

Preaching Justice through Art

Debra J. Mumford

Academic Dean, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Africa S. Hands

Assistant Professor, East Carolina University, Department of Interdisciplinary Professions

Abstract: *As the saying goes, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” However, the printed word—more specifically, scripture—has been the traditional base of the sermon. Through a personal experience reflection, this paper advocates using artwork as the foundational text for sermons, and presents an approach to art exegesis based on the practical method of art criticism. Employing art historian and educator Edmund Burke Feldman’s approach to art criticism, the authors present a step-by-step exegesis of an artwork that mirrors the exegesis of biblical texts, including selecting an artwork, exegeting the art, choosing a theme and sermon form, and developing an introduction and conclusion. The authors further illustrate that preachers can create sermons that are faithful to their personal theologies and faith traditions even when using art, rather than the Bible, as foundational texts.*

Introduction

In February 2017, I¹ was among several people asked to give 5–7 minute talks at an event entitled “Re-Actions: Art, Advocacy, and Activism,” hosted by the American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky (ACLU-KY). The purpose of the event was for a variety of local non-artists from different walks of life to share their reaction to art that addressed international social justice issues. In doing so, conversation and critique of art would take place among everyday people demonstrating the openness of art interpretation. What follows is an explication and reflective analysis of the homiletical experience of one preacher’s first foray into liberating the sermon from the exclusive domain of biblical texts.

The art was exhibited (and the event was to take place) at the 21c Museum Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky. This hotel has a unique concept in that it also houses a contemporary museum open 24 hours daily, making art available to all without barriers. The first part of the assignment was for each speaker to select one artwork that would be the focus of our talks. When walking through the museum a little more than a month before the event, there was one photograph that literally beckoned me—Mikhael Subotzky’s *Sunday Church Service, Beaufort West Prison*. When I selected the piece, I had no intention of preaching it. But from the moment I saw it, it became my text. What do preachers do when they encounter a text? They exegete it. Art criticism provided a foundation for my exegesis.

Exegeting Art

Before surveying some of the basic tenets of art criticism, we should answer the question, “What is art?” Art includes paintings, sculptures, music, literature, dance, photography, animation, calligraphy, drawing, tapestry, needlepoint, stained glass, digital media, religious symbols and texts, assemblage, architecture, graffiti, and video. Many of these art forms were on display at the museum during my visit. Within those genres, what qualifies as “good” art is different for different people. The sources of art are as varied as the types; art is everywhere. Examples of sources are museums, galleries, schools, churches, mosques, private homes,

¹ Throughout this article personal pronouns refer to Debra J. Mumford.

universities, libraries, street corners, subway stations, social media platforms, books, television, and radio. When seeking to exegete art, preachers can draw inspiration from a wealth of resources.

We should also answer the question, “Why art?” Why should preachers consider using art as the text for their sermons? Simply put, art is powerful. Art displayed at 21c Louisville has shined artistic light on immigration, different forms of abuse, labor practices, and civil liberties. Art can make us laugh, cry, celebrate, and mourn. Art can inspire greatness or send us spiraling into hopelessness. Art can highlight the grace of God and critique the absence of the spirit of God. Art in the form of photography and video is used by advertisers to compel us to spend money we may or may not have to purchase products we may or may not need. In a world in which the average attention span fell from twelve seconds in 2000 to eight seconds in 2017, art can be a viable means of capturing and maintaining attention longer than textual or verbal communication alone.²

As it relates to exegeting art for preaching, there are undoubtedly many approaches that would be helpful. Edmund Feldman, professor emeritus of art at the University of Georgia, developed a practical approach to art criticism that will prove helpful for our exegetical process. Feldman’s approach has four steps: naming and describing the facts, analyzing the facts, interpreting the evidence, and judging the work.

