

**Considering the Social Action within Preaching:  
Reading 1 Samuel 3 through the Lens of G. H. Mead and H. R. Niebuhr**

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***Abstract:** This essay proposes a method to both analyze and create social action within the sermon and examines the process through the narrative example of Samuel's calling in 1 Samuel 3. The method derives from George H. Mead's sociological development theory regarding the self's emergence within a social context, in conjunction with the qualities of radical monotheistic faith outlined by H. Richard Niebuhr. In using their scholarship, we discover how the social action occurring between Samuel, Eli, and God solidifies, shifts, deconstructs, or creates categories of understanding. When preachers pay attention to these realities, they are not only equipped to study the logistics of their sermons but are challenged to strive for an ecological interconnectivity that moves beyond the discursive into the transformative.*

Several years ago, Colgate ran an ad that featured a running tap. It began inconspicuously enough as someone approached a bathroom sink to brush their teeth, but after they turned on the tap full blast to rinse their brush, the camera did not leave the tight frame of the faucet. The water poured out to the sound of scrubbing teeth. Soon a hand appeared holding a dirty pear under the cascade to rinse it clean. Next, a second set of hands held out a bowl to fill. Finally, a young girl in a frayed shirt approached the sink, her chin barely clearing the bowl's edge. She reached out with cupped hands under the stream to ultimately bring a drink of water to her mouth. The tagline: every drop counts. Years later I don't remember the data about the average American pouring four gallons of water down the drain while they brush their teeth, or that this is more clean water than many people have access to each week.<sup>1</sup> I remember that girl reaching out for a drink whenever I brush my teeth and forget to shut off the water. I see those little hands under my own faucet before I remember to slam my own down to stop the stream. I will never brush my teeth the same way again.

Preachers long to have this kind of effect within their sermons, communicating macro truths in a way that impacts the micro faith realities of the listener. I contend that one way to both evaluate and approach building these connections is through the lens of social development, specifically the development theory of American sociologist George Herbert Mead. Mead asserts that the self forms in symbiotic relationship to a social world through social acts. We can only learn about ourselves as we learn about others, creating categories of understanding which affect both our personal being and overall environment. In considering the impact of the commercial above, a Meadian approach reasons that a new relationship formed between my individual self, who has regular access to a seemingly infinite supply of clean water, and an *other* who does not. While I had known about communities with a paucity of clean, accessible water, this commercial created a new paradigm of knowledge by forming a more direct and concrete relationship between myself and those communities. Now, the act of brushing my teeth carries additional layers of social significance as I perceive my action through the eyes of another. This new

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<sup>1</sup> Colgate US, "Colgate #EveryDrop Counts." *YouTube* video, 0:30. January 22, 2016  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5Ar0eCp6uE>. Accessed September 14, 2020.

connection fundamentally shifted my category of understanding around water and impacted how I engaged with it in my own daily, lived experience.

In this essay I will demonstrate how looking at preaching through the lens of social development can reveal relational connections between categories of understanding. By analyzing the social action of sermons, we will see how the preacher reaffirms, corrects, dismantles, or creates new relationships between these categories, not simply to methodically look at structures but to empower the preacher to create transformational moments for the listener. The story of Samuel's calling in 1 Samuel 3 offers a helpful example through which to examine this method by looking at each of the three actors involved. Mead's insight into self-development through social action becomes apparent in Samuel as the listener. Samuel cannot participate in the social action initiated by God. He must first go to Eli, who empowers him to make new connections, enabling Samuel to respond to the voice of God. Alongside Mead, I will also bring in the scholarship of theologian H. Richard Niebuhr. Niebuhr bridges the gap between a sociological approach and the phenomenological realities of faith in preaching. Here we can examine how God participates in this narrative transcendentally beyond Samuel's reality, while also moving through it to reach him. In the final section of this paper I will focus on Eli's role as "preacher." Eli's preaching action appears throughout all portions of the narrative but the power of his social action requires particular attention. Joshua Daniel, a religious philosopher, offers a way to navigate this power through an *ecological conscience* found in the connectivity between Mead and Niebuhr's scholarship. By focusing on the four characteristics of an ecological interconnectivity, preaching moves beyond description into transformation. In God's calling of Samuel, we see connectivity flourish between God who reaches through social reality to connect with humanity and empowers humanity to reach out to others.

