

Donyelle C. McCray. *The Censored Pulpit: Julian of Norwich as Preacher*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. 141 pages. \$90.

Donyelle C. McCray's book, *The Censored Pulpit: Julian of Norwich as Preacher*, explores the person and work of the medieval English visionary through a homiletic lens. McCray's goal is to "present Julian of Norwich as an instrumental figure in the history of Christian preaching" (5), and to raise broader questions about what it means to preach. McCray notes that her own understanding of preaching shifted while studying Julian; McCray now regards preaching as "drawing others into the extravagance of the gospel—its joy, horror, and inscrutability," none of which requires a pulpit, a formal liturgy, or traditional authorization (4).

Julian lived in 14th century England as an anchoress, "a religious solitary who expressed her spirituality by vowing to live in a fixed room or cluster of rooms attached to a church" (7). At age 30, Julian became gravely ill, and in what seemed like her final days she received a series of sixteen religious visions. After she recovered, she wrote the visions in detail in two dramatic accounts, making her the first woman known to have been published in English (8).

Despite not having any of preaching's "authorizing credentials," McCray argues, Julian's anchoritic vocation itself should mark her as a preacher, because "To be an anchoress was to be a living sermon" (20). In modeling holiness and virtue, an anchoress represented a "living metaphor of Christian hope" (8). Further, Julian's writing can be regarded as "uplifting written discourse"—a medieval understanding of what constituted a sermon (27–29). Julian describes the radical love of God in dramatic imagery and humble and gentle vernacular, which McCray suggests is an expression of Julian's humility as a woman as well as a strategy for gaining a hearing in a world resistant to female authority. Julian cannot deny her call to proclaim God's love, and thus "seems to be taking up the authority to preach even as she relinquishes any claim to worldly wisdom" (32).

Julian's primary source material for exegesis is not scripture, but the physical body of Jesus (46). Her visions of Jesus's agony on the cross become the means to interpret salvation, kenosis, grace, and even solidarity with other humans who suffer. Julian's intent is to help others "have a multisensory experience of the Passion and a living encounter with Jesus' weak body," as she has had (56). McCray articulates in Julian a preacher desirous of eliciting in others the experiences of God's intimate love, culminating in "oneing"—a process in which "the soul cleaves to God and achieves a synergy with the divine will" (93). For Julian, the central aspects of the preaching task are to equip listeners to deepen their Christian identity and sense of agency, cultivating in them an appetite for divine wisdom (105).

McCray's interpretation of Julian's writings in the medieval context is wide-ranging and full of gems, such as the reminder that medieval publications (including Julian's) were often read aloud as a community activity—meaning that Julian's published writings perhaps functioned more like traditional sermons than we might expect. Additionally, Julian's many references to saints and apostles (John the Baptist, Saint Cecelia, Mary Magdalene, the apostle Paul, and Mary the mother of Jesus, among others) suggest parallels between Julian and various models of the preacher, from prophet to pastor to apostle to lover. McCray concludes the book with comparisons between Julian and more recent examples of "non-traditional" preachers, such as retreat leader Evelyn Underhill and singing evangelist Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith.

The strength of *The Censored Pulpit* is the multifaceted way McCray uses Julian to examine and reimagine preaching, including the meaning of authority, proclamation, and even exegesis. But this is also where the argument becomes muddled. McCray's stated priority is to

identify why Julian should be considered a preacher. But to do so, McCray aligns Julian with preaching's "outsiders," historical and contemporary, and the ways in which they similarly subvert or challenge "accepted" understandings of preaching. Thus, is McCray's primary concern to demonstrate that Julian meets the criteria of a preacher, or that the criteria on which preaching is identified should be changed, or both? Put another way, is it most significant that Julian be understood as a preacher, or that Julian as a preacher redefines what preaching is and can be? Moreover, to whom is this concern addressed: the censored context of the medieval church in which Julian lived, or the contemporary homiletical field?

In a sense, these questions are not so much a critique of McCray's work as they are an acknowledgement that homiletics sits in an historical stream full of possibilities for reinterpretation, and hindrances to imagination and vision. The questions of who "counts" as a preacher and what constitutes a sermon are well worth asking, and McCray has added a worthy partner to the conversation.

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