were not used as prevalent.

Unacceptable Preaching Performance Choices

A fourth set of questions asked respondents if certain delivery choices made them uncomfortable. This question was asked with the aim to find the limits of listeners’ performance expectations. How far will the listener stretch before they question the preacher or the message? As with the previous set of questions, many of the listeners’ answers dealt with the focus and function of the sermon rather than delivery. However, there were some answers of note connected to performance.

Only two comments focused on specific delivery choices regarding the voice. One person said, “I personally dislike monotone delivery, sing-song delivery, and extended shouting.” The other participant discussed how being “too scripted” or “fumbling over the words” was a distraction.

Eight of the respondents described undesirable performance choices in terms of emotional response or personal attributes of the pastor. For example, one said, “I am not likely to be attracted to the stereotypical evangelical style even though I know that ‘evangelical’ should be understood in a broader context.” Another said, “I have heard a preacher take an almost condescending demeanor during a sermon, which is a total turnoff for me.” Another said, “I do not enjoy having a pretend style or appearance. . . . pastors have to be themselves.” Still another said, “I think that it would be uncomfortable to be talked at or yelled at.” This person went on to say they would feel uncomfortable “if the preacher was very extreme in speech or appearance.” Another said, “I dislike ‘fire and brimstone’ or assumption of judgment styles.” Another said, “I find any pastor who feels it is necessary to ‘pound’ a pulpit or wave wildly very uncomfortable for me to engage in the message.”

Nine respondents’ comments regarding discomfort had more to do with the message of the sermon or their response to the sermon rather than the delivery of the sermon itself. These answers became particularly important when crafting the second sermon to test expectation levels. The following responses reflect key descriptions from their comments:

- I am uncomfortable with sermons that are political, whether or not I agree with the politics. I appreciate when pastors search for application to current events, but sometimes this is done in a way where the pastor’s political bias becomes very evident. Even if the pastor admits this bias, I find this inappropriate . . . This makes me very upset and uncomfortable.
- “Too inappropriate of personal mentions in a sermon would bring a negative reaction from me whether male or female.”
- “I dislike content that by its implication is accusatory. I prefer a good rhetorical question that leaves the assumption of guilt up to the listener.”
- “Don’t tell me I am wrong, help me understand what I am not doing correctly. . . . make me do some soul searching/discovery.” In the same vein of thought as this idea, the same participant made a comment about a woman whom he heard preach

who “spoke down to a certain group, which I felt was inappropriate . . . too much like gossip.”

- [I feel uncomfortable with a sermon when] “only vaguely preaching too much to any one person or section of the congregation.”
- “Being uncomfortable is frequent because of our sinful lives. But I would be uncomfortable with regular preaching that does not offer us God’s forgiveness as the conclusion.”
- “When a preacher calls on someone to stand up and answer a question in open church. Or makes someone feel uncomfortable by calling them out or recognizing them by name without prior consent.”
- “Demanding agreement in belief or thought or any effort to create guilt should be used cautiously.”
- “I would be uncomfortable if a preacher were to denigrate individual[s] or group[s], but that is not something I’ve encountered.”

In summary, the respondents gave some general boundaries for preaching performance that could alter their ability to listen and accept the sermon as they experience it. Preachers should refrain from “monotone” voices, “sing-song” voices, or “shouting.” Anything about appearance that is “too demonstrative” could be distracting. It makes listeners’ uncomfortable if preachers are not being themselves. However, preachers should not be “extreme in speech or appearance.” Preachers should avoid “stereotypical evangelical,” “fire and brimstone” styles. Pounding the pulpit or waving wildly makes people feel uncomfortable. Preachers should avoid political topics and voicing their own opinions “outside of Scripture.” They should neither be condescending nor accusatory. Preachers should neither demand agreement in belief nor make an effort to create guilt. If preachers preach about sin, they should always offer God’s forgiveness at the end of the sermon.

These comments describe an expectation for preachers to perform naturally, as reflected chapter 1 above. However, they simultaneously name a boundary of performance regardless of definitions of “natural.” When considering emotion specifically, preachers are not to perform in ways that are “too demonstrative” or “fire and

brimstone.” One could conclude that choices displaying anger, indignation, serious conviction, or disgust might be rejected as acceptable.

Difference of Performance Choices for Female Preachers

The next set of questions asked about differences of performance expectations for female and male preachers: Are there any choices that make the sermon easier to hear or more enjoyable that are especially important that are specific to men or women? Are there any choices specific to women or men that would make you uncomfortable or react negatively?

Only one participant noted potential differences in gender performance regarding delivery.² They remarked as follows:

I have never heard [my current female pastor] preach from a “damnation” approach and I am having difficulty imagine her doing that. So, I expect I would be more uncomfortable with a woman taking this approach. I have heard many male preachers preach this way throughout my life in a variety of church settings (Baptist, Congregational, American Lutheran, Protestant in military settings, and now Presbyterian).

All other respondents answered, “no” to these last questions. They did not name any choices either in the positive or negative specific to men or women. However, three people made comments describing *perceived* differences in women preachers’ delivery choices. These descriptions had less to do with the listeners’ own desires, dislikes, and expectations and more to do with the pastors themselves. One person said, “Sometimes I think female pastors try to emulate or copy a male pastor’s delivery or actions. It is much better for the female pastor to be herself and deliver the sermon in her own manner utilizing personable, sincere, humble (attributes) with the use of humor.” Another person

² An additional comment was made regarding body that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

wondered about women's self-image when answering a question regarding women on screens during COVID-19. They said,

I wonder if this is harder for women than for men since society places so much emphasis on body image for women and less so for men. If a woman is more self-conscious, this may be more challenging. I don't know, and certainly there are many men who are more self-conscious than many women.

Another said, "Culturally, men's traditional role has had more related experience to public speaking than has women's. This is obviously changing, but women's traditional roles have been in small group conversations. . . I think women are more conversation oriented, while men are more comfortable speaking out."

In summary, the questions specifically concerning female and male preaching performance preferences revealed a potential, hidden bias not explicitly claimed by the respondents. On one hand, the group could name consistent traits and performance choices that were both desirable and unacceptable when it came to all preachers. And yet, for the vast majority of the respondents, these performance choices had nothing to do with whether the preacher was male or female. At the same time, however, these respondents (when asked) could predict a female preaching performance that was relatively consistent across the span of questionnaires. It appeared that the majority of respondents named the reality of female preaching expectations, while also naming their expectations for preaching performance in general. However, nineteen out of twenty-one respondents, denied that the intersection of these two realms of expectations affected them personally when experiencing the sermon.

The lack of awareness on the part of the respondent confirms the difficulty of naming and identifying performance expectations concerning emotions. Likewise, it highlights the importance of this exploratory research. A hidden bias is held in the

context of preaching. Only in discovering this bias can preachers and listeners expand beyond it.

Pastor Interviews

The interviews with the four pastors of the represented congregations provided a wealth of interesting information regarding preaching performance. A few key areas of conversations were particularly helpful in gaining insight into listeners' expectations expressed on the initial questionnaires and in planning for the sermons. Those areas are (1) the preachers' performance choices regarding emotion, (2) the preachers' performance choices when dealing with difficult texts and topic, and (3) the preachers' own experience of the congregation's performance expectations.

Emotional Choices

Many respondents described preaching performance in emotional terms. Therefore, it was important to have an idea of the emotions these listeners experience on a regular basis. One question I asked of the pastors was how they displayed emotions while preaching. Are there certain emotions that you show more than others? Are there emotions that you do not show or should not show?

First, I interviewed a female pastor who had been preaching for eight years and had served as the pastor of her current church for four years. She named several emotions that she shares with the congregation on a regular basis: silliness, skepticism, confusion, delight, nurture, compassion, and seriousness about God's promises. However, when asked what emotions she does not share, she talked about crying. She said that she is not a "crying" person. So, it feels unauthentic to do so when preaching. In addition, she does not want the congregation to feel like they have to care for her when she is called to care

for them. She believes that she should not seek them out for emotional support but maintain appropriate boundaries. Then, she said, “Also, I’m a woman. I don’t want them to feel like I’m unstable.” She talked about watching men who cry. She commented that the acceptance of a privileged man crying in the pulpit is in and of itself a privilege for said man. If a woman were to cry, the listener might wonder if the woman was strong enough to stand with confidence in the “darkness” with the congregation. She thought they might wonder, “Can she really slay the dragon?” She spoke about how her congregation might already have an expectation of a woman being more emotional. I asked if she ever displayed anger in the pulpit. She said that she is not nominally angry. If she shows anger, it is not too much. She doesn’t want to “lose people.” She also said that she never wanted to show anger when talking about female characters in the Bible for fear of perpetuating stereotypes of the “angry, nagging” woman.

The second pastor I interviewed was a female pastor who had been preaching for twenty-seven years and had served as the pastor of her current church for sixteen years. The two emotions she most readily displays in the pulpit are happiness and joy. It is important to her that the joy is sincere and authentic. For example, she doesn’t smile during sad stories. At the same time, she does not want to be “glum.” She mentioned that it bothers her when she smiles at people and gets no response. It makes her wonder if she is smiling too much. She has a hard time preaching something that’s a “downer.” I asked what emotions she does not show. She said that she doesn’t express anger, even though she feels anger in the pulpit. She said that might be her growing edge. She thinks that “righteous anger” is risky because what she feels might not be what the listener is feeling. She mentioned examples like President Trump’s behavior, corruption in leadership, and

consumption of money. When she does express passion or “disgust” over these things there is always the risk of someone calling her “too political.” At the same time, she has learned not to care too much about what people think. Crying was also discussed. She has cried from the pulpit, but she never plans on it. She is moved when she sees someone else crying, especially during funerals. However, she has learned over the years to be careful about looking at people. Genuineness of crying is important. Personal life sometimes makes you cry.

Next, I interviewed a male pastor. He had been preaching for thirty-three years and served his current church for five years. The primary emotion he shows is humor. He said that showing humor allows him to show other kinds of emotions. Humor helps him tackle hard topics. At the same time, he said that he never tries to hide his emotions. The topic of the sermon dictates his emotional expression. If it is happy, then he is happy. If it is angry then he shows anger. However, he mentioned that showing anger can be risky, and so he doesn’t do it often. He said that he has to be “self-aware when showing emotions.” He has a tell when he gets angry: he takes off his glasses and rubs his forehead. He said that listeners seem to like when he feels sad. It makes him seem real. He has cried in the pulpit about six to ten times per year. He gave an example recently during prayers of the people. He shared a personal prayer concern (fear about our nation dividing) and cried during it. A listener emailed him and thanked him. They could tell he was “really sincere.” He said that the congregation can see when he is getting really emotional. He has another tell: reaching for a glass of water. I asked if there were any emotions he should not show. He answered with “inordinate pride.” He hates it when preachers use themselves as an example of Godliness. Instead, he gives suggestions of

things that have helped him. He talks more about the ways he has “screwed up.” When I asked, he explained that listeners have never offered him negative feedback about showing emotions. They make comments like “it really hit home.” He said that this might be a benefit for men. Some people might see men showing emotions as a sign of strength. When women show emotions like raising their voice, it is seen as anger or posturing.

Finally, I interviewed another male preacher. He had been preaching for forty years and served at his current church for twenty-one years. He talked about having passion in his voice, something that he has worked on over the years. He mentioned that when he was a younger preacher, listeners called his style “flat.” So, he tries to show emotions. He mentioned, though, that he is “not good at crying.” He may “feel some of that,” but he said, “I don’t get a lot of emotion.” He tries to show more excitement but not too much. He thinks that this is because it is “just who he is.” He’s not overly emotional. When asked if there are certain emotions that he should not show, he said no. He just doesn’t show a lot. He talked about funerals, particularly of family members. But it’s more from the standpoint of hoping to get through the service and be there for other people. When asked if he showed anger, he said that he never shows anger toward the congregation. He may be angry at a situation. In that case, he might acknowledge that people are angry about certain situations.

In summary, all the pastors acknowledged the importance of showing passion in their preaching. They named the importance of authentic emotions and explained how the Scripture and sermon dictate the nature of the emotions displayed.

However, they also named concern about being overly emotional. They explained how anger can be “tricky” and how it can actually have a negative effect on the preaching

event and the listeners' response. This tension led all the pastors to refrain from displays of anger or disgust from the pulpit.

Furthermore, they named some perceptions when women display emotions from the pulpit. With something as slight as raising the voice, female preachers can be interpreted as angry. Female displays of anger can be perceived as posturing. Female displays of crying can be perceived as "unstable." At the same time, male displays of emotion, particularly crying, are encouraged and seen as a sign of strength and genuine feeling.

While the focus group respondents had a difficult time naming the bias of female emotional performances, the preachers named them clearly. One can conclude that these preachers have navigated the boundaries surrounding emotional performances in ways that might not be overtly articulated by the congregation. Once again, expectations surrounding emotional performance came to light.