### **Samuel, the Listener, Within a Holy Social Action**

The primary foundation of Mead's sociological work is his theory of role-taking, which contends that selfhood develops by holding the positionality of another subject within its imaginary. As the fully developed self takes on the role of another, it imagines the position of the other, remains differentiated from the other, but is affected by seeing itself through the eyes of the other, both particular and generalized. The concept of this process weaves throughout most of Mead's work but is emphasized in *Mind, Self, and Society*. Other theological scholars have brought Mead's sociological work into questions about practical theology, including faith development,<sup>2</sup> liturgical formation,<sup>3</sup> and intercessory prayer.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, however, I will focus on one aspect of this role-taking process, the role of the other, and how we, when drawing from categories of understanding about the other, may communicate effectively with the other.

Mead argues that in the process of role-taking we develop our selfhood through the gaze of others. While this includes particular others, the self typically relies on a general consolidation

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<sup>2</sup> Larry G Day, "The Development of the God Concept: A Symbolic Interaction Approach," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 3, no. 3 (1975): 172–78.

<sup>3</sup> E. Byron Anderson, *Worship and Christian Identity: Practicing Ourselves* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Donald Capps, "The Psychology of Petitionary Prayer," *Theology Today* 39, no. 2 (July 1982): 130–41; John S. McClure, *Speaking Together and with God: Liturgy and Communicative Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).

of data that it has categorized to represent the attitude of a group.<sup>5</sup> A young child may learn to say “cat” in connection to the household pet from a particular other, like their mother, but their subsequent use of this word does not continue to refer back to their mother. English speakers do not use the word “cat” because a particular other taught us this. Rather, its use belongs to a generalized other: all who communicate using the English language. Mead demonstrates the complexities of this occurrence in child development through the difference between play and game. When a young child plays, they take on the role of a particular other. They deliberately try to imitate a mother, a teacher, a firefighter by drawing from specific, limited categories of knowledge to take on the role of a single other. This contrasts with gameplay as children must be able to take on the attitudes of all who participate in the game in order to be successful in their role. After hitting a baseball, a player takes on the generalized attitudes of the others who expect him to run to first base rather than third.<sup>6</sup> The baseball team forms a community with social rules and expectations, which the individual takes into the self and uses to be able to participate within that community. Whereas play is serial and occurs in order, game requires an intertwining of multiple roles, creating an interconnected mentality.<sup>7</sup>

The self creates the generalized other by amalgamating information about the other until it crystalizes into general categories of understanding.<sup>8</sup> This developmental stage allows the self to expand into new worldviews and navigate wider systems with greater ease because it can encounter and hold more people within its imaginary. However, it would be a mistake to consider the self’s engagement of the generalized other as a more developed version of its connection with the particular other. Feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan suggests that in comparing the types of relationships presented through game, Mead’s generalized other is most apparent in games typically preferred by boys, which promote abstract human relationships. She compares this with girls, who typically prefer smaller, more relational patterns of play, developing “empathy and sensitivity necessary for taking the role of ‘the particular other.’”<sup>9</sup> This type of game action invests in knowing others, contributing to the differentiation and development of self through a different but equally effective type of social action. Gilligan’s inclusion of the particular other in consideration of higher developed game play expands Mead’s theory and impacts our consideration of communication with regard to the other. Including the particular other alongside the generalized other creates balance by reducing the possibility of harmful or fixed generalized categories of understanding because it forces the self to recognize a complexity in others that cannot be flattened into shallow, general understandings. The self needs to create the generalized other in order to navigate multiple and varied systems of communal belonging. Engagement with the particular other keeps the self grounded in multifaceted relationship, refusing to let the other dissolve into abstraction.