In the first step, we are simply naming and describing what we see. We name the people, places, and objects we observe in the piece. The language we use at this point should be simple, unloaded, and as neutral as possible. Descriptions may include:

- lines (straight, curved, jagged, thick, thin, hard, soft, continuous or interrupted, etc.),
- shapes (square, triangular, or circular; flat, stout, solid, broken, concave, convex, stable or unstable, etc.),
- color and temperature (red, blue, yellow, green, hot, cold, complementary, analogous, primary, secondary, etc.),
- size and quantity (great, small, many, few, tall, short, wide, narrow, equal, uneven, heavy, weightless, massive, little, dominant, subordinate, swollen, shrunken, prominent, or inconspicuous),
- space and location (left, right, high, low, close, distant, above, beneath, first, last, central, peripheral, shallow, deep, empty, full, limited, boundless), and
- surface and texture (smooth, rough, coarse, fine, dry, wet, grainy, filmy, opaque, transparent, porous, or sealed).

Part of the naming process is gathering information provided by the host venue (in this case the museum) such as the title, name of the artist, geographical location of artist, medium, and date of the work. Feldman advises that when the title makes sense, use it for the interpretive process. When the title seems to contradict the visual facts of the piece, do not use it.

Naming and describing what we see takes time. This part of the process should not be rushed. We should stop to observe the piece using all our senses and cognitive abilities. Just as we do when interpreting biblical texts, it is important for us to approach the work without preconceptions so we can see it for what it is and not for what we think it should be. Naming and

² Michael Garel, “The Power of Visual Content: Images Vs Text,” *eye Q* (2017), accessed September 20, 2018, <https://www.eyeqinsights.com/power-visual-content-images-vs-text/>.

describing the work can be impeded when we fail to see the work in its entirety and when we finish this part of the process too soon.³

Analyzing the facts is another way of saying we should take time to find relationships among and between all visual evidence we have gathered by observing closeness, contrast, similarity, sequence, rhythm, symmetry, balance, completeness, and closure. For this part of the process, Feldman contends that we should use the right side of our brains versus the left side of our brains, referring to the idea that right hemisphere of the brain is involved in imagination, visualization, holistic thinking, and creativity. In this manner, a color by itself may not be perceived as bold or angry. However, when that same color is combined with shape and size and seen with other colors, it can be perceived as bold, angry, or aggressive.⁴

The third step to Feldman's process is interpreting the evidence. In this step, we try to make sense of the partial meanings we discovered in the first two steps by formulating a critical hypothesis. We may need more information that we can gather by asking and finding answers to questions we form when looking at the work. Questions can include:

- Where is this happening?
- Who lives here? What do they do? Why do they do it?
- Was this place seen, remembered or invented?
- Are these events real or potentially real?
- Is this work about the artist's life?
- Is someone being denounced? Is the work competing with something we do not see?
- Is this a demonstration of skill or technique or process?
- Does the subject matter really matter?

The interpretive process should also include acknowledgement of feelings that the work invokes in us. Does the work invoke anger, sadness, happiness, calm, anxiety, or combativeness? We may also have impressions, memories, or associations that are a subliminal effort to connect with the work. When we look at a work, we may think that it "looks like," "feels like," or "reminds us of" something or someone that is familiar to us. For Feldman, a good interpretation is one that fits most of the facts together and has the following traits: completeness, persuasiveness, personal relevance, durability, emotional power, intellectual force, insight, visual responsiveness, and originality.

The last part of the art criticism process is judging the work. Feldman identified three grounds upon which art may be judged: formalism, expressivism, or instrumentalism. The formalist perspective perceives art to be good when various parts of the work cooperate, reinforce each other, and combine in perfect unity.⁵ Every work of art is seen as a formal arrangement and represents the highest aesthetic value. At its core, formalism contends that we do not have to bring anything from life to interpret artwork, that we need no knowledge of the ideas, affairs, or emotions that served to inspire its creation. People seeking to critique formalist works just need an ability to see, feel, and appreciate the discriminating choices of themes, materials, and modes of expression used by formalist artists. Formalism's allegiance to artistic reality does not allow the observer to interpret the work through their own experiences, be they

³ Edmund Burke Feldman, *Practical Art Criticism* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1994), 28–29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

religious, political, or social. This line of thinking runs counter to the intention of the Re-Actions event and the organizers' viewpoint that every person comes to an artwork with a perspective that enriches rather than "taints" precisely because of the lived experiences that influence their judgement or interpretation.

