



Women Preachers

A Review Article

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WITH OUR CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL AND THEOLOGICAL AWARENESS, WE KNOW that generalizations about religion, faith, theology, and life perpetuate privilege and domination at the expense of human individuality and diversity. In the craft of preaching, too, there have been too many generalizations, universal claims, and assumed truths. Most of us no longer assume that any one essay could adequately name and articulate the work of male preachers, given the vast array of differences among them, nor do we find the effort desirable or productive. Writing a general article encompassing all women preachers is clearly an impossible task as well.

Out of respect for the vast diversity embodied by women preachers and the distinctive quality of each woman's style and craft, I want to lift up a few women's voices, perhaps unknown to other women, that may be particularly formative for contemporary women preachers. While I believe that it is both impossible and oppressive to generalize about women preachers, it is crucial and important to name the experience of some women that may be transforming the craft and act of preaching. Culturally, theologically, and homiletically, women are giving expression to their diverse human experiences and inviting us to listen.

We find women raising voices of resistance and transformation today within the academy of theological scholars. We also find such women working among us in churches and communities, immersed in everyday life. We find them as exiled voices driven from their own homeland. We find them walking our city streets and in the intimacy of our living rooms. We find these women's voices in the midst of protest marches and presiding over the eucharist in mainline churches. Women's voices are appearing wherever people are violated and oppressed, wherever people hurt and suffer, and wherever people are longing for new life. These prophetic women have stopped waiting to be freed from the shackles of silence and cultural imprisonment;

CHRISTINE SMITH's first book, Weaving the Sermon: Preaching from a Feminist Perspective, explores issues related to women preachers. Her second book, Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance, looks at preaching and systemic evil.

they have burst forth, claiming passionate life, claiming new truths, claiming justice for individuals and whole communities. Countless women preachers are being transformed by these radically diverse, sometimes indicting, voices.

Carol Christ reminds us of the power in naming our own reality and exposing the powers that have usurped women's right to name, create, define, and transform the world. She says,

When one woman puts her experiences into words, another woman who has kept silent, afraid of what others will think, can find validation. And when the second woman says aloud, "Yes, that was my experience too," the first woman loses some of her fear....Their act creates new possibilities of being and living for themselves and for all women.¹

Their act also creates new possibilities for ministry and for preaching.

It is to some of those myriad voices that I now want to turn. These voices are helping women preachers know how to transform their personal and professional lives, their preaching ministries, and the larger society of which they are a part. Each woman preacher will be uniquely transformed by these voices, depending upon her own social location. These varied voices, often interpreted and shared through the voices of women preachers, are helping to create new possibilities of life for us all.

In a book that appeared in the fall of 1994, we find a prophetic critique of Christianity in relation to the lives of people with disabilities. Nancy Eiesland suggests there are two primary tasks that must be a part of a liberatory theology of disability: political action and resymbolization.² A part of that resymbolization involves imaging God as disabled and imaging the eucharist as a primary ritual place where the disabled God meets us all. During this central feast of the Christian faith the disabled God meets people with disabilities in moments of radical empowerment and affirmation:

"Do this in remembrance of me." Who is the one we remember in the Eucharist? It is the disabled God who is present at the Eucharist table—the God who was physically tortured, arose from the dead and is present in heaven and on earth, disabled and whole.³

Not only does Eiesland invite us to transform our theological understandings of God and the eucharist, she also invites us to think about and proclaim resurrection in new ways:

Resurrection is not about the negation or erasure of our disabled bodies in hopes of perfect images, untouched by physical disability; rather Christ's resurrection offers hope that our nonconventional and sometimes difficult bodies participate fully in the imago Dei and that God whose nature is love and who is on the side of justice and solidarity is touched by our experience.⁴

¹Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon, 1980) 23.

²Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994). Eiesland discusses political action and resymbolization, particularly in chapter three.

³Ibid., 107.

⁴Ibid.

These theological assertions are challenging and compelling. In recent years Christian preachers have been asked to image God as female, Asian, African-American, and poor; now they are being asked to think of God as limited, disabled, changed, and transformed by the experience of being incarnate in a disabled body. Whether any given woman preacher agrees with every theological assertion Eiesland makes is not the point. Women preachers are asked to struggle with the indicting and transformative truths she expresses. Women preachers who have a disability will surely respond to Eiesland's voice in radically different ways than women preachers who are able-bodied. Regardless of where we stand, the experiences of women with disabilities have been silenced and marginalized in human history and religious practice. As women preachers seek to uncover the silenced voices of disabled women, we all will be asked to rethink and resymbolize every aspect of Christian theology and faith.

Our theologizing and preaching today are also profoundly stretched by the distinctive voices of lesbian women. Episcopal priest Carter Heyward has waged a systematic critique of heterosexism and homophobia as that which enforces and maintains male supremacy. She names the power of life among us as erotic energy and forges a new sexual theology. Heyward's words remind us in a poignant way that lesbian women's presence and critique within the institutional church are shaking the foundations in ways we cannot yet fully discern:

If we are to live with our feet on the ground, in touch with reality, we must help one another accept the fact that we who are christian are heirs to a body-despising, woman-fearing, sexually repressive religious tradition. If we are to continue as members of the church, we must challenge and transform it at the root.⁵

Lesbian women are asking that women preachers take seriously the chronic sense of exile and homelessness that permeates the lives of lesbian women and gay men. They are urging preachers to stop denying the rising number of teenage suicides among gay and lesbian youth. Their voices are probing the theological and religious dimensions of "coming out," the haunting distortions of selective biblical hermeneutics, and the powerful connections between erotic power and God's redemptive activity. For lesbian women preachers, discovering and drawing upon these lesbian voices will be like coming home. For many heterosexual women preachers, these voices will demand honesty about heterosexual privilege and the church's complicity in the oppression of lesbian and gay people.