Performing Difficult Sermons

The focus group named a number of performance expectations when it came to difficult topics, such as sin, judgment, and politics. I asked the pastors about their preaching performance choices when they knew the congregation might have difficulty with the sermon or the Scripture passage for that week.

The first female pastor said that she smiles a lot when she knows that the text will be difficult. This is an intentional decision. She hopes to convey the message: "This is hard, but God is here. I'm here to walk through this with you. Have hope." She also can laugh a little during hard interpretations or readings. She called this being "silly." She said that she wanted to give people the freedom to "laugh at" her in order to empower

them to question or deal with difficult interpretations. She said that laughter or delivering the Scripture and the sermon in an extreme way helps to diffuse the difficulty and empower the listener to wrestle with the text. She said, “I don’t want them to think I’m attacking them.” Sometimes, she uses her southern accent when talking about difficult issues. She explained that her accent has been called “cute,” and she has been surprised by how diffusing it can be.

When dealing with a difficult topic or text, the second female pastor said that she names how it is hard for the listeners in the course of the sermon. She tries to imply that they will work through this together. She mentioned that she despises “wagging the finger” at listeners. She also said, “I discount my own expertise.” She gave an example of a sermon on marriage equality. She gave a preface saying that the sermon would be about a difficult issue. She softened her voice. She did not smile, but she used a nurturing, thoughtful tone. She also added that the more she preaches, the more she may not be “nice.” After years of preaching, she’s more direct where she might have been more subtle at first.

The third preacher, a male, also talked about intentional delivery techniques when tackling difficult topics or texts. He slows down, softens, and offers more biographical material. He tries not to hold anyone’s gaze for too long, especially if he is “fussing” at them or describing the depths of human pain. He wants to make a connection but not make anyone uncomfortable by making them feel pointed out. He mentioned how humor can be a way to help with hard topics.³ When asked if he smiles during hard deliveries, he said that he probably did. He said he might smile and shrug. At the end of the day, he said

³ This comment was mentioned earlier.

that he just tries to be who he is. Interestingly, he also mentioned using his southern accent, just like the first pastor. He can “dial it up or down” for certain phrases to make a point. He explained that some people call it “cute” or “charming.”

The fourth preacher, a male, said that he does not “hit them over the head” with hard topics of texts. He tries to engage people in the form of questions. He might say something like, “This is how we could see this interpretation.” He tries to nudge them along. He gave the example of preaching on loving your enemies. He asked, “Who could our enemy be? Maybe . . .” and then listed examples. He said, “I lead them to water but let them drink.” Concerning delivery, he makes his voice softer and “more intimate.” He tries to convey, “I’m not telling you. I’m inviting you into a conversation.” When asked if he smiles when talking about hard things, he did not know for sure. He thought that if it was pretty serious, then no. He also mentioned the use of humor and self-deprecation sometimes so that people know he’s not perfect. He wants to imply, “Yes, this applies to me too.”

In summary, all of the pastors seemed to take an “I’m with you” approach to hard topics. In these instances, pastoral care rather than the emotion of the Scripture or topic seemed to drive delivery choices. Shedding of authority and even self-deprecation were disarming approaches. Preachers avoided singling people out with their gaze or wagging their finger. While a difficult passage or topic might bring feelings of anger, disgust, conviction, or indignation, softer, gentler, more nurturing tones of voice were used in preaching performance. One could argue that the opposite approach to hard issues was taken through the use of humor and sometimes smiles.

Because of this opposite approach to difficult texts, I asked all the pastors about the congruency of their delivery choices with the focus and function of the sermon. Has there ever been a comment about your delivery that was not congruent with your intent or the message you hoped to convey? What was it? These questions were asked in reference to all preaching, not just those sermons on difficult topics and Scripture. Three of the preachers answered “no.” However, one preacher, a female, shared a story. She preached on a passage of Scripture that was intended to be disturbing. She went through great lengths to pick the passage apart so that people would understand that it should disturb them. Afterwards, a listener commented on how comforted she felt. “That was just so comforting,” she said. This story seems to indicate that perhaps a calm, quiet, soothing delivery of difficult issues might not always convey the truth of the Word heard by the preacher for the congregation. One could conclude that the preaching performance choices of this female preacher, while adhering to expectations of calm and peaceful, also constricted the preaching event itself and affected the way the listener received the message.

Congregations’ Performance Expectations

Focus groups were asked to make predictions about female preaching performance. A similar question was asked of the preachers. If you could guess, how would the majority of your congregation visualize female preaching delivery? Their answers were compared to the listeners’ responses.

The first preacher, a female, commented on how they call her a “lady preacher.” She predicted that the congregation would describe a female preacher as respectable, motherly, not a single woman, emotionally mature, with a loving voice, nurturing, and

comforting. The second preacher, a female, said that the congregation would describe her as authentic, applicable, emotional, grace-filled, professional, faithful, soft-spoken, nurturing, thoughtful, and appreciative. The third preacher, a male, said that the congregation would describe the former two pastors, both female. He said that he experienced one of the preachers' sermons once. During that sermon, she was "loud and intense." He went on to say that the congregation would not use sexist language to describe the female preacher, but some stereotypes might be there. They might describe her as "nurturing and caring." He also said that the congregation would not use "nurturing and caring" to describe his preaching. The third pastor, a male, said that if the congregation heard a woman was preaching, they might think there is more chance for variety. They might think, "Maybe this will be a little different." He went on to say that the congregation is open to hearing women preach and have had experience with women in the pulpit.

Focus groups also named uncomfortable performance choices as boundaries on performance expectations. The preachers were asked a similar question. Are there certain delivery or embodiment choices that would make your congregation uncomfortable? If so, what? As with the other questions, I wanted to compare the listeners' responses to the preachers' experience.

While the majority of their answers had to do with body, their answers surrounding emotion and difficult passages were particularly helpful for my sermons and focus groups. One pastor, a male, said that the congregation would be uncomfortable with a lot of "pulpit pounding" and "you" language. He also mentioned that they would be uncomfortable with raised fists. Another pastor, a female, said that her congregation

would be uncomfortable with displays of anger. She said that “anger should be controlled. Another pastor, a female, said that her congregation would be uncomfortable with “too much crying” or “too much vulnerability.” The preachers were asked if any of those choices were specific to female preaching performance. Only one mentioned a bias regarding emotion or difficult topics. She said that her congregation might be uncomfortable if a man cried simply because they were not used to seeing it from the pulpit.

In summary, the pastors’ predictions about their congregations generally matched many of the responses from the focus group’s initial questionnaires. Preachers’ predictions about female preaching performance used words like “loving,” “nurturing,” and “comforting,” just like the listeners. They also named some of the same boundaries that might make listeners uncomfortable: displays of anger, pulpit-pounding, and judgmental attitudes. Also, like the listeners, the preachers described their congregation as being open to hearing female preachers, even if differences were noted. However, the idea of “over-emotion” was a more emphasized element than in the focus group questionnaires. They talked more about their hesitancy with displays of “over-emotion.” They also named a potential difference in expectation when it comes to women and men.

Three Different Sermons

Based on the initial questionnaires and pastor interviews, three sermons were developed for feedback from the focus group. The first sermon was performed by me, a female preacher, and it was developed to adhere to the expected, acceptable female preaching performances expectations described by the focus group and affirmed by the pastor interviews. The second was also performed by me and was intended to diverge

from expected, acceptable preaching performance choices that were described by the focus group and pastors. In fact, the sermon was designed to play with some of the delivery choices that were labeled as “uncomfortable” or unwanted. The third sermon was preached by a male colleague and also used uncomfortable or unwanted delivery choices as a way of comparing listeners’ responses to the second sermon. Comparing my second sermon to my male colleague’s sermon created the potential for differences in expectations to be revealed.

All of these sermons not only adhered to comments from listeners and pastors, but they also reflected the Word as heard in the particular Scripture passages of the sermon. After all, as discussed in chapter 2, delivery choices are influenced by the Word heard and proclaimed in Scripture. My colleague and I could not merely make performance choices based on the listeners’ comments. The Scripture itself had to justify our delivery choices in order for the listener to reflect on an authentic preaching experience of the Word.

The first sermon text was Psalm 131, a psalm of comfort. Scholars have wondered if this psalm was originally authored by a woman due to the mothering images at play.⁴ A person’s relationship with God is described as a weaned child being held by her mother. Certain words and phrases evoke a calming, nurturing, humble image: “My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty. I do not aspire to great things or matter too lofty for me.”⁵ I personally found this passage to offer words of hope in the midst of chaos and

⁴ J. Clinton McCann, “The Book of Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 4:1208.

⁵ Psalm 131:1, NIV Translation.

uncertainty. The sermon focus was, “God holds us and offers comfort in times of trouble.” The sermon function was to offer comfort to those who are anxious or overwhelmed by life, particularly during COVID-19. During the sermon, I told a personal story about my own son being anxious and how I held him. I also shared a slightly humorous story about an anxious basset hound being held like a pup. The focus and function, along with these two stories, allowed for natural delivery choices that adhered to accepted female performance expectations of the listener. I tried to smile the whole time. I used a gentle, quiet voice. My gestures were minimal, smooth, and slower than usual. I tried to laugh a little and shrug my shoulders when talking about the mildly funny joke I made regarding basset hounds being stubborn. Especially, I tried to exude emotions that could be described as calm, peaceful, compassionate, nurturing, and joy filled. To use McCullough’s work, one could have described me as embodying the “virtuous woman” habitation as described by the respondents.⁶

The second sermon text was Galatians 5:2-12,⁷ the passage in Paul’s letter where he wishes for those who preach circumcision to castrate themselves. Paul is obviously angry in this letter and casts judgment on those who would preach a distorted gospel where some are considered only partial members in the community of faith. Paul boldly corrects those who claim to follow Jesus while excluding others as less worthy of grace and inclusion.⁸ I was personally convicted by this passage and could name countless times when I have heard Christians make prejudiced comments that exclude certain

⁶ A description of the virtuous woman habitation is found in Chapter 1.

⁷ NRSV Translation used.

⁸ Richard B. Hays, “The Letter to the Galatians,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 11:317-319.

groups of people. Furthermore, I was struck by how many Christians keep quiet about these injustices of exclusion. The example of Paul compels us to confront those Christians who would subvert the gospel. The sermon focus was, “God includes all people in grace and community and calls us to correct those who would preach otherwise.” The function of the sermon was to inspire people to move from complicity to action, to speak out on behalf of the marginalized. In order to bring a bit of discomfort to the listener, I named three issues that might be seen as controversial given the political climate of the time: racism, poverty, and immigration. The focus and function, along with sermon illustrations allowed for delivery choices that might push the boundaries of accepted preaching performance expectations. I used a louder voice. I used more hand gestures, including waving my hands faster and more often than before and banging my hand on the pulpit once. I was intentional about not smiling at all and even frowning from time to time. Especially, I was serious in tone and tried to show a great deal of passion in my voice that could have been interpreted as anger at times.

The third sermon text was John 2:13-22, in which Jesus turns over the tables in the Temple. In this story, Jesus is disruptive, perhaps even angry, and offers a judgment of correction for the religious establishment. My male colleague used this interpretation in his own sermon. The focus of the sermon was, “Jesus calls us to think of church as a movement rather than a building or institution.” The function was to inspire the church to move into the world in order to offer care and hope in Christ. I was in close collaboration with this preacher as he developed the sermon. I knew that my second sermon on Galatians and my male colleague’s sermon needed to have similarities for comparison. Therefore, he also used sermon examples that might have been seen as controversial:

racism, poverty, and immigration. Most importantly, he and I tried to make the same kind of performance choices while being as authentic as possible. My colleague used a louder voice. He used more hand gestures, including banging his hand on the pulpit once. He did not smile. Especially, he was serious in tone, showing a great deal of passion in his voice and face.

Focus Group Responses to Sermons

Sermon #1

The first set of feedback forms responded to my first sermon. The vast majority of comments were positive and affirming. Terms and phrases used to describe the delivery included: “excellent,” “perfect,” “good,” “acceptable,” “appropriate,” “absolutely worked,” “basically wouldn’t change a thing,” “no problem,” and “nothing to criticize.”

While the majority of comments spoke in terms of “good” or “bad,” there were also some specific comments about the delivery choices made. Six respondents spoke about my eye contact and facial expressions as warm and an avenue for connecting to people. For example one person said, “Her eyes moved to keep everyone included.” Another said that my face was “expressive, engaging through smiles.” Another said that my eyes were “trying to draw all listeners into the message.”

Three people commented on the appropriateness of my gestures. One said that I had “enough movement without overdoing it.” Another said, that I “stayed still, no bouncing all around, appropriate, not too much.” Still another said that my gestures were “natural and comfortable.”

Eight people spoke about the tone of my voice describing it as “soft,” “pleasant,” “calming,” “comforting, almost like my mother,” “[full of] feeling, passion,” and

“sincere.” One participant said that I have an “appropriate relationship between voice and nature of content.”