When using an expressivist approach, artwork should be judged by its ability to convey emotions and ideas with power, honesty, and vitality. Expressivism is not concerned with purity of form or formal arrangements that represent particular aesthetic values. Rather, the expressivist critic makes a judgment based on the ability of the artwork to portray life just the way it is and to stir emotions by saying something new or important. The expressivist approach in this regard aligns with the ethos of 21c Museum Hotels as expressed on the company's website: "Art can anchor and energize a community, be used as an agent for positive change, be part of everyday life. Art can provide insights and start conversation."⁶ The critic judges whether a work is relevant to the critic, to their audience, or to society in general. For expressivist critics, form is a means to an end, which is truth rather than beauty. Truthful expression is more important than goodness. Facts are more important than beauty. Expressivists value intellectual and moral values as much as they do aesthetic ones.

In the instrumentalist approach, the goodness of artwork is determined by whether it advances the agenda of a church, a government, a business, or a political party. Artwork can promote a religious doctrine, political ideology, or sell a product. Since the needs and interests of institutions are known in advance, it is not difficult to determine whether artwork fulfills its intended purpose. Instrumentalism only endorses formal values when those values support a higher purpose. Though instrumentalists do not critique art apart from its ideological, political, or economic purposes, they do appreciate the innate appeal of a range of visual forms.⁷

Selecting the Art

Just as the preacher goes to the Bible or lectionary each week in search of a biblical text that they feel will meet the needs of the people to whom they will be preaching, similarly the preacher needs to find a work of art that will relate to and somehow meet the needs of a particular people in a particular time and place. My task was simplified when I was instructed to find a piece on display at 21c Louisville—a contemporary art museum and hotel founded by local philanthropists with the belief that art can provide insights into and conversations about contemporary issues.⁸ The exhibit at the time was of contemporary art that reflected social justice issues around the world.

When I visited the museum, I wanted to find a piece that spoke to me. Of the dozens of artworks on display at the time by artists such as Carrie Mae Weems and Kehinde Wiley, Mikhael Subotzky's *Sunday Church Service*, *Beaufort West Prison* spoke volumes. Perhaps it was the timing. I had read Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* a few months before. America's incarceration policies and practices were on my mind. Of the many evocative, sermon-worthy pieces, I kept returning to *Sunday Church Service*.

⁶ "About 21c Museum Hotels," *21c Museum Hotels* (2018), accessed September 24 C.

⁷ Feldman, *Practical Art Criticism*, 1994, 38–41.

⁸ "About 21c Museum Hotels," *21c Museum Hotels* (2018), accessed September 24 <https://www.21cmuseumhotels.com/louisville/>.



Image used with the permission of Subotzky Studio, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Exegeting *Sunday Church Service, Beaufort West Prison*

This photograph readily lends itself to an expressivist approach. When I saw men of color, uniformly dressed, hands raised, worshipping in prison, I felt many emotions. I felt anger that the men were overwhelmingly men of color. I felt sadness about the contradiction between the beauty of worship and the ugliness of the worship space with its barred windows and peeling concrete walls. I felt sorrow about the hopefulness of the worship moment symbolized by the uplifted hands of each of the men in total surrender to the will of God, and the hopelessness of the social realities that may have led to their incarceration and that will undoubtedly continue to shape their realities if/when they are released. I wrestled with the contradiction between the brightness and joyfulness of the color of their orange jump suits and the darkness of their skin, which was analogous to their existential states. I was simultaneously heartened that they found God in that space and mad at God that such spaces continue to exist.

When I read the object label (the label next to art in museums that gives the name of the artist, title, and description of the work), my initial thoughts were borne out. This picture was one of Sunday worship in a prison. It was one of a series of photographs Mikhael Subotzky took in 2006 in the city of Beaufort West, South Africa. I believed that the photographer was offering a social critique that I wanted to delve into more deeply.