Finally, I want to turn to two African-American womanist theologians whose work promises to transform the biblical hermeneutics of women preachers as well as our understandings of human ethical activity.

Many American women preachers, particularly those who are economically privileged, find it nearly impossible to understand or comprehend the fundamental issue of survival that permeates and forms the social reality of most people of color in this nation and throughout the world. Survival is a profound religious and

⁵Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) 47.

theological category for contemporary preaching. Katie Cannon urges us to see that black women make their moral and ethical decisions out of an environment of survival, not freedom. She confronts us with the notion that freedom as the starting point of ethical decision-making is a white, dominant construct having little relevance for black women's lives; it serves only to minimize, trivialize, and reduce the real moral and ethical agency of black women's lives.⁶ To understand the moral agency of black women's lives one would need to understand their concrete expressions of invisible dignity, quiet grace, and unshouted courage.⁷ For many African-American women preachers, Cannon's ethical and moral assertions are, no doubt, assumed as a part of the foundational fabric of daily life. For women preachers who have been profoundly influenced by thinking that idealizes personal freedom as the source of human action and choice, Cannon's words provide a crucial challenge.

In a similar radical vein, Delores Williams shifts our biblical and theological thinking and worldviews. With a clear and persistent focus on the Egyptian slave Hagar, whose oppression and moral agency is recorded in Genesis, Williams invites us into a multilayered conversion experience. She challenges all of us who use liberation language, who analyze our social, political, and ecclesiastical lives out of liberation categories, by suggesting that those liberation categories and constructs are inadequate. "The Hagar-Sarah texts in Genesis and Galatians, however, demonstrate that the oppressed and abused do not always experience God's liberating power."⁸ Williams refuses to be convinced that Hagar's story is one of liberation, pressing us to consider it a story of survival. Hagar, and African-American women after her, have lived their lives much more out of a survival/quality-of-life ethics than out of a liberationist ethical position.⁹ At the very least she is suggesting that there is a fundamental tension within the African-American religious community between liberation ethics and survival/quality-of-life ethics. In response to the ethical shift she suggests, she then invites us to reconsider the nature of God and God's saving activity, the nature of human existence, and the nature of moral and ethical activity. She finally suggests that perhaps wilderness is a more appropriate description of the experience of African-American women's lives, and the locus of God's activity, than exodus.

Any woman preacher today needs to take seriously the voices of African-American womanist theologians. They raise critical issues for preaching within the African-American churches, and they demand biblical and theological transformation from those of us who are listening from the outside. Not only do they demand that we take seriously survival as one starting point for theology and preaching,

⁶Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988). The entire book develops this basic ethical assertion, shifting from freedom to survival as the locus of ethical activity.

⁷Ibid., 105-157. Within these pages, invisible dignity, quiet grace, and unshouted courage are explored as dimensions of black women's ethical agency in the world.

⁸Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993) 144.

⁹This is one of the fundamental tenets that undergird Williams's entire book.

they promise to shift all our ethical categories and understandings, and deepen and transform our assertions about God's saving, redemptive activity. Shifting from liberation to wilderness is a monumental challenge to the language and theology of many women's proclamation.

Other women speak about survival in ways that are instructive for our theological and homiletical lives. Donna Kate Rushin talks about this reality as "this bridge called my back."¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldua describes her life as lesbian and Chicana as living in the "borderlands."¹¹ She says, "Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger."¹² Chung Hyun Kyung speaks about Asian women's experience: "Colonialism, neo-colonialism, militarism and dictatorship are everyday reality for most Asian women....They create food for life out of nothing. Their bodies take and carry all the burdens for survival."¹³ These different human worlds stand and confront the contemporary woman preacher. If we allow ourselves to encounter these passionate women's voices—their critique, their visions, their distinctive worldviews, their theological constructions, and their faithfulness—our preaching ministries will change. Many of these women's voices speak from within a collective, community identity that gives rise to a radically different context for preaching than does a middle-class American context of comfortable privilege and isolated individualism. In many white congregations, people often speak of trying to save our institutions; we seldom speak of preserving and sustaining a people.

These women's voices represent communities where individuals and whole groups of people are struggling for cultural integrity and justice. For many women preachers, who minister from within these communities of struggle and resistance, survival may be a central reality of human experience that is deeply acknowledged and understood. This is the starting place for relevant and vital preaching. For women preachers who minister from within communities of social and economic privilege, struggle and survival become compelling and indicting categories of human experience that have the power to reshape proclamation.

The voices that emerge from women's diverse lives are filled with confrontation and hope. There are indeed significant differences among women that challenge and terrify any conscientious woman preacher. These voices urge us to rethink, to reconceptualize, to deconstruct and reconstruct many of the assumptions and understandings of our faith. These voices ask us to make struggle, survival, and resistance primary points of focus within our sermons, and they ask us to shift the social, theological, pastoral, and ecclesiastical priorities of our lives. ⊕

¹⁰Donna Kate Rushin, "The Bridge Poem," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table) xxi.

¹¹Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987). Anzaldua uses the image of borderlands to describe the reality of Chicana women who exist within both Mexican and Anglo worlds.

¹²Ibid., 4.

¹³Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990) 23.