Preaching participates in these interconnective dynamics. Sermon communication relies on collective categories of understanding shared by listeners, while at the same time recognizing the presence of particular multiplicity. Sermons create action by drawing on scriptural,

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<sup>5</sup> George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934), 154.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 150–156.

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Daniel, “Conscience as Ecological Participation and the Maintenance of Moral Perplexity,” in *The Timeliness of George Herbert Mead*, ed. Hans Joas and Daniel R. Huebner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 279–280.

<sup>8</sup> Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 90.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1982] 2003), 11.

theological, semantic, and cultural coding that resonates in the listener's ear.<sup>10</sup> For the listener to participate in the social action of the sermon, the preacher needs to offer communicative elements accessible to the listener, both individually and collectively. The listener does not limit the preacher but any moves or adjustments the preacher makes requires recognition in the listener, a connection to something known. Emergence of anything new, Mead argues, requires reorganization of what was already there.<sup>11</sup> Novelty is possible, but must begin in what is known to the listener for them to be able to understand. Preaching not only communicates with others, but its social action draws on categories of understanding about others to do so.

I suggest that when we preach, the social action of the sermon does one of four things. First, preaching can reify existing structures of understanding. Here the preacher taps into the existing categories of understanding of the listener to reinforce that belief. This action solidifies the category of the generalized other. Second, preaching can shift the structure of an existing category. Here the preacher works within an already accepted category, like the first. Unlike the first, however, the preacher attempts to soften, not solidify, the boundaries of that category, aiming to adjust what is already known. This is a disruption, not a dismantling, which prevents boundaries from becoming rigid. Third, some social action in sermons intentionally deconstructs categories of understanding. Here the preacher notes a category of belief held by listeners and works to undo or break it. This can be done in many ways, from a large sweep—by introducing a paradox, which reveals the impossibility of that category—to a small introduction of a particular other, which breaks categorization. Fourth, preaching can create something new by rearranging what is known in connection to something unknown. As suggested before, anything new requires some connection to an existing structure, but through reorganization something novel emerges. These four actions do not occur exclusively from one another, and listeners may not necessarily have a unified response to the social action offered by the preacher. The preacher may present an idea that solidifies a category for one listener but deconstructs a category for another. The difference resides in the collective assent of the listeners to a particular category of understanding. The more unified the listening community is within a category, the more unified the response.

When looking at the social action occurring in 1 Samuel 3, we see a rearrangement of what is known to create something new in connection to something unknown. The story begins by telling us, “The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread” (1 Sam 3:1). This clue offers insight into the categories of understanding about God from which Samuel draws. When he hears a voice calling his name, Samuel does not expect the voice to belong to God. He automatically assumes that Eli is calling. Samuel repeats this error three times, despite constantly being told otherwise by the priest. He displays an inability to draw a different conclusion based on the information to which he has access. Samuel grew up in a space dedicated to God, but he never considers to whom the voice might belong, other than Eli. As a result, Eli needs to intercede in a social action of his own. Eli knows the history of God's people and knows that God can speak directly to a person. He accesses his category of understanding to help Samuel build a new framework. He gives Samuel a phrase to respond to the voice he hears, challenging Samuel to understand that he can hear God's voice as clearly as he can hear Eli's, and respond similarly. Eli equips Samuel with new knowledge about the Other so that he can

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<sup>10</sup>For detailed analysis and classification of these sermon codes see: John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 198.

respond when God calls out the fourth time. Samuel can finally join God in the social act God offers and find a profound new dimension in his relationship with the Holy Other.