Almost every participant spoke of the emotions conveyed using words and phrases like: “pleasant,” “warm,” “heartfelt,” “calming,” “sincere,” “uplifting,” “natural,” “light-hearted,” “not overdone,” “peace,” “comfort,” “emotive,” “heart reached out to us,” “showing you care,” “reassuring,” “upbeat,” and “compassionate.” One respondent commented that I displayed “excellent control of the mood.” Another affirmed my calm delivery by saying, “Hellfire delivery is never acceptable.” These comments affirmed that the emotions performed adhered to the expectations of female preaching voiced by the respondents.

There were a few critical comments regarding overall delivery. Most of these concerned whether or not I could be heard. The vast majority of people said that the volume was too soft. Sixteen of the 21 respondents said that they or their congregation would have a difficult time hearing me. Some commented that I needed to speak up, turn down the air conditioner, or reposition my microphone. In many ways, this criticism also fit with female performance expectations.

Four people commented on my gestures with mixed responses. Two of the four commented on the lack of gestures. One further explained that her congregation might have wanted more gestures, even though she personally thought that more gestures would have been distracting. Another further explained saying that I might have been limited by the COVID-19 restrictions. The other two out of four respondents took an opposite perspective saying that my gestures were too many and too planned.

Only two respondents made negative comments about my emotion or mood. The first respondent said that I was trying to project comfort but maybe it was “too much.” The last respondent’s comments reflected an overall desire for “more.” His comments were completely unlike the other respondents. He said, “I felt you believed what you were preaching but you could be more convincing if you went with what for you might seem overboard with greater voice volume, great emphasis on points you felt important in terms of allowing more time after them.” He said to “exaggerate your belief in what you are saying more than you think you should. He wanted more speed among major points. He wanted me to “go even further” with eye contact. My movement and gesture “could use just a bit more.” Regarding emotion he said, “That you yourself had a positive heartfelt general emotion/mood might be enhanced even more by some of the above points.” These comments were completely out of the norm and could be considered in anomaly in analyzing the results.

Even with these criticisms, neither surprises in delivery, nor any moments of discomfort with the delivery were reported. Therefore, the intentional delivery choices achieved the desired effect of meeting the expectations discerned from the initial questionnaires and pastors’ interviews. When asked if there were any changes to delivery that could have made the message more accepted, all but one participant (as already noted) said no.

When asked to consider how their congregation would have responded to the delivery, most people’s comments about the congregation agreed with their own feedback. Besides general descriptive words such as “good,” “just right,” “excellent,” “agree,” “appropriate,” and “acceptable,” the comments were unquestionably affirming.

One person said, “I honestly don’t think they’d find anything to criticize.” Another said, “they would have liked it.” Even the participant who wanted “more” in the delivery thought his congregation would have thought the delivery was “good.”

The main criticism respondents voiced when they considered the congregation was that I would need to speak louder, just as they themselves felt. One person said that her congregation might have wanted me to speed up a bit, although she thought that my speeding up would have been a distraction to her. One other person commented that her congregation “might doze no matter what,” which could imply that the mood was boring or calming enough to lose people’s attention. Only one person was not certain about their congregation’s response to delivery saying, “Not sure.”

Even with a handful of criticisms, the overall response to the preaching performance was one of acceptance, both at the individual and congregational level.

How did adhering to female preaching performance expectations affect the listeners’ response to the message? Respondents spoke of the timeliness of the message and the comfort it provided for them personally. For example, one person said, “This was a relevant and timely reminder. . . . I didn’t find anything difficult to accept or an area of disagreement.” Another said, “She let us understand that we all need to find comfort and to feel safe. We can find this in God as well as our family. . . . It was not difficult to accept because she had the message said in a way we could relate it to our family life.”

None of the respondents voiced major disagreement with the message. However, five explained that while they believed in God’s comfort and provision, they wrestled with trusting this promise. For example, one person said, “Despite being a Christian for 50 years I am struggling with this concept. I feel less connected with God, less assured of

His presence in my life. I do not disagree. I simply don't feel as certain anymore as I feel we are 'abandoned' sometimes." Another said, "I liked [the message] . . . still hard to accept given the challenges facing us today." Still, comments like this reveal an inner, personal struggle rather than a struggle with the truth and authenticity of the preacher's message.

Three other respondents voiced some questions about the message, but these concerned the examples given in the story, not the message itself. One person wondered whether the mother image was helpful or not if some did not have a good relationship with their own mother. Another said that the sermon's illustrations did not represent the magnitude of the psalmist's problems. Only one questioned the context in which I was speaking. He said that COVID-19 was not all that troubling to him and wondered if other examples might be given. This last comment might be the only indication that someone questioned or debated the message. Even then, it could not be characterized as a disagreement.

This acceptance of the message is particularly important to note since there was a new image of God introduced to many listeners. In the sermon, I referred to God as "she," since the image of God in the psalm is a mother. One-third of the respondents acknowledged in the focus group conversation that they were not familiar with God being referred to as Mother. One participant even said that the reference would have sparked a conversation with her spouse after the service. And yet, those same respondents accepted the image as either helpful, interesting, or at least something to ponder.

Additionally, respondents were asked to speculate about their congregations' response to the message. How would the message have been received? Almost all

respondents said their congregation would accept the message without question or debate, with one participant voicing that they might want more Biblical references. Only one respondent questioned their congregation's acceptance of the message, referring to the difficulty some might have with the image of God as a mother.

In summary, the first sermon clearly met common expectations of delivery, particularly expectations of emotion. At the same time, the message was accepted and true. Two comments exemplify the overarching experience for the focus groups. One person said, "She's a good speaker. I liked her message." Another simply said that the sermon "fit the model and delivery."

Sermon #2

Like the first sermon, there were many positive comments regarding the sermon delivery even as the listeners recognized the differences in delivery choices. General comments included the following words: "good," "excellent," "perfect for subject matter," "well done," "authentic," "appropriate," "strong," "just right," "no problem," "ok," "nice," "nailed it," and "great."

As with the last sermon, most comments spoke in terms of good or bad. However, there were still specific comments on delivery that proved insightful. Five mentioned that my face was expressive and eye contact was direct. For example, one person said, "I felt like you looked at the audience often." Another said, that I "worked the room." Another noted that there was "no smiling this time" but that it was appropriate.

Eight people commented on how they appreciated my pacing. For example, one person said, "Good pause when needed." Another said that they could "feel your passion for the message" in the pacing. Another said that the pacing "varied in making points

appropriately.” Another said, that the pacing, “kept my interest, deliberate and controlled, deliberate pacing was helpful in following ideas.”

Eight people commented on my gestures, saying that they appeared natural while being more “animated,” “stronger,” and “emphatic” than the previous sermon. For example, one person said, “It was enhanced a bit more than last week.” This change was affirmed in the comments as “appropriate to the message.” For example, another respondent said, “[The preacher’s] arm movement [was] excellent for emphasis.” Another said, “The message especially in the Bible reading [was] appropriate to the situation/world.” Still another said, “It worked well with the sermon.”

Twelve people commented on my tone of voice saying that it conveyed conviction and helped hold people’s attention. Other words to describe my voice were “stern,” “serious,” “strong,” “intense,” even “yelling.” For example, one person said, “used voice to emphasize points, able to concentrate on the message, agree with tones of voice.” Another said, “loud enough and more direct today, stronger today, more emphatic.” Another said, “much stronger” than the first sermon. Another said, “great inflection easy to hear and understand.”

Eight respondents commented on the ability to understand my speech. Only one person had trouble hearing my voice saying that “sometimes [the preacher] trailed off at end of sentence” More often, people commented on the pacing being too fast. For example, one person said, “I’m not certain to have understood each phrase at the points of your fastest pace.” Another said, “tempo was rushed at times.” Two respondents wondered if their congregation would have felt the same way. One said, “Could they

keep up?” Another said, the congregation “would have trouble with the speed of the Scripture reading.”

Even with these criticisms, all respondents said that the overall delivery matched the message of the sermon. For example, one person said, “very well done. This is a serious subject.” Another said, “Yes, I could feel Paul’s frustration and anger to a degree, and yet still find understanding in the message.” Another said, “The delivery, including attire, emotion, voice matched perfectly.” Another said, “Yes, [the delivery] seemed to match. You give the impression of this being a serious topic with your clothing, demeanor, and tone of voice.”

And yet, this affirmation of the delivery does not necessarily mean that defining expectations were not revealed. Comments around performance choices specific to emotions included those of surprise, discomfort, and even possible negativity.

All of the respondents spoke about the emotion performed in my second sermon. The majority overwhelmingly affirmed the emotions displayed and said that they were appropriate to the Scripture and message. Emotions were described using the following words and phrases: “powerful,” “angry,” “commitment [to the message],” “kept my attention,” “believed in what you were saying,” “perfect for subject matter,” “stern,” “assertive,” “solemn,” “strongly behind what you were saying,” “not accusatory or sanctimonious (because of rhetorical questions),” “serious,” “passionate,” “animated,” “emphatic,” “she was fired up today,” “more drama today,” “somber,” “intense,” “mood reflected desire to be understood,” “yelling at the point of Paul’s anger,” “riled up,” “set mood for message,” and “fiery.” Six respondents justified my “emotions” or “passion” pointing to Paul’s anger. In addition, two comments outside of the category of emotion

were made regarding Paul and delivery choices. One person said that my voice sometimes reached degrees of “yelling at the point of Paul’s anger.” Another said that my pacing “matched Paul’s emotions.” Even still, 20 out of 21 respondents said that no delivery choices needed to be changed except for those regarding pacing for understanding. In fact, one participant said that the sermon “needed to be passionate.” She was quick to add, however, in parentheses, “but not lectern pounding.”

However, ten respondents’ comments pointed to a potential crossing of acceptable performance expectations, either for themselves, the congregation, or both. Regarding emotion, they spoke in terms of surprise, discomfort, and even wariness.

One participant out of the 10 voiced merely surprise about the emotions for herself and the congregation saying, “I read the Scripture on my phone before you began. Had I not, I would have been surprised by your emotionally charged delivery.” She went on to explain that the congregation might have thought, “I wonder why she chose that Scripture?”

Three of the ten voiced their own surprise at the emotion and went onto say that the congregation might feel uncomfortable. One participant said that she was surprised by the way I read the Scripture passage, which was angrily. That wasn’t how she “heard it in her head.” She said, “the congregation would have been surprised too, maybe wondering why I chose it. But the congregation would have found the delivery honest and thought-provoking.” However, she added later that some people would have found it “uncomfortable.” Another participant said that she was also surprised by the “sharp contrast to last week.” She went on to say, “The congregation would have been surprised at first but would have adapted.” However, she, too, later said that “the emotion might

make the congregation uncomfortable.” Another said, “I’ve never heard Pastor Amy this emotional and ‘old school tent revival.’ Concerning the congregation, I think it would surprise a few. It certainly would start conversation. I think a few people would be put off.”

Three more of the ten voiced discomfort or wariness. The first participant’s comment was subtle, saying, “I appreciated that the rest of the sermon was in a more controlled tone that invited contemplation.” It might be fair to note that she said her congregation, in contrast, would have received the delivery well. At the same time, other respondents from the same church disagreed with her prediction of the congregation saying they would not have received the emotion well. The second participant’s comment might have been laced with stereotypes of emotional women being out of control. He said,

The sermon delivery was different than last week. It was harder to follow and stay with. However, in the end I did understand and learn. The beginning of the sermon bounced around and almost got defensive or offensive. The emotion was a little more stern than last week. A bit more assertive. Put me on guard.

He explained several times in the comments that the sermon did not make sense at first and that I should explain Paul’s message at the beginning. He went on to say that the congregation would make similar comments. This is the only participant who said anything of this nature about the structure or logic of the message. Finally, the third person of the group suggested a change in my delivery in no uncertain terms saying,

The call to action requires motivation—a reason to act and the animated delivery doesn’t make sense until that motivation is established. I think that an animated delivery at the beginning of the message before the listener is motivated would be disorienting (Why is the preacher so riled up?). This is why it was hard to hear the Scripture reading which was read quickly and with fire.

The last three in the group of ten referred to discomfort in their congregation while they themselves affirmed the performance choices around emotion. The first comment was positive, but a boundary can be read between the lines. He said, “[The congregation would] like the mood and the emotion, especially not being quite as emotional as Paul himself regarding law and castration (some ironic humor).” The other two comments were more direct. One person said, “Some congregants might be uncomfortable with being challenged in this way—or with the emotion or mood of the sermon.” The other person said the congregation would say that it is “too much emotion.” From these comments, one can see that expectations regarding emotion were being pushed or even crossed in some instances.

In summary, the emotions displayed in the second sermon were not expected and in some cases not accepted by all of the respondents. Almost half of the participants pointed out that either they or themselves would respond with wondering or even wariness. From these comments, a clear boundary around emotion was revealed. The performances of preachers who speak with “firey” emotions and more passion might not be accepted.

But how did this affect the receptivity of the message? Fifteen respondents accepted the message as important for our times and applicable to their own lives. For example, one said, “I totally agree, and I am saddened by the knowledge that there are many who have the Christian identity but act otherwise.” Another said, “I resonated well with the message and agreed that modern application of the Gal 5:2-12 scripture is important.” Another said, “As soon as you started speaking about identity markers, I was thinking back to my youth and how identity markers excluded me. The yeast is very

much alive and working. We have our work cut out for us.” Another said, “Yes! So many identity markers keep some people on the outside of God’s kingdom. There is sometimes this feeling I sense of ‘Yes, they’re God’s children, but don’t seat them next to me.’” Another said, “It resonated with the times we are in. I agreed wholly with the message.”

Like with the first sermon, some still voiced inner, personal struggles. People talked about the difficulty of applying the message to their lives. For example, one participant explained, “The challenge was difficult to accept because following through with what we know is right is always the hardest part.” Another said, “The message was difficult because I was asked to examine my own biases and preconceptions.” Another said, “I need to be more accountable for my complacency.” However, even with these struggles, they agreed that the sermon was an important call to action and accepted the message as true.

However, there were six respondents who either did not accept aspects of the message or questioned the message as either true or acceptable. One person struggled with the example of Black Live Matter. Another person still did not understand why Paul wished people to castrate themselves. Still another described the message as confusing and that I started out as defensive and offensive. But still, he “got” the message “in the end.”⁹ One commented that the subject matter of Scripture was not appropriate to the time of day saying, “It’s too early to be talking about circumcision and castration.” Two others had a difficult time accepting comments about “the law.” One said, “I didn’t disagree with anything. However, being included in God’s family does not exempt anyone from *attempting* to live in accordance with God’s law.” Another said, “Paul

⁹ This participant’s comments were mentioned earlier.

disputed law in the name of the Lord in a way. This is a hard call to me because of the fact that there is a 'right' and 'wrong' to actions. No one should use their own views or movements to hurt others in any manner. Laws have been wrong many, many times and changed for the better. Maybe that was Paul's point." I could not help but think that this last participant was conflating Jewish law with American law in light of recent racial protests and riots.

But what about the congregation's response to the message? Many people thought that the congregation would be receptive to the message, again saying that it was timely and important. In fact, some mentioned that they had been hearing similar messages recently. For example, one said, "The message has previously been heard in our Sunday sermons by both of our male pastors with equal passion. I think [the congregation] would think it's consistent with our times and needed to jog us 'white middle class' people into thinking deeply and acting appropriately."

However, seven people said that their congregation would struggle with the message. Three of those seven people described a milder discomfort. For example, one person said her congregation would feel uncomfortable with the language used. Another mentioned that the congregation would wonder why I chose this text, especially since it is not in the lectionary. The same participant who commented on the confusion of my sermon thought that the congregation would think the same. But none of these three explicitly said that the congregation would not accept the message as true.

Four more respondents described a stronger discomfort that might result in a questioning or even rejection of the message. One said that her congregation "would not be too pleased with examples of scenarios given." Another said, "I think it would surprise

a few. It would certainly start conversations. Some would be a little put off.” Another said, “I feel that some people can’t receive this message because of the wood in their own eye. Self-reflection is hard, and not always pleasant. Also, many people feel like those identity markers you spoke of are simply political, and we shouldn’t delve into those issues. But, overall I think that people could/would think deeply about it.” Finally, another said that the congregation would accept the message but only because of the way I handled sermon examples. She said, “I think it would be well received and promote further contemplation. Although it introduced some controversial topics, it did not do so in a way that promoted argument and discord. Rather than introspection and thought.”

In summary, most of the responses expressed acceptance of the sermon’s message even with inner, personal struggle. However, six respondents voiced comments about elements of the sermon that personally questioned the sermon’s message or acceptability of the message. Four of these respondents who questioned or rejected elements of the message also voiced surprise or discomfort with the emotional delivery. This represents 66% of the respondents who struggled with the message.

When making predictions about their congregation, seven respondents voiced comments about elements of the sermon that their congregation would question or find potentially unacceptable. Five of these seven respondents also voiced that their congregation would be uncomfortable with the emotions displayed. This represents 71% of the respondents who commented on their congregation’s struggle. Given that some respondents’ comments about emotional choices revealed a potential boundary regarding delivery choices and given that some of those same respondents also voiced comments

that revealed a struggle with the message itself, one is left to wonder about the potential correlation.

Sermon #3

Are expectations of performance regarding emotion different for female and male preachers? To answer this, it was necessary to analyze and compare my second sermon with my male colleague's sermon, particularly around emotion. Just like the responses to my second sermon, my male colleague received several positive comments about delivery: "excellent," "very good," "fine," "good," "strong," "ok," "good," "just right." Furthermore, many of the comments regarding facial expression, eye contact, voice, pace, and gesture were similar to comments about my second sermon. For example, his voice was described as strong. Several people said that his pacing "kept interest high." One person said, "his eyes worked the room and his face was expressive." One person said that his hand gestures provided emphasis. Another said they were "quite animated but effectively so." Like me, he also received a bit of criticism when it came to pacing. People said he also spoke a little too fast at times. Thus far, one might think there is very little difference between the receptivity of my delivery and that of my colleague or at least that no differences can be detected.

However, when our emotional performances were compared, the remarks revealed differences that might point to bias. Concerning the male preacher's sermon, there were mixed answers regarding whether the delivery matched the message. Most people said that the delivery matched the message, often citing emotional delivery as a factor. For example, one person said, "His emotion definitely captured the passion that he visibly felt about the message he was delivering. Another said that his "raised voice was

appropriate for the message.” Another said, “He is serious. This is serious stuff. His mood is matching with the topic. He’s not light and airy because caring about justice isn’t light and airy.” Another said, “Good use of emotion and mood for setting up the call.” A similar comparison could be made with my second sermon.

And yet, only three people cited Jesus’s passion or power as a way to justify the delivery, rather than the six people who named Paul’s passion in my own sermon. One said, “He demonstrated higher emotion to help us understand the power Jesus displayed in the temple and why. Another said, “This was a very passionate scene at the temple and also the idea that we really do not know what time it is in God’s time for us is a very emotional thing to grasp.” Another said, “The statement from Jesus about zeal for the house was better understood. I could imagine the speaker’s tone called for a closing statement, with a finger pointing to each in the audience, to “Go! Get out of your building and get to work among the people!””

When the negative comments regarding emotion were examined, more differences began to emerge in the respondents’ reaction to the two sermons. Four people said that they disliked his emotion or thought it was overdone. For example, one person said,

I understand that the speaker was trying to move the audience to share his own depth of feeling and it is a Biblical account of an angry moment which he is trying to relate to today. However, for me I felt it became overdone. In today’s times, we have a lot of people being angry and loud and insistent on their voice being heard and their cause being seen as the most important. I feel what we are short on is reasoning, listening and understanding others.

Another participant said,

At moments, it seemed like his voice was raised just a little too much, adding just a little too much “drama.” When applying the message to present-day issues, he plowed through a number of politically charged statements. Those statements

really require thoughtfulness and care, not fire and anger. Anger there stirs up defensiveness, not thoughtful consideration or persuasion.

The comments of dislike were much blunter and straightforward than the responses to my second sermon.

Most notable was a third group of responders regarding emotion. There were five people who thought the preacher's delivery was "neutral" or even lacking in emotion or passion. One said, "General mood was a good nondescript sort of background for the emotions of thinking about all the time frames in the sermon." Another said that the preacher was "dry and expression of emotions was not his apparent comfort, but I do think he felt deeply about his message." Another said, "The message was of Jesus's upsetting of tables and whipping action. His delivery style did not reflect this fiery message." Another person said that he didn't seem animated. Another said, "his tone seems to say, 'You may not agree with me, but hear me out.'" Another said, "I thought there was a measure of compassion or empathy for any difficulty the audience might be having in understanding or agreeing with his ideas." Another said, "Maybe it could have been even more serious! Maybe he could have slammed his hand on the pulpit!" Another said, "I thought he began pretty slowly, so I prepared myself to be bored. Thankfully, he found his mojo fairly early."

For comparison purposes, no one interpreted my performance of my second sermon as lacking in passion, even though my colleague and I did our best to match delivery choices. Comments that describe the male preacher as "neutral," "dry," showing "compassion," "showing "empathy," and lacking "mojo," reveal a dramatic difference in the listeners' interpretation of preaching performance regarding emotion.

How did people respond when asked if the male preacher's delivery matched the message? More people questioned the appropriateness of the preacher's delivery than they did with my second sermon. Three people, unlike comments for my sermon, said that the emotional delivery did not match the message. One person said that the delivery did not match because it was not passionate enough. She said,

His lack of animation to me was not enjoyable to watch or did not help to draw me into listening. His message, however, resonated so well with me, it was not a problem in this sermon. The message was of Jesus's upsetting of tables and whipping action. His delivery style did not reflect this fiery message.

However, the other two respondents thought it did not match because it was too passionate. One said, "Well, if he wanted us to be uncomfortable, his delivery was certainly that." The other seemed to struggle with the delivery because he disagreed with the message, which I will discuss later. He said, "He went from teaching to proclaiming" with "proclaiming" as a negative term.

These negative reviews extended to the respondents' predictions about their own congregations. Most of the respondents' predictions matched their own analysis of likes and dislikes. However, there were a few differences. Four respondents voiced that some of their congregation might struggle with the emotional delivery even though they might have accepted it. One said, "His passion might be a little over the top for some. Others will think that he is a powerful speaker." Another said, "Their feelings here [about emotions] would be varied but largely accepting." Another said, "Some would not have liked the strong emotion [the male preacher] exhibited on this sermon subject." Another said that the congregation might respond by saying, "We're not used to being yelled at." On the other end of the spectrum, three respondents who struggled with the emotion acknowledged that some in their congregation might have like it. One said, "Lack of

passion came across to me, but they might not have felt the same.” Another said, “It would be a mixed reception. I’m sure some would be supportive, in agreement, and feel empowered by it. I think others would feel it was somewhat exaggerated, over the top and political.” The other person said, “I think all of the above [all delivery choices, including emotion] would be accepted as fine in approach.” This person voiced his personal dislike of the emotion.

And yet, even with the wide array of responses regarding emotion, no one—not one—voiced surprise. This is particularly notable because it reveals that all the respondents had experienced this kind of preaching performance from a male preacher in the past. They might not have liked it or thought it was appropriate, but they could visualize and imagine the male preacher’s emotional performance. With my emotional preaching performance in sermon number two, more people voiced surprise. There was an incongruence between my emotional display and their imaginings and expectations.

But how did this affect the receptivity of the message? Thirteen respondents accepted the male preacher’s message as true and important for our times and the church’s mission. For example, one participant said, “I absolutely agree with what was said concerning Jesus’s words and reactions. . . . No aspects were difficult to accept for me.” Another said, “The message resonated with me and is what is being preached by our pastor. . . . I grew up when the building and the functions inside were the most important. We were not fulfilling the ‘going out’ part of our call. And still don’t today.” Another said, “I resonated with the message very much. . . . We have an opportunity to get rid of stuff and get back to the real work of the church.”

As with the other sermons, people still voiced inner, personal struggle with the message even though they resonated with the message. For example, one person said, “Often now is the time to do worthwhile things in time we may be reluctant to do or lazy or complacent about. We may accept this generally but find it hard to practice and keep the right perspective on.” One person agreed with the message but voiced struggle over the practicality of it. They said, “the message resonated, and yes, I agree. . . . but building and budget matter too. Takes money to pay leaders and to support initiatives to carry Jesus’s message to the people.” Another said, “The difficult aspects [of the sermon] are more tied to my own self-reflection. My own awareness that I am not doing enough. So I don’t disagree at all with the message. I just need to think on my own actions.”

However, there were eight respondents who did not accept aspects of the message or questioned the message as either true or acceptable. The following comments reflect their remarks:

- I felt challenged, but I also tried to discern if Jesus really would look down on how we use the resources that come into the church. Not sure of that part. But agree that we do spend too much time in the building and too often not enough on the outside. I guess it was difficult to accept that perhaps Jesus would also be angry with the way we place so much importance on the money or lack thereof with it comes to maintaining our church buildings. Some church may try too hard to have the best space, best organ, best choir when these are not the things of Jesus, but man.
- I felt he was correct in talking about going out to help others . . . but) the discussion regarding youth selling something or raising funds for something. I had the feeling he thought—in Jesus’s eyes—this was wrong. My thoughts are that this is one way we help the youth to be involved, make a difference, and in the end discover or gain positive values in their life.
- “More political than I care for. I am for legal immigration not just open borders. . . . In these times, I am not surprised by the message. While I may not agree with everything said, I get the message.”
- “Even though it resonates with me that the church needs to do real work to help the marginalized, the minister seems to jump to conclusions about what political path we must take to do that. This makes me not uncomfortable because I disagree (I don’t) but because many of my smart, dedicated brothers and sisters in

Christ DO disagree. To speak so forcefully from the pulpit about this marginalizes those brothers and sisters who disagree. So while I don't personally disagree with what he said there, I object to the way he said it. I disagree that what he said was THE right answer, and I think in failing to acknowledge that, he sows seeds of discord in the church

- [The preacher] brought up current topics and used his personal views of what Jesus would think and do ranging from BLM to offering plates. These topics left me wondering about Jesus' views and teachings concerning the mentioned topics. I always worry about statements or sermons based on WWJD on situations without sound scripture background. I really wonder how Jesus would view our world today, don't you? What actions, protest, social movement He would approve, and He would take part and support. He must shake His head on the way we have treated God's creation and wonder, why? On many occasions.
- Individuals experiences and viewpoints vary widely so it is important to understand that this is one individual's interpretation of what this Scripture means to him. You cannot assume everyone sees things as you do. I don't think passing the offering plate or supporting a youth group carwash for a mission trip is the equivalent of having money changers selling animals for sacrifice at all. I took exception to the references about a few people leaving a church as being acceptable for doing what this speaker believe is right. It makes me wonder if this sermon is in response to some controversy happening in an individual congregation and if the individuals leaving were feeling as if their viewpoint was being ignored. Many churches are losing members currently and it is important to understand why this is happening and where they are going.
- One respondent said they struggled with the concept of "leaders whose job it is to maintain the investment of the building/property are at odds with having 'too much zeal for your house!'"
- "For me there was little to disagree with except the tie to specific events that may lead us to think little about the needs in our own community."

But what about the congregation's response to the message? Many people thought that the congregation would be receptive to the message, again saying that it was timely and important. However, eight people said that their congregation would struggle with the message. For example, one said,

I think my congregation would question the premise he made that the church is a movement and not a building, and that aren't we doing the very thing that the Jews were doing in the Temple? They would not like being compared to a religious country club, and that every Sunday the church becomes a 'house of trade, gathering up offerings and bringing them to the altar; referring to this as 'dangling it before the Lord'. The vision of Jesus doing in our sanctuary what he did in the Temple might make lots of folks uncomfortable."

Another person said,

We pride ourselves on being ‘a place for everyone,’ which in this day of political polarization is harder than it sounds. . . . to the extent [the preacher] made explicit he was talking about marching with Black Lives Matter, supporting universal health care, paying living wages, and refugees—there are conservatives politically in the congregation—maybe would not agree??? (a major donor left last fall over gay rights).

Another said, “There would be pushback. I am certain some do not agree.” Still another said,

Not sure our congregation would have been comfortable with his message, especially calling for the church to be out of the building, to face some of the social issues, not just talk about them or give to a committee for action. There would be members that would find this message encouraging for more action as the body, others would have angered by the call to do such.

In summary, most of the responses to the male preacher expressed acceptance of the message even with inner, personal struggle. However, eight respondents voiced comments about elements of the sermon that made them question the message or whether it was acceptable. Only four of those eight thought the emotional delivery was overdone. This represents 50% of the respondents who struggled with the message. For comparison, six respondents voiced comments about elements of my second sermon that made them question the message or its acceptability, two less than the male preacher. However, four of those respondents also voiced surprise or discomfort with the emotional delivery of my second sermon. This represents 66% of the respondents who struggled with the message, which is a sixteen-point increase.

When predicting the congregation, eight respondents voiced comments about my male colleague’s message that their congregation would question or find potentially unacceptable. However, only three of these eight respondents also voiced that their congregation would be uncomfortable with the emotions displayed. This represents 37%

of the respondents who commented on their congregation struggling with the message. For comparison, seven respondents voiced comments about elements of the sermon that their congregation would question or find potentially unacceptable, one less comment than the male preacher. However, five of these eight respondents also voiced that their congregation would be uncomfortable with the emotions displayed. This represents 63% of the respondents who commented on their congregation's struggle, which is a thirty-four-point increase.

There were more negative comments about the male pastor's emotional delivery and message than there were for my second sermon. Those who disliked the male preacher's emotional delivery and message were harsher and blunter than those given for my performance. However, the lack of surprise about his performance choices, the dramatically different interpretation of his emotions themselves among the respondents, and a smaller connection between delivery discomfort and message discomfort point to a stark difference between my second sermon and the male preacher's. This difference would lead one to ask if bias around emotional preaching performance for men and women affects the receptivity of the message.

Listeners' Comparisons of Sermon #1 and #2

After listening to my first and second sermon, the focus group was asked to reflect on and compare both sermons in two ways: (1) From a delivery standpoint, which sermon has been closest to your experience of women preaching? (2) From a delivery standpoint, which of the two sermons did you prefer and why? In asking these questions, I wanted to explore any connections between experience, expectation, and receptivity of delivery.

Regarding answers to the first question, nine chose the first sermon as the style with which they had the most experience. Two chose the second sermon. Five said they had experience with both styles in equal measure. Five respondents did not clearly specify. Regarding answers to the second question, four chose the first sermon as the style that they preferred. Eight chose the second sermon. Seven said they enjoyed both. Two respondents did not clearly specify in terms of delivery.

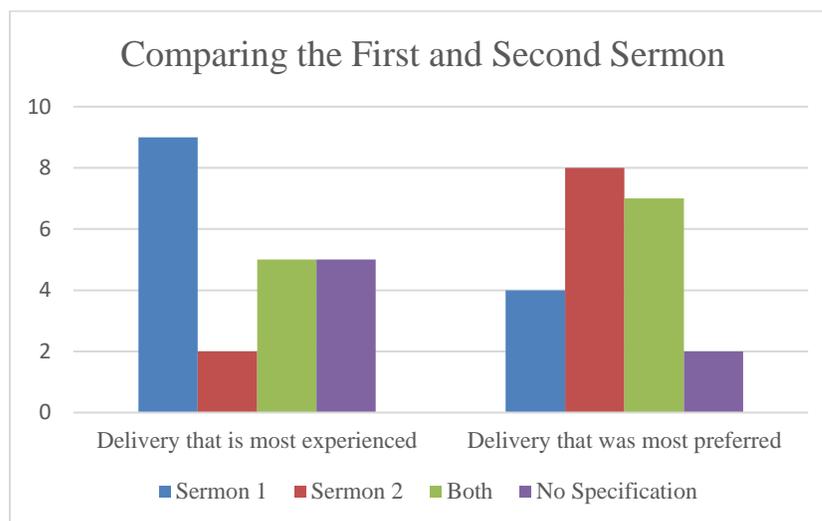


Table 1 Comparisons of the First and Second Sermon

On the surface, it looks like most of the respondents enjoyed the second sermon delivery more than the first, even though the focus group on the whole had more experience with the first type of delivery.

Deeper analysis brings some important details to light when interpreting this result. Preference for the message of the sermon might have influenced the delivery preference. In listening to the respondents, there seemed to be more preference for the message and content of the second sermon. Among the fifteen respondents who said they enjoyed the second sermon, six people specifically mentioned that they enjoyed the content, particularly the call to action and extensive discussion of the Scripture within the

sermon.¹⁰ For example, one person said, “I preferred the second [sermon] because it seemed to resonate with me. The Scripture spoken and explained and the examples seem to provide me with a call to action better.” Even one participant who preferred the delivery of the first sermon commented that he like the content of the second sermon better. He said, “The second sermon resonated with me more because of the timeliness of the subject.” In comparison, only one person who preferred the style of the first sermon commented on the content saying, “I’m less of a fan of lots of Bible heavy sermons.”

Comments about the message begged further analysis between delivery preference expressed in this feedback form and comments about the message of the second sermon expressed in the previous feedback form. All four respondents who clearly showed a preference for the delivery of the first sermon expressed a struggle with the message of the second sermon as appropriate, or they questioned the content of the sermon itself even if they accepted the message eventually. In comparison, the eight people who clearly showed a preference for the delivery of the second sermon expressed no struggle with its message. This comparison begs the question: Would greater comfort with the delivery style of the second sermon create more openness to its message?

Potential Forms of “Riffing” Within the Preaching Experience

I see two elements of the second sermon’s structure that might have aided in the listeners’ receptivity of the sermon and potential expansion of expectations. First, I spent the first third of my sermon explaining Paul’s emotions giving justification for my own. In fact, one of the main focuses of my second sermon was the fact that Christians are not

¹⁰ I will discuss this further in chapter 6.

bold enough. I said at one point, “I wonder if making hot-headed remarks is really the church’s problem. No, I wonder if our problem is saying anything at all.” Many of the respondents identified this as an explanation for why my own emotional display was “appropriate.” In comparison, my male counterpart did not explain why Jesus’s emotions would have been severe, angry, or disruptive.

Second, I used rhetorical questions when addressing controversial issues. For example, I gave hypothetical scenarios of silence as complicity and then asked, “What do you do? What do you say?” Many of the respondents commented on this technique as a way of inviting them into the difficult message without feeling judged. They reflected and considered difficult truths for themselves. In comparison, the male preacher did not ask any rhetorical questions. Instead, he spoke in more definitive statements when naming controversial issues.

Based on these notable differences and listener comments, one wonders if these approaches were a form of “riffing” or playing within expectations and listener preferences while simultaneously defying their performance expectations. While I did not make this kind of connection in the process of writing the sermon, upon reflection, I wonder if these choices became a vehicle for expansion and acceptance.

Summary

At the beginning of the research project, focus group respondents articulated two different expectations for preaching performance. The first was an accepted expectation of female preaching performance with which they were familiar. Even though several named the difficulty of predicting specifically female preaching performances, a consistent picture was drawn. Female preachers performed in ways that were calm,

compassionate, caring, empathetic, approachable, joy-filled, and emotive. The focus group thought delivery choices, particularly those that showed emotion, should be authentic, but at the same time they should not be overdramatic.

I preached my first sermon adhering to this description of female preaching performance. I tried to smile the whole time. I used a gentle, quiet voice. My gestures were minimal, smooth, and slower than usual. I tried to laugh a little and shrug my shoulders when talking about a mildly funny joke. Most especially, I tried to exude emotions that could be described as calm, peaceful, compassionate, nurturing, and joyful. The focus group did not report any surprise or discomfort with the delivery choices, confirming that my performance was accepted and expected. Likewise, the message was overwhelmingly accepted as true.

The second expectation of preaching performance was articulated when listeners named delivery choices that made them uncomfortable, that they disliked, or saw as inappropriate. Nevertheless, respondents said that these expectations regarding delivery applied to all pastors regardless of whether they are male or female. The predominant descriptions could be articulated in terms of emotion. Preachers should not be extreme in speech, avoiding stereotypical “evangelical” styles or “fire and brimstone” styles. Specifically, preachers should avoid shouting. They should not pound the pulpit or wave loudly. In addition, they should not be condescending or accusatory. These boundaries were confirmed by the pastors’ experience from the listeners’ congregations.

I preached my second sermon in a way that pushed or crossed these named boundaries. I used a louder voice. I used more hand gestures, including waving my hands faster and banging my hand on the pulpit once. I was intentional about not smiling at all

and even frowning from time to time. I was serious in tone and tried to show a great deal of passion in my voice that could have been interpreted as anger at times.

In response to my delivery, ten respondents' comments voiced surprise, discomfort, or even wariness, which confirmed a boundary-crossing of preaching expectation. Furthermore, six respondents voiced comments about elements of the sermon that made them question the message or acceptability of the message. Four of these respondents also voiced surprise or discomfort with the emotional delivery. Additionally, seven respondents voiced comments about elements of the sermon that their congregation would question or find potentially unacceptable. Five of these seven respondents also voiced that their congregation would be uncomfortable with the emotions displayed. These findings might lead a preacher to assume that the reaction to delivery affected the reaction, not the message.

Given the focus groups' initial comments, this kind of response might be expected of any preacher who presses against performance expectation. However, comparing listener feedback to the second sermon with that of the male preacher revealed some differences. He also performed in a way that pushed or crossed boundaries. There were more negative comments about the pastor's emotional delivery and message than there were for my second sermon. Those who disliked the male preacher's emotional delivery and message were harsher and blunter than those given for my performance. However, no respondents voiced surprise about his performance choices. In addition, the respondents shared a wide range of interpretations concerning his emotions, with some saying he was appropriately passionate, some saying he was "over the top," and still others saying he was not passionate enough. Finally, when compared to feedback on my sermon, there

was a smaller number of people who voiced concern over delivery while *also* voicing concern about the truth or appropriateness of the message. These differences would lead someone to assume that listeners have different expectations regarding displays of emotion for men and women, specifically emotions that could be described as serious, passionate, or angry. Perhaps female preachers are allowed to emote less from the pulpit than male preachers. When female preachers cross boundaries that define acceptable emotional performances, there might be more potential to influence the receptivity of the message.

And yet, this difference does not mean that the crossing boundaries of performance expectation automatically caused a rejection of the sermon message. Fifteen of the twenty-one respondents, 71%, said they either preferred the performance of the second sermon or enjoyed it just as much as the first sermon. This means that several people who were surprised by or concerned about an unexpected female performance still accepted and affirmed it. Perhaps expectations of female preaching performance and emotion were expanded in the focus group.

CHAPTER 6

EVALUATION

Strengths of the Project

The predominant strength of my exploratory research is that it revealed a potential bias concerning preaching and emotions in this particular context. Listeners did not easily accept emotional displays from the preacher that were “overdone,” particularly those that could be interpreted as angry, “fiery,” or passionate. When a female preacher performed in ways described in these terms, she was met with more surprise than her male counterpart, and her emotions were explained with a smaller range of interpretations than those of her male counterpart.

And yet this expectation of preaching performance was largely unrecognized by the listener. As stated above, the majority of the listeners had positive experiences with female preachers, and they affirmed acceptance of female preaching. Additionally, some recognized how gender stereotypes held by others influence the preaching event and that female preachers have to overcome these stereotypes. However, none of the respondents recognized or claimed that preaching performance was influenced by expectations placed specifically on female preachers. This ideology was summed up in one person’s response when asked to participate in the focus groups. She said, “I don’t know if I’m right for this study.” She explained that she had no problem listening to female preachers. She thought that they were equal to men. At the same time, she recognized that not all people felt this

way. She said, “In fact, I think that women have to be better than men. I don’t think delivery has anything to do with that.”

The literature reviewed did not speak of emotional performances as holding potential limits for preachers. In fact, little attention was given to emotion at all in the literature. However, preachers and focus group respondents in this study noted emotions as an important aspect of preaching performance. Indeed, preaching performance was most often described in emotional terms by the respondents. For example, one respondent said that a preacher is enjoyable when she “feels things deeply and is passionate.” Preachers interviewed described how they tried to perform in passionate ways displaying emotion in order to enhance the listeners’ experience. For example, one said that as a younger preacher, listeners called his style “flat.” So, he is more intentional about trying to show emotions now.

And yet, there is a clear limit to how far a preacher can push the listener when it comes to emotional displays. Based on my interviews, pastors seem to intuitively know these limits and make performance choices accordingly, especially when it comes to difficult Scripture or sermons. They named concern about being overly emotional. They explained how anger can be “tricky” and how it can actually have a negative effect on the preaching event and the listeners’ response. This tension led all the pastors to refrain from displays of anger or disgust from the pulpit. Furthermore, this limit on emotion was confirmed by respondents in their questionnaires and feedback forms of sermon where preachers raised their voice, gestured more, frowned and used a great deal of passion from the pulpit. Respondents interpreted this performance as full of emotions that were

surprising even unacceptable. These limits around emotion and performance were even stronger for female preachers.

These limits, however, potentially constrict the preaching event itself and affects the receptivity of the message. This was explained throughout the research and was more prevalent for female preachers. For example, one female preacher shared a story about preaching on a passage of Scripture that was intended to be disturbing. However, the preacher's incongruent preaching performance which included a quieter voice, a smile, and calmer presence led a listener to comment on how comforted she felt. Additionally, more listeners said that they or their congregation would struggle with an "overdone" emotional performance from a female preacher when compared to her male counterpart.

Recognizing this difference is the first step in expanding performances of the Word. After all, not all Scripture can be described as calm, peaceful, joy-filled, comforting, or nurturing. There are passages of Scripture that are, indeed, "fiery," serious, somber, severe, and even angry. For example, consider the story of Hagar in Genesis. Preachers can certainly form sermons that point to God's hope and provision in the story, which might lend themselves to performances of joy. However, preaching this story with exclusively calm, peaceful, joy-filled emotions, ignores the enormous distress of Hagar and the injustices she faces, injustices that could call for serious tones and perhaps even righteous anger. Another example is found in the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, the story read on Palm Sunday. Again, preachers can certainly find messages that point toward Jesus' peaceful demonstration of God's Kingdom, which could call for emotions of peace. And yet, limiting a preacher to this emotion ignores the fear of the disciples, the anger of the Pharisees, and the distress of Jesus himself. These emotions

also need to be acknowledged and performed when a preacher is listening to the Word. Given these examples and others like them, one must ask what disservice we give to God's Word when we limit preaching performance in ways that soften or censure these passages, especially where female preachers are concerned. How do we misinterpret and misunderstand the Word that God is trying to speak to us if female preachers are confined by an expectation to be calm, peaceful, joy-filled, comforting, and nurturing? Recognizing expectations of emotion can help female preachers intentionally play with expectations or even defy expectations for the sake of expanding the emotional performance of God's Word.

This playing with expectations is a second, more unexpected strength of the study. Listeners in the focus group accepted a sermon even as female performance expectations of emotion were defied. It is important to remember that fifteen of the twenty-one respondents, 71%, said they either preferred the performance of my second sermon or enjoyed it just as much as my first. This means that several people who were surprised or concerned by an unexpected female performance still accepted it and affirmed it. Perhaps expectations were expanded within the focus groups through "riffing."¹ Sermon form and exposition techniques helped listeners accept unexpected emotions.

Overall, this research identified a place of performance expectation that should be further explored not only for the sake of the preacher and listener but also for the sake of God's Word itself. Knowing and naming the performance expectations for female preachers connected to emotion can expand the preaching event and experience of God's Word.

¹ Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 11.

Weaknesses of the Study

The main weakness of the project is found in the difficult, perhaps impossible, task of creating controlled experiences for objective comparison and feedback.

Respondents in this study had a difficult time speaking exclusively about preaching performance choices without also simultaneously speaking about the message, the preacher, the context, and the relationships involved. Responses to preaching are subjective and are influenced by a myriad of factors working together, not least of which is the Holy Spirit. It was difficult for respondents to completely discard other mitigating factors when responding to a preaching experience. Therefore, it is important to name particular factors in this study that might have uniquely influenced the responses regarding preaching performance and gender.

First, I had a personal relationship with many of the respondents. While none attend my church, I have worked with several of the respondents in shared ministry within my context. I even served at Westminster Presbyterian Church for a year as the Director of Children's Ministry. I have worked with many of them since this study. They have proven to be thoughtful, kind, supportive church members. Therefore, I wonder about the candor of their responses. While I do not question their truthfulness, I wonder if their comments might have been harsher and more direct with a female preacher they did not know. After all, the comments about my male colleague's preaching were in fact more direct and even harsher, and they did not know him.

Second, the expectation regarding emotional displays was articulated in terms of "too much" or "not enough." It is difficult to objectively compare amounts of emotion, especially if listeners' perception of emotion is influenced by gender. Maybe I was in fact

more emotionally expressive than my colleague. Maybe it was not only a perception but a true description of my emotions versus my male counterpart. Furthermore, experiencing my performance in person and my colleague's performance on a screen might have influenced the perception of emotional display. A person does not interpret the energy and emotion in the air in the same ways. So, again, this is somewhat of a subjective call and therefore difficult to objectively compare, even though the two preachers made intentional choices to perform in similar ways.

Third, both my colleague and I used sermon illustrations that had the potential to be viewed as "controversial" or "political." We made this choice intentionally based on the questionnaires and preacher interviews. Intentional choices regarding performance were made and expected based on sermons that were difficult for the congregation to absorb. It seemed appropriate to recreate this kind of scenario. At the same time, the use of these particular sermon illustrations might have had more influence over the reception of the message than the performance choices. For example, it is possible that a person did not prefer the sermon performance and also questioned the sermon message. However, the illustrations might have influenced their response more than the performance.

Fourth, I enjoyed preaching my second sermon more than my first. It felt more authentic to my own passions. I delved into the Scripture on a deeper level. I believed that the message of the second sermon was more needed in the moment. My own personal preference for sermon two might have influenced the preaching experience, thus making it a "better" sermon to some of the listeners as articulated in the feedback.

Considering these mitigating factors, a preacher might consider a similar study with the intentional changes described as follows: (1) create an environment where all the

preachers preached in person rather than on a screen; (2) invite unknown female preachers to participate to ensure candid feedback; (3) consider having more than one female preachers preach—one to adhere to expectations, the other to cross or defy those expectations; (4) consider having more than one male preach; (5) consider smaller focus groups so that I could spend more time trying to understand their responses and answer deeper questions regarding the responses; (6) eliminate controversial sermon illustrations from the sermons, since they might influence the receptivity of the sermon as much if not more than the performance choices.

However, the strengths of the study are still compelling even with these mitigating factors. More study should be done around the intersection of expectations, performance regarding emotion, and listener receptivity of the Word. More study on expectations with a focus on performed emotion, particularly emotions that could be interpreted as severe, somber, or angry, could add clarity and further assist preachers as they perform God's Word.

CHAPTER 7
REFLECTION

Personal Growth

I began this research in order to explore my own preaching performance experience regarding emotion and listener response. There are often times in my own preaching where I am compelled to perform in ways that do not adhere to listeners' expectations regarding emotions. There are passages in Scripture that inhabit my body in ways that are not nurturing, comforting, peaceful, calm, or joyful. These passages of Scripture embed themselves in my body and call me to raise my voice, lift my hand, wipe the smile off my face, and gesture with the force of the Holy Spirit. While my preaching performance has been widely accepted and even praised, comments over the years have made me wonder about listeners' expectations about emotion and specifically expectations of female preachers.

Listener comments have made me question my performance of emotion in the past. However, this study points to a bias that has to do with more than my individual preaching performance. Recognizing this expectation regarding emotional performances, particularly the expectations for female preachers, has helped me to justify and even embrace my own displays of emotion in the pulpit as they are influenced by the Word. In fact, I have come to believe that displaying a variety of emotions, even those that push against acceptability, helps listeners expand their own experience of preaching.

Suggestions for Further Research

There are several research questions that could expand on the findings of this thesis. Most obviously, a person could focus on the area of performed emotion specifically. Research around anger or somberness and the gendered pulpit would be particularly interesting. How do listeners respond to anger from the pulpit and how does gender influence their response? How does anger influence the receptivity of the message? Exploratory questions around other emotions could be included. How does sadness or humor affect the listener and the preaching experience?

Additionally, research could focus on emotion at the intersection of several different gender expressions beyond the limited expression of female used in this thesis. For example, how is the listener affected when a male preacher cries? Focusing on specific emotions at the intersection of multiple gender expressions would continue to clarify specific expectations and corresponding limits to preaching performance, not only for women but for all preachers. After all, dominant expectations for female preachers do not only affect women. Likewise, dominant expectations for male preachers do not only affect men. These expectations influence all preachers. As preachers identify more limits, they can continue to play with the boundaries in order to expand interpretations of the Word, thus creating new opportunities for the Spirit.

Once clear expectations around emotional performance were defined, it would be interesting to research specific approaches to navigating emotional choices. This work could focus on the role of the preacher more than listener responses. What are the techniques that preachers have used to embody the Word while displaying emotions authentic to their encounter with Scripture and the Word? This kind of study would give

specific ideas for preachers and listeners to expand interpretations of Scripture and embodiment of the Word.

Beyond the expectations of emotion, one could research how listener experience of preaching performance affects listener expectation. The listeners in this study were asked about experience with female preaching. No analysis was done regarding how more experience influenced expectations around emotion. For example, if a listener heard a female preach with “fiery” passion on multiple occasions, is that listener more prone to expand her expectations of emotional performance? If a listener sees a male cry from the pulpit on a regular basis, is that listener more prone to expand his expectations? This kind of study might help preachers feel more confident in staying the course of defying and bending performance expectations.

Finally, more research could be done around expectations of the body and the intersection of gendered expectations. This would require a different set of literature than what is currently in preaching literature. While data around body image, body adornment, and dress went beyond the scope of this particular thesis, the focus group made comments that might lead to further discoveries of gendered bias. One could utilize much of the research and methodology for additional studies focusing on body image, body adornment, and dress.

Value of the Project and Closing Comments

This project is most valuable in its efforts to expose emotional elements of preaching performance that can be limiting for both preacher and listener. More work has been done on naming the experience of women in the pulpit and on the importance of tending to preaching performance. My hope with this project is to support and encourage

more conversation around how emotion and female preaching performance inform each other. Naming listener performance expectations and limitations, particularly around emotion, can be validating for preachers like me who have intuitively dealt with these limitations. Naming listener expectations can serve as an enlightening moment for further exploration in oral interpretation. Thus, it can be a catalyst for broadening performances of the Word. Recognition and discovery of the expectations that restrict preaching performance can allow preachers to experiment, approach Scripture with more abandon, and engage more intentionally in the Holy work of performing the Word in the faith community.