Next, I engaged in Feldman's naming and describing step. I decided I needed to capture all my thoughts and questions immediately. I took a picture of the photo with my phone and went to the restaurant in the hotel. I borrowed a pen. Like a business person with a burgeoning idea, I commandeered a few napkins and began to write down my thoughts and to capture all the questions that flooded my mind. I had questions about the context of the photograph and the men in it. Who were these men? Where in South Africa was Beaufort West prison, exactly? Who was Mikhael Subotzky? What compelled him to take the picture? What was his intent in publishing it? Why were these men worshipping? Whose God were they worshipping? Who was leading them in worship? How did these men come to be in prison? How long will they be there? What will life be like for them when they leave? Will the one leading them in worship be there for them when they leave? I had so many questions. Some of the answers I got from the object label. Some I got from the artist's website.

During the days and weeks leading up to the ACLU-KY event, I began exegeting the photograph, researching my questions and looking at the photo at least once a day to see what else I could uncover. As it happens when exegeting biblical texts, I did not seek or find answers to all my questions. However, I was able to find answers to some very important ones. I found that Mikhael Subotzky is a film, video, and photographic artist who was born in 1981 in Cape Town, South Africa. He currently lives and works in Johannesburg.⁹ *Sunday Church Service, Beaufort West Prison* was part of a Subotzky's first collection of photographic work entitled *Die Vier Hoeke (The Four Corners)*. It was an in-depth study of the South African penal system. His intent was to highlight the contradictions between the public rhetoric of an apartheid-free South Africa and the imprisonment of men supposedly set free from racial oppression.

Beaufort West is a town of 37,000 in rural South Africa. Two-thirds of the adults in the town are unemployed. The murder rate is ten times the rate of New York and twenty times the rate of London. Unlike prisons in the United States that are often relegated to the outskirts of cities and towns, away from much of public view and leading to burdensome treks for families, Beaufort West Prison sits at the center of a traffic circle on South Africa's longest highway, which connects the northern and southern provinces. Millions of cars pass by the prison every year, normalizing its presence in the town. The centrality of the prison renders it inescapable. That is, part of the townspeople's lived experiences could include being incarcerated in their own neighborhood.¹⁰

I felt that demographic information about the prison population in South Africa would be helpful for my interpretation. Since I would be presenting to people familiar with mass incarceration in the United States, comparing statistics of the two countries could be both enlightening and informative. In 2017, the total population of the Justice and Correctional Service Ministry in South Africa was 158,111. Two hundred eighty people per 100,000 were incarcerated. Female prisoners made up 2.6% of the total population. There were 243 prisons with an occupancy level of 136. At the end of 2016, 79.6% of the total prison population in South Africa was black, 18.2% was coloured, and 1.6% was white.¹¹ In comparison, in the United States in 2016, 2,121,600 people were incarcerated: 704,500 in local jails, 1,228,800 in state prisons, and 188,300 with the Federal Bureau of Corrections. Six hundred fifty-five people per 100,000 people were incarcerated. Females made up 9.8% of the total incarcerated population. The occupancy rate was 103.9% in 2014.¹² African Americans made up 13.4% of the total U.S. population but 37.9% of the prison population.

There are many different prison ministries offering services in South African prisons. For many of the prisoners, religion is something they adopt after being incarcerated to help them cope with imprisonment. Some prisoners attend worship because they are lonely and in need of community. Some see attending worship and faith in God as a means of getting their lives back

⁹ Mikhael Subotzky, *Mikhael Subotzky Archive*, 2015 ed. (Cape Town, South Africa: Mikhael Subotzky, 2006).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Ina Skosana & Ruth Hopkins G Makou, "Fact Sheet: The State of South Africa's Prisons," *Daily Maverick* (2017), accessed September 23, 2018, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-07-18-fact-sheet-the-state-of-south-africas-prisons/>.

¹² U.S. Department of Justice, *Prisoners in 2016*, by E. Ann Carson, Vol. NCJ 251149 pt. January 2018 (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018), 13.

on track. For those who have faith when they go to prison, their faith often becomes more intense and even more essential to their daily lives.¹³

Choosing the Theme

After exegeting the work, my prevailing thought was that though these men are highly visible in the picture because they are at the center of it and because they are wearing orange, the systems that maintain their incarceration and oppression seek to render them invisible, dispensable, and irrelevant. Therefore, I developed a theme for my sermon: People committed to justice must see all people as worthy of justice. The title was *A Strange Sort of Sanctuary*.

Underlying Theology

After gathering some exegetical information, it is important for the preacher to identify the theology that will inform their interpretation of the work. My theological underpinnings include the belief that all people are created in the image of God, though not all people reflect the image of God in their interactions with others. To be the image of God means being human. Being human means having the freedom: to be creative, to treat others humanely, and to oppose acts of inhumanity. Anyone who intentionally oppresses and marginalizes others ceases to be the image of God. God is not just a pious feeling in human hearts or a being who oversees the affairs of humans on earth. God is a spirit that is active in concrete historical situations of human existence. Experiencing the salvation of God is not just about confession and repentance of sin. Salvation means having a relationship with God that requires us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Loving our neighbors means not only praying for them and wishing the best for them but also being committed to working on their behalf to ensure they experience the goodness and justice of God embodied in the reign of God.¹⁴ Repentance of sin requires confession of sin and a commitment to changing sinful behavior. Sincere repentance is rewarded with God's forgiveness and forgetfulness. God remembers our sins no more after repentance. The people of God should seek ways to embody God's forgiveness and forgetfulness in the ways we treat those who have paid their debt to society through our penal systems, which are punitive rather than restorative.

Sermon Form

The next step in the process of preaching art is selecting an appropriate sermon form. Much has been written about the need for the form of the sermon to reflect the form of the text being interpreted. So, what does this mean for art in general and photography in particular? I wanted to allow my observations and questions about the photograph to serve as a guide throughout the sermon. Therefore, the form of the sermon was interrogative-expository. Often when we think of expository preaching, our thoughts focus solely on *form* rather than *content*. Many of us have experienced preaching in which the preacher reads a verse of scripture, explains its meaning, and then shares a story or illustration to reinforce the meaning they have just declared. Therefore, for many of us this verse-by-verse structure is what we have in mind when we think "expository preaching." However, after years of studying many forms of preaching in general and expository preaching in particular, I know that the term "expository" represents

¹³ Zoe Psiakis, "South African Prison Life: The Importance of Religion to Inmates and Ex-Offenders," *VU Break Through Blog* (2017), <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/universityfundingprograms/2017/10/south-african-prison-life-the-importance-of-religion-to-inmates-and-ex-offenders/>.

¹⁴ Debra J. Mumford, *Envisioning the Reign of God: Preaching for Tomorrow* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2019), 204.

much more than form. Expository designates mode of origination. An expository sermon originates directly from the texts (usually biblical ones) through careful exegesis (often organically so) and explains the text's meaning and implications for faith and practice.

In addition, I did not believe this sermon would be best delivered as a narrative. A photograph as provocative as *Sunday Church Service* needed a delivery system that was equally provocative. The unique occasion, an evening of stimulating talks about activism and social justice using artwork as the point of departure, needed a delivery form that was equally as dynamic. I chose to deliver the sermon in free verse. Free verse is a type of poetry that does not adhere to any strict meter or have a set rhyme scheme. Lines can have any length. The poet (or preacher in this case) can insert line breaks in the middle of thoughts or in the middle of words. The number of stanzas is also the choice of the poet. The length of my stanzas varied from five lines to thirteen. In the first five stanzas, after the introduction, I noted what I saw when I looked deeply into the photograph. In the subsequent six stanzas, I highlighted questions raised for me when I studied the photograph intensely. Within the stanzas I used repetition and alliteration to punctuate my thoughts and questions.

Development of Introduction and Conclusion

When I delivered this sermon, the photograph was projected on a screen behind me. A display of the art is necessary for preaching so the congregation can experience the art as they experience the sermon. I introduced the sermon with the name of the artwork, the photographer, and the work's country of origin. From there I segued into what I saw in the piece. I ended the sermon with two different types of rhetorical repetition: *epimone* and *anaphora*. *Epimone* is the repetition of a phrase or question for emphasis. I repeated the phrase "If we can truly see" as a charge for the people to look beyond the picture of worship and into the penal system that keeps men like the ones in the image in captivity when they are inside and outside the prison. *Anaphora* is the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of subsequent lines. I used repetition of phrases such as "past our experiences, past our biases, past our prejudices" as a "See what?" response to the "If we can truly see" *epimone*.

Preaching art has many of the same challenges as preaching biblical texts: finding the right text (artwork), exegesis, determining a theme, and developing effective introductions and conclusions. Determining the form of the sermon can be particularly challenging because different types of art can lend themselves to a range of possibilities. Feldman's approach to art criticism, namely expressivism, provided an appropriate framework for exegeting the complex and stimulating artwork exhibited at the museum. As expected by the event organizers, the exhibit evoked deep and stirring reactions from the speakers and attendees alike. For me, the experience reinforced the power of image for preaching. Though we most often use our words to create images, let us also occasionally allow images to inspire our words.

The 5–7 minute sermon is included below in its entirety.

A Strange Sort of Sanctuary

In South African photographer
Mikhael Subotzky's
"Sunday Church Service, Beaufort West Prison"

I see...
This is a strange sort of sanctuary.
Men — in worship
Hands raised in complete surrender to God.
Men in worship — in prison
Hands raised in worship after surrendering their freedom to the state.

When I see this picture, I see men who have been convicted,
Found guilty in a court,
Sentenced for their crimes,
Showing their conviction for the one who created them,
Who formed, and fashioned them in their mother's wombs
In their creator's image.

When I see **this** picture,
I see men of color who are marginalized,
Who are under-educated,
Who are under-employed,
Who are underpaid,
But overrepresented

When I see **this** picture
I see men of color -
Who are oppressed because of their color,
Who are marginalized because of their color -
Forced to wear colors that further mark them as "other."

When I see this picture
I see containment.
Barred windows,
Concrete walls and concrete floors to keep in
Those society deems too dangerous, too brown, too black to be out.

When I see this picture
I have questions.
Whose God are they worshipping?
The God of their oppressors or the God of the oppressed?
A God of liberation or a God of marginalization?
A God who cares only about their souls,
or a God who cares about their minds and bodies as well?

When I see this picture
I have questions.
Why are they allowed to worship?
To forget their pasts, or cope with their present?
To control their minds or transform their futures?
To give them hope for this life or the life to come?

When I see this picture I have questions.
Is apartheid truly over?
Is discrimination by color, caste and ethnicity truly over?
Or has it morphed into a new form
Much like Jim Crow?

When I see this picture
I am made to wonder
Will the one up front who looks like them,
Who is leading them.
Who is beseeching them to love God,
Be there for them, when their time for prison-worship is over?
Will the one up front who looks like them,
Who is leading them.
Who is beseeching them to love God.
Love them unconditionally when they are on the other side of the concrete walls?

When I see this picture
I have more questions
Will the state who dresses them and feeds them on the inside,
Continue to dress them and feed them when they are on the outside?
Or will these worshippers of God
Be left to feed themselves?
Will these worshippers of God
Be left to dress themselves?
Will these worshippers of God
Be left on their own
Without training, without skills, without hope for a tomorrow
Any different than their yesterday?

Jesus said he was anointed to bring good news to the poor,
To proclaim release to the captive,
To let the oppressed go free.
But, where is the good news for these brothers?
Will they ever be released from captivity?
Will they ever be anything but oppressed?
Can these men ever be free?
Maybe.

If — we can ever truly see
 I mean not with open eyes,
 But with open hearts,
 With open minds
If we can ever truly see,
 past our experiences,
 past our biases,
 past our prejudices,
If we can ever truly see
 Beyond our politics,
 Even beyond our religion.
If we can truly see —
See each of them very differently
As the children of God they were created to be.¹⁵

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¹⁵ Videos of the sermon and other talks are available at:
<https://www.facebook.com/ACLUofKY/videos/10154738381321072/>