Preaching creates the kind of social action we see occurring between Eli and Samuel. Sermons offer a social act between preacher and listener, creating a ripple effect for future social actions of the listener. For Eli, Samuel presents the other approach with inquiry. Eli considers Samuel's experience and confusion before choosing how to help him reframe categories of understanding; in this case, the creation of something new. As a result, Samuel's following social action is directly impacted, now equipped to respond to God. Preachers obviously differ from Eli's example here—congregations of many compared to Eli's audience of one. Yet the process is similar. Mead contends that any social reconstruction "presupposes a basis of common social interests shared by all the individual members of the given human society in which that reconstruction occurs; shared, that is, by all the individuals whose minds must participate in, or whose minds bring about, that reconstruction."<sup>12</sup> Preachers draw on categories of understanding that undergird the listening community's mind. At the least, we utilize a shared language; at the most, we draw on theologies and symbols that uniquely mark our communities. Any new preacher in a body of believers recognizes the learning curve required to learn the patterns unique to that particular body of believers. These patterns are rooted in a group consciousness of agreed-upon understandings that may be unvoiced but are nonetheless collectively held.

Sociological analysis enables preachers to see the presumed categories they ascribe to their listeners as well as how they navigate them. This can occur on macro levels by examining the social action occurring at a high level, such as the activity occurring in what Tom Long calls the *focus* and *function* of sermons.<sup>13</sup> Preachers can look for patterns emerging in the trajectory of social action occurring in sermons over a period of time. Are sermon series built toward shoring up existing categories of theological identity? Does the preacher hope to create a change in behavior by upending categories in paradoxes for the season of Lent? Is there a challenge to remember forgotten characteristics of a certain category, reversing the rigidity that has settled into its boundaries? This type of analysis is also helpful on a micro level as well. A preacher can assess individual moves in their sermon to see both the general motion of the sermon as well as consider the effectiveness of those moves. Samuel approaches Eli twice before Eli finally creates a successful connection for Samuel, resulting in a different follow-up action. When an intended social action is not successful or does not carry the expected impact, the preacher should begin by looking at the presumed categories of knowledge they are working with. Does the preacher expect the listener to know something they do not? Is the preacher overestimating the value or assent the listener has to the category they are drawing upon? When the preacher examines the social action of their sermons, they not only learn about their expectations of the listener, they can also work to improve the intentionality and efficacy of their communication.

### **The Phenomenological Reality of God as a Social Actor**

The danger of using a sociological method for analyzing the action in sermons resides in the potential to fall into a constructivist position that potentially minimizes or overlooks the transcendent nature of God. When we rely on the social recognition of patterns and categories in our faith, we might cynically wonder if the truth of God is nothing but a social construction itself. Scholars have often set up the constructivist position as a polarity opposite to the idea of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, Third Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 113–136.

transcendence, suggesting all experience, including potential God experience, is accessed and processed through human-created social structures and thus cannot be separated from them.<sup>14</sup> However, when we examine H. Richard Niebuhr's writing on radical monotheistic faith, we can find a way to layer social reality with the possibility of transcendence beyond it.

Niebuhr acknowledges the self as a relational being formed from and within a social community. The self finds connection with others that goes deeper than simply adhering to the mores and laws of society. He contends, "To be able to say that I am I is...the acknowledgment of my existence as the counterpart of another self."<sup>15</sup> He engages Mead's ideas of the self, as well as Martin Buber's existentialist "I-Thou" to examine how moral intuition comes about in individuals, arguing that we judge our actions in either approval or disapproval when we transcend ourselves to know ourselves through others.<sup>16</sup> Niebuhr's scholarship reflects Mead's claims about the self developing within an interdependent social community. Yet Niebuhr takes this a step further by examining the transcendence required to participate in these relationships. When the self participates in social action, two elements appear: the interconnected dynamics and expectations of the current situation as well as transcendence as the self connects to something larger and independent of the moment. These two elements meet in social action where the immediate structures require a certain type of participation but also require the self to transcend these structures in order to reflect upon them and how they interact with the larger value centers of their identity.