APPENDIX A

PASTOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions about the preachers' preaching performance:

- How long have you been preaching? How long have you been at your current church?
- How much time and preparation do you give to sermon delivery?
- How would you describe your voice when preaching? Tone, volume, inflection?
- How would you describe the gestures you use? Are you still? Do you move a lot? Do you stay in one place?
- How would you describe your eye contact and facial expression?
- Are there certain emotions that you show more than others?
- Are there certain aspects of sermon delivery that you feel more comfortable with? Less comfortable with?
- How have listeners commented on your delivery? What do they “like?” What criticisms have you received?
- Has there ever been a comment about your delivery that surprised you? What was it?
- Has there ever been a comment about your delivery that was not congruent with your intent or the message you hoped to convey? What was it?
- Are there certain things about sermon delivery that you consider because you are a man/woman?

Questions about the congregation's experiences and expectations:

- How much experience has the congregation had with female preachers? If possible, how would you describe the delivery of those women?
- If you could guess, how does the majority of your congregation visualize female preaching delivery? Voice? Gesture? Appearance? Gestures? Eye contact and facial expression? Emotions?
- Are there certain delivery or embodiment choices that would make your congregation uncomfortable? If so, what?
- Regarding the previous question, are there any choices specific to women or men that would make them uncomfortable or have a negative reaction?

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:

Phone:

Email:

Address:

Age:

Race/Ethnicity:

Gender:

Church:

How many years have you been a member/attended:

Questions regarding your experience with preaching:

- How much experience have you had with female preachers?
- Do you see women preach on a regular basis or is it more sporadic?
- Describe the first time you saw a woman preach. Describe her voice, gesture, appearance, eye contact, facial expression, and the emotions expressed.
- If you heard that a woman was going to preach this coming Sunday, and you were forced to make a prediction, describe how the woman would deliver the sermon. What would her voice sound like? How would she gesture? How would she look? What emotions would she exude?
- When you consider all preachers, what aspects of preaching delivery make the sermon easier to hear?
- What makes a preacher enjoyable?
- Are there certain aspects of delivery that are especially important when a preacher is giving the message?
- Regarding the previous three questions, are there any choices specific to women or men?
- Are there certain delivery or choices with appearance that would make you uncomfortable?
- Regarding the previous question, are there any choices specific to women or men that would make you uncomfortable or have a negative reaction?
- Have you been able to watch more women preaching through online worship during the Covid-19 season?
- Are their particularly important delivery choices for preachers to consider when preaching online? For example, tone of voice, eye contact, body language, etc.?
- Regarding the previous question, are there any choices specific to women or men?

Reflect on the delivery:

4. What aspects of the preacher's delivery or appearance helped you listen and enhanced the experience? This can be answered BOTH from a technical standpoint (i.e. "His gesture went with the message and so it captured my attention throughout.") OR from an inner personal/emotional/spiritual standpoint (i.e. "He kept eye contact with me and so, I felt like the message was for me...")

Voice

Pacing (speed)

Face/eye contact

Body(physical appearance)

Movement Gesture

Emotion/Mood

5. What aspects of the preacher's delivery or appearance hindered your listening or proved to be obstacles to the experience? This can be answered BOTH from a technical standpoint (i.e. "I couldn't hear her well, because her voice was too soft.") OR from an inner personal/emotional/spiritual standpoint (i.e. "The way he pounded on the pulpit made me feel uncomfortable because ...")

Voice

Pacing (speed)

Face/eye contact

Body (physical appearance)

Movement Gesture

Emotion/Mood

Imagine your own congregation. How would your congregation respond to this experience of preaching?

9. What would they say about the message? Consider questions 1, 2, and 3.

10. What would they say about the delivery? Consider questions 4 & 5.

Voice

Pacing (speed)

Face/eye contact

Body (physical appearance)

Movement Gesture

Emotion/Mood

10. How would they answer questions 6, 7, and 8?

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP FINAL COMPARISON FEEDBACK FORM

1. Thinking about sermons you've heard Pastor Amy preach, how do the messages of the sermons compare?

How do the messages of the sermons contrast?

2. Thinking about both sermons that Pastor Amy preached, how does the delivery compare?

Voice

Pacing (speed)

Face/eye contact

Body (physical appearances)

Movement Gesture

Emotion/Mood

How does the delivery contrast?

Voice

Pacing (speed)

Face/eye contact

Body (physical appearances)

Movement Gesture

Emotion/Mood

3. From a delivery standpoint, which sermon over the last two Saturdays has been closest to your experience of women preachers?

4. From a delivery standpoint, which of the two sermons did you prefer? Why?

APPENDIX E

FIRST SERMON BY FEMALE PREACHER

Knowing our Mother

Psalm 131

Every morning we take our regular places around the kitchen.

-- John, my husband, starts taking food out of the fridge for our breakfast smoothies.

-- Ruthie, our six-year-old daughter, grabs her preferred breakfast of the day (which always changes and has been known to include chicken and biscuit crackers), and she heads to the living room for some TV time.

-- Thomas, our one-year-old son, sits in his high chair with a small bowl of oatmeal and oranges (his favorite).

-- And I? Well I grab a much-needed cup of coffee and sit down at the table right next to Thomas.

And that's when it happens.

John takes the berries, bananas, almond milk, and other ingredients that he's taken out of the fridge

-- and puts them into the blender

-- with Thomas watching suspiciously.

-- John pushes the blend button. EEEEEEEEE.

And Thomas grabs for me.

-- He's scared of the noise, and he's not sure what's going on.

-- And his first instinct is to reach for his momma.

-- I wrap him up tight in my arms and let him bury his head in my chest, while his little heart beats wildly.

-- "It's ok," a whisper. "Everything's ok."

And then it's over. And he's alright again.

That's my job every morning.

-- To offer reassuring comfort in the midst of seeming chaos.

And that has been my job and my husband's job

-- throughout this COVID-19 season for both of our children -

-- in more ways and during more times than simply when we make smoothies.

The noise and uncertainties of our world right now have been hard to navigate.

-- The unknowns surrounding future plans are difficult to take

-- and our kids need comfort, reassurance, and calm in the midst of chaos.

But it's been a hard job.

--It hasn't always been easy to offer this calm and comforting reassurance.

Because, honestly, I have found myself needing the very same things I have had to offer.

-- I have needed to be comforted.

-- I have needed to be reassured.

-- I have needed to be calmed.

In short, I have needed to be parented myself.

Have you felt that way? Have you felt the need to be parented?

It isn't always easy to admit,

-- because as adults, we are supposed to be able to handle big problems.

-- We are supposed to be independent, autonomous.

-- Isn't that what we've been taught and our culture and society promotes?

-- Success means growing up and making it on our own.

-- and if we are just smart enough, talented enough, capable enough, then we can

handle anything life throws at us.

-- Oh sure, it's good to help other people, even noble.

-- But heaven forbid if we admit that we need help.

-- That we don't have all the answers or the ability to simply muscle through difficulty.

-- No, no, we are supposed to be Iowa strong... self-sufficient.

And yet, if this pandemic has taught us anything, anything at all, it is just how false that narrative is.

-- There are some things that are beyond our capabilities to explain or the handle.

-- There are some times when no amount of trying can calm our rapidly beating hearts and our stirred up anxiety.

-- There are sometimes when our own self-sufficient independence cannot provide for all our needs.

-- There are some times that are beyond us . . .

This truth is what the Psalmist acknowledges in the Scripture passage for today.

“Oh Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.”

The psalmist who prays these familiar words begins with a posture of humility.

-- he is not too prideful.

-- He certainly doesn't puff himself up.

-- But with instead with a hint of submission and perhaps even lament, he recognizes that there are some things he cannot understand, let alone control,

-- no matter how capable, how independent, or how self-sufficient.

“Oh Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.”

It's a very different kind of confession than what our modern world would profess as truth . . .

But recognizing this truth is actually the pathway to the peace we crave. (repeat)

I saw evidence of this kind of pathway to peace in a story I heard this week.

- It's a story about my mother-in-law's dog of all things.

She had a basset hound—Annabelle

-- And if you know anything about basset hounds, then you know that they are stubborn.

-- Well, her basset hound was particularly stubborn when it came to its behavior around the front door.

-- Every time someone came to the door, the dog would get out of control—

-- bark, jump up, run around.

-- She was frantic about the “intruder” who was coming.

-- No matter what my mother-in-law tried, the behavior never changed . . .

until one day she happened to meet a dog trainer who specialized in basset hounds.

-- The trainer said, “Whenever the dog gets frantic, grab her by the back of the neck,

-- like its mother would and hold her when she was a puppy.”

-- Don’t let go.

And so she tried it.

-- The next time the basset went berserk,

-- she grabbed the dog like the mother would hold onto a puppy

--and she wouldn’t let go.

-- The dog fought for a while, but then all of a sudden she let out a big sigh, relaxed, and lay down.

-- She calmed down and got still. It was a remarkable thing.

The trainer explained.

-- That the dog calmed down and ultimately found peace

--because she knew who her mother was.

-- The trainer didn't use the word alpha dog or owner.

-- The trainer used the word mother.

-- She had calmed and quieted her soul because she knew who her mother was.

I think today's Psalm reminds us of a similar thing.

“O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself too great and too marvelous for me.

But, I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned with me.”

The psalm reminds us we do not have to rely on our own abilities.

-- Indeed, to do so, only leads to disappointment, destruction, and despair.

-- Rather, all we really need is to **remember who our mother is.**

During those times, when we feel the need to be parented,

-- God, our holy parent, grabs onto us in a loving embrace.

When the noise and uncertainty of our lives and world around us, stir up our anxiety, and make our hearts race,

-- our divine mother, holds us fast

-- reminding us that we are not all on our own.

We don't have to be self-sufficient

-- rather we can reach for our Holy Mother

-- and trust in her loving comfort.

We can trust in who our mother is. We can trust in God.

Friends, I don't know how you come today.

-- What chaos has stirred up the anxiety in your heart ...

-- What uncertainties have threatened the quiet of your soul ...

-- I do not know how *you* need to be parented.

But, however you come, remember who your mother is.

-- Rest in God.

-- You can still and quiet your soul

-- because God's loving embrace holds you fast and will never let you go.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

APPENDIX F

SECOND SERMON BY FEMALE PREACHER

Not Being Nice
Galatians 5:2-12

Yep. You heard that last verse correctly.

-- Paul says, "I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves."

Paul has become so angry that his lengthy letter to this early church

-- devolves for a moment into a harmful, even violent, curse

-- on those who are opposing him.

It's certainly not how we expect one of the apostles to behave.

-- It's Paul; he's supposed to be the example of how the church should behave.

Is Paul really providing a model for discourse in the church today?

On one hand, the answer is, “Of course not.”

-- Mudslinging and obscene jokes and innuendos are not likely to promote peaceful resolution of disputes.

-- I imagine that even Paul himself might have had a hard time defending his choice of words.

-- After some deep breaths and a good night’s sleep, he might have woken up the next day and even apologized for letting his emotions get the better of him.

Maybe that’s why when chapter 5 of Galatians comes up in the revised common lectionary, it lists the first verse

-- and then mysteriously skips all the verses I just read until verse 13

-- when Paul talks about love and the fruits of the Spirit.

So, maybe it’s better just to ignore this little outburst.

But . . .

On the other hand, his anger—which is not only seen here, but throughout the entire letter—

-- has a deep and serious cause,

-- and we should not pass too quickly over what that cause is.

Perhaps, before we dismiss his emotion as overreacting we should ask why he's so mad?

To answer that question, we have to understand what's going on in this letter.

-- AND we have to understand the role of circumcision and the law in Paul's context.

We need to take a few minutes and understand this because frankly speaking, many Christians simply don't fully understand it.

-- Let me take a second and share what I usually hear people say about terms like Law and Christ when it comes to the epistles. It goes something like this:

Before Jesus, people thought that you had to do a lot of things in order to earn God's love.

-- So there was a long list of things that people had to do.

-- This list is called laws, and they're in the Old Testament.

-- But then Jesus came and preached a message of grace and so, we don't have to do those things anymore.

Friends, there is truth in the knowledge that with the grace of Jesus, we don't have to earn God's love.

It's just that that's not Paul's main argument.

-- And we have to understand the context so that we guard against simplistic understandings that could potentially lead to pitting the Old Testament and New Testament against each other. They're not against each other.

Even more severely, we have to guard against simplistic understanding that could create anti-Semitic understandings of Paul's writing.

-- Paul was a Jewish thinker.

-- So, it is important to understand circumcision and law in the way Paul understood them.

What is Paul talking about when he uses words like circumcision and law?

Well, he is talking about identity.

-- Circumcision was a mark of inclusion for the community of faith.

-- It was first seen when God made a covenant with Abraham.

-- And as God's covenant continued with Israel and the Jewish people, so did the practice of circumcision.

-- Being circumcised meant that you were included in the covenant which formed a people of faith.

-- And by following the law the community of faith was further marked as God's people in the world.

-- Circumcision and the law were not a cosmic to-do list to earn your way to heaven.

--They were identity markers.

So many Christians who were part of the Jewish faith, like Paul, were still practicing much of the law including circumcision.

-- And why not? After all Jesus himself said that he came to fulfill the Law, not to abolish it.

But here's where things got tricky, the Christian Galatians were not Jews.

-- So, they weren't circumcised.

-- They weren't following the law.

-- And so, some Jewish Christians were beginning to wonder if the Galatians were really a part of the covenant.

-- Were they really included in God's family?

-- Or did they need to be circumcised?

If we read the entire book of Galatians, we learn there are so-called missionaries coming into Galatia and treating the Galatians like they weren't quite a part of God's family.

-- They had to look a certain way, act a certain way, be a certain way in order to be fully accepted.

-- Yes, they believe in Jesus, but they aren't quite "in" yet.

And that's when Paul flies off the handle because that's not what Jesus said.

-- Paul explains it this way in the crux of his letter, (I bet you've heard this passage before).

-- "In Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, (for that matter) there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." (chapter 3)

Because of Jesus's love and grace, **all** people are worthy of inclusion. All people have a place at the table of Christ, no matter who you are.

So, why is Paul so angry?

He hears that missionaries—Christians, people who should know better—are preaching something other than radical, grace-filled inclusion of all people.

-- He hears that essentially Galatians are being treated as second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God.

-- And that kind thinking even in small doses is enough to make Paul pick up a pen and write this letter with the fury of his faith to hold people accountable to the gospel.

And in reading and studying this letter, I have wondered if that same kind of accountability is needed in our world today.

Because we still live in a world where some people are treated as second-class

-- because they don't look a certain way or act a certain way or live a certain way.

-- Countless identity markers in our society cause some people to be excluded, ostracized, or even oppressed.

-- Markers like race and gender and sexual orientation and ethnicity and income and on and on and on.

We live in a world where some people are not quite "in."

And we as the church believe in and are the stewards of the radical, grace-filled gospel of Jesus who says ALL people are worthy, all people are loved, all people are a part of the family of God.

But what are we doing to make sure that everyone lives by that message?

We go to church, we read books, we give money, we volunteer,

-- but what about accountability and correction?

-- That's a little harder isn't?

-- Could there be a place for that too?

Imagine you're hanging out with your neighbor at the 4th of July cookout.

-- He's a good friend. You've known him for years; you've raised your kids together.

-- In fact, he's the one who introduced you to the church.

-- You're having a nice time, when you see the new neighbor across the street put out a yard sign . "Black Lives Matter," it says.

-- You both watch her walk back in the house, and you can see your old friend's blood beginning to boil. You prepare yourself for a dialogue about politics,

-- but are shocked to hear something else come out of his mouth.

-- A racial slur that you didn't think people used in hear Iowa.

-- At least you've never heard him say it before.

Do you say anything?

Or imagine that you're volunteering with a group at church.

-- The church has organized a group to have a neighborhood clean-up in East Waterloo—the Walnut neighborhood.

-- There is a lot of trash that can find its way to the yards and streets over there with the festivals and school events and city gatherings nearby.

-- You're walking along with one of the deacons of the church who is a little frustrated.

-- It's hotter than they predicted, and there aren't as many people as they thought.

-- So the work is harder, and she's struggling.

-- She turns to you, and you assume she's going to ask for a break or a drink of water.

-- But, instead, she surprises you with something else say, "You know I don't know why we are doing this anyway. Coming all the way to East Waterloo. I mean these people don't take care of their property anyway."

-- These people?, you think.

Do you say anything to her?

Or imagine that you're sitting at a Mission Committee Team meeting. People have been a little nervous about the finances with COVID-19.

-- But surprisingly, the church is giving more than people thought.

-- And the mission committee has been tasked with finding ways to give away the money.

-- You start the conversation, and someone brings up how the refugee and immigrant community has been particularly hard-hit.

-- Maybe we should give some money to help them.

-- That's when you hear the chair clear his throat. "You know, that community has been in this city for 12–15 years now, and they've never really shown any interest in being a part of us. I mean, come on, when are they going to learn English? I vote no.

Do you say anything?

Accountability and correction are harder, aren't they?

And as I said earlier, making hot-headed attacks certainly won't do any good.

-- And they don't lead to the kind of unity and peace that we long for.

But I wonder if making hot-headed remarks is really the church's problem.

-- No, I wonder if our problem is saying anything at all.

-- Do we hold people accountable when we hear the gospel being twisted or abandoned all together by Christians?

I know . . . We don't want to ruffle feathers. We don't want to risk relationships. We don't want to make the wrong people mad. Maybe they'll leave. Maybe they'll gossip. Maybe they'll stop giving.

-- Best to avoid anything too controversial.

-- They're just small comments, little comments, made when people are frustrated.

-- Never mind that a little yeast leaven the whole batch of dough.

Better for the sake of unity to simply keep our mouths shut, right?

But, friends, Christian unity does not mandate bland tolerance of destructive ideologies that seek to treat some people as less than.

-- Following Jesus demands faith working through love (as Paul says), which is more than merely being nice (or even worse simply being polite).

-- Perhaps, we should not be so quick to overlook Paul's passion for the gospel in today's Scripture because maybe we need a little more of it.

The love that Jesus demonstrated was kind and compassionate and comforting. But it was also love that wasn't afraid to turn over tables and confront religious leaders who seemed to lose sight of God's purpose and speak truth to government systems that benefited some and oppressed others. It was a love that wasn't afraid to name how God's grace and love extended to ALL people, no matter what.

And that's the same kind of love that Jesus shows our world today.

-- If we believe in the risen Christ, then we believe that Jesus is still working to confront destructive ideologies that would keep God's vision for humanity from being a reality here on earth.

-- Jesus is still working to make sure that no one counts as second-class citizen in the Kingdom of God.

-- Are we?

I know that this is hard news, maybe even convicting news,

-- but that doesn't mean that it is not good news.

-- This difficult call to accountability and truth telling is good news because it is how the world changes.

-- And it's how this world, even if for a moment, looks a little like a new heaven and a new earth.

-- And Jesus is still ushering in that new heaven and new earth, even today.

Don't you want to be a part of it? Oh, how I pray we do. Amen.

APPENDIX G

SERMON BY MALE PREACHER

John 2:13-22

. . . near was the Judean Passover, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem, and he found in the temple those selling oxen and sheep and doves and the money changers sitting; and having made a whip of cords, he drove out all from the temple, both sheep and oxen; and of the money changers he poured out the coins, and the tables he overturned. And to those selling doves he said, “Take these things from here. Do not make the house of my Father a house of trade.” His students remembered that it is having been written, “The zeal of your house will devour me.” Answered therefore the Judeans and said to him, “What sign will you show us, such that these things you do?” Answered Jesus and said to them, “Destroy this sanctuary, and in three days I will raise it up.” Said the Judeans then, “In forty-six years this sanctuary was built, and you in three days will raise it up?” However, he was speaking concerning the sanctuary of his body. When thus he was raised from the dead, his students remembered that he said this, and they believed in the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

One of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is this: “What time is it?” It matters in the day-to-day of life, of course. Is it time to go to work? Is it time to eat? Is it time to sleep? And it matters in larger ways too. Is it time to change a job or to change a relationship? Is it time to hold a child close, or is it time to let her go? And who among us hasn’t looked back and thought, *I wish I’d known what time it was. I wish I’d known that was the last time I would see that person. I wish I had taken the time to say what was in my heart before sickness or tragedy or distance parted us.*

The Anglican scholar N.T. Wright says we ought to think the same way about the Bible. Whenever we read Scripture, he says, one of the first questions we ought to ask ourselves is, “What time is it?” If it is the time of the matriarchs and the patriarchs—of Sarah and Abraham—then we ought to expect one kind of story. If the time of David and Solomon, then another kind. If the time of the early church, another kind yet again. PAUSE.

There had been a temple to the LORD God in Jerusalem for nearly a thousand years when Jesus arrives. In fact, there had been two. The first one was destroyed by the Babylonians about six hundred years before Jesus’s birth, and then as soon as they could, the Israelites built another one. Imagine that length of time—a thousand years back. Twice as far back as Martin Luther is from us. Halfway back to the time of Jesus. The Temple was so central that scholars refer to the centuries leading up to Jesus as Second Temple Judaism.

So when Jesus comes into Jerusalem here in the second chapter of St. John, we need to realize that everything going on around him has been business as usual for as long as anyone can remember. It sounds strange to us that there are live animals and money changers in the Temple, but to the people there at the time, it is standard practice. The business of the Temple is sacrificing animals on the altar of God, and city folk can hardly be expected to bring their own animals. The business of the Temple is collecting offerings for the upkeep of the buildings and the salaries of the staff . . . but you can’t make an offering with Roman or pagan coins, so there have to be money changers. It’s how / things / are.

When Jesus challenges all this, then, when he physically overturns the status quo, he is doing something truly, wildly disruptive. This is someone going to the floor of the Senate and turning over the antique desks. Someone going to the floor of the House and breaking the Speaker’s gavel. Why does he do it then? PAUSE.

Perhaps it’s because Jesus knows what time it is. He knows that the days of the Temple are coming to an end. Though the Temple has brought God close to God’s chosen people for nearly a millennium, nonetheless in its final days it has become little more than a house of trade. The time has come for the messiah to take its place. Not to

reject the Temple but to succeed it. To bring God to the people of Israel not through stone and wood only but through body and blood. To be for them a Word made flesh.

It is not surprising that such disruption causes a sharp reaction. Hardly surprising that the leaders of the Temple ask Jesus just who he thinks he is. He has a response, of course, but before we hear it, let's stop and check in on ourselves. Do we know what time it is? Do we know that the messiah has come? Do we recognize that the church is a movement and not a building? That we are a pilgrim people and not a religious country club? Because, let's face it, every week we gather in the holy place and we make it a house of trade.

We gather up our offerings and bring them before the altar. Have you ever thought of how odd that is? I never did until a friend of mine, a Swedish Lutheran, came to church with me and was absolutely shocked—disgusted might be a better word—by our passing around a plate full of money in the sanctuary. What about in the outer court of our temple? What about the narthex? You know as well as I. There we sell tickets to church events. There we collect money for youth projects. Can we imagine what Jesus would do if he walked in?

Might he not throw the offering plates to the ground? Might he not overturn the sign-up tables in the narthex? Might he not say, “Don't you know what time it is? Why are you still indoors? It is time to do what is right . . . even if the budget suffers, even if we have to give up some of our prized programs, even if—heaven forbid—we make a few people angry.”

Might he not say, “Get out of this so-called holy space. . . . go and tell the world that the lives of black citizens must be protected under the law and the lives of black people loved and honored. Shout from your beloved steeple that a black body is not an illegal body. Go announce that God is not mocked, and justice will be done.”

Might he not say, “When you've done that, stand up for the poor. Fight for a living wage for all people. Insist that people need access to health care that they can afford.”

Might he not say, “When you've done that, go to the margins. Listen to the tired and the poor yearning to breathe free, and declare that immigrants are a gift to our nation. Go to the borders. Insist that refugees are not criminals.”

Do you feel it? Do you feel your heart pumping? Can you see now why Jesus stirred people up? Can you see why the Judeans push back? Who does this guy think he is, coming in here and telling us how to run our religion?

His answer to our objection comes in the form a riddle. *Throw down the temple*, he says, *and I will raise it back up*. His opponents do not get it. Of course they don't. Like just about everyone else in John's Gospel, they take Jesus literally but not seriously. Perhaps . . . perhaps if they had known what time it was, they might have grasped the riddle. Perhaps if they could have seen that Jesus had come to fulfill the temple and to replace it (to bring God closer than any building ever could), then they might have known that he was speaking of himself, that he himself was the sign they were looking for . . . that the time was right to worry less about the building and the budget, to worry less if a few people get angry or walk away.

It's easy to judge, but let us take note that the disciples don't grasp the meaning of the riddle either, not until he has been raised from the dead. They cannot realize what Jesus meant in the midst of his earthly ministry until they have come to the end of it. Only by looking back from a later time does the earlier time become clear. In all this we are the fortunate one; we have been given time to grasp more clearly who Jesus is and how he transforms our lives.

So . . . what time is it? It is nothing less than the age of the risen Christ. The church lives and moves in a time of resurrection promise. We do not have to try to imagine Christ in our midst. But rather the Holy Spirit brings Christ to us every time we gather. We receive Christ in baptism and in the meal. Whenever a handful of us feed the poor or house the homeless. Whenever two or three of us gather to study Scripture. Whenever one of us prays to God for a spirit of service in the world.

This story of Jesus in the temple . . . it is a hard one to receive. It asks us to endure a great deal of honesty about ourselves. But it is also a great gift. It points us back to Christ's resurrection and also ahead to our own rising from the dead. And then it calls us to live in this in-between time with courage, with zeal, and with a sure and certain hope. Amen.

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