When looking specifically at the church, Niebuhr considers this function within a collective rather than the individual. He illustrates how social action occurs between members to form a certain type of religious community, marked by use of particular theologies, symbols, metaphors, and more. However, the social action of the members also indicates a transcendent presence, as their faithfulness to a common cause points beyond themselves to a Creator as the source of their cause.<sup>17</sup> The commitment of a disparate group of people to a single identity discloses a transcendent element beyond the social structures they have created. In this way, Niebuhr makes room for both the social and the phenomenological. While social structures form the self, the socially formed self or society can never fully represent God. God is not fully represented by one person, one community, one metaphor, one idea, or one theology. However, the diverse multiplicity of these elements finds a common trajectory among them, hinting at the transcendent reality of God, the ultimate Being from whom all being derives. Niebuhr describes this as *radical monotheistic faith*:

[This radical faith is] neither closed society nor the principle of such a society but the principle of being itself; its reference is to no one reality among the many but to One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist. As faith, it is reliance on the source of all being for the significance of the self and of all that exists. It is the assurance that because I am, I am valued, and

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<sup>14</sup> James M. Nelson, *Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality* (New York, NY: Springer, 2009), 129–133.

<sup>15</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self; An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 71.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 72–76.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 86–87.

because you are, you are beloved, and because whatever is has being, therefor it is worthy of love.<sup>18</sup>

Radical monotheism emerges in relationship with God, an independent actor who is beyond our social mechanisms and yet meets us through them.<sup>19</sup> Radical faith exists beyond our social constructs but reveals itself through them. God meets us in our social connection, chooses to disclose Themselves. We see this in the incarnation of Christ, in the Holy Spirit whisper. God meets us in our social limitations but is not contained by them. This type of perspective prevents us from a constructivist position because it demands that we acknowledge a transcendent reality not confined to our social action, but apparent through it. We reach this transcendence through our fallible human constructs, recognizing that none can truly capture the truth and thus must be deemed temporary and partial. We need categories of understanding about God to hear God, and yet we cannot presume that God is identifiable with any one category of being.

Several things emerge for consideration when looking at the story of Samuel within this context. First, God appears as independent actor who stoops into humanity to participate in a social act with Samuel. Samuel's confusion reveals that he is not constructing that voice within his own existing structures. God reaches through the wider social structure of language even if Samuel does not have the capacity to fully join in the action that God initiates. The voice comes to Samuel again and again until Samuel is equipped to respond. The phenomenological reality of God is not limited by the social structures of Samuel's worldview, but God chooses to engage Samuel through that social reality. As a result, Samuel experiences different elements of relationship with the Holy Other, and through social constructs he begins to exhibit new dimensions of a radical faith, again pointing to God as a transcendent other.

Second, God invites Eli's participation into this story. In other stories throughout scripture, God has shown up in unusual and surprising ways, unknown to the receiver of the theophany. However, God overcomes the gap of categorical ignorance to make connections with humanity Themselves. This story reveals something different as God patiently approaches Samuel in repeated attempts. God does not do the work of making new connections in this instance but waits for Eli's intervention. Samuel builds something new with God through his relationship to Eli. In this way, God empowers and entrusts Eli to reconfigure categories to help Samuel make new connections. God similarly empowers preachers to play with paradigms of understanding, ultimately inviting the listener to participate in a radical monotheistic faith.

Samuel's response reveals the final aspect of encountering transcendence within this story. Eli tells Samuel to respond to the voice by saying "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:10). Samuel joins God in the social act but listens without predetermined ideas of how God may continue to engage. God chooses to meet Samuel through the language and conversational tone that Samuel expects from Eli, but Samuel's response acknowledges the Holy Other that exists beyond the social framework with a posture of willing openness to hear and experience the unknown. The radical faith that Niebuhr describes disappears when humanity attempts to identify it with a closed social construct. For radical faith to exist, it needs to be open to a wild, uncontrollable God, a Holy One who cannot be identified by what we create within our social world.

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<sup>18</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, [1960] 1993), 32.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

God's relational connection with Samuel reflects the dynamics of Niebuhr's radical monotheistic faith while also adhering to the social realities of categorical understanding in Mead's social act. It shows that we do not have to choose one or the other but that they can indeed occur together. We divide the world into various domains: political, scientific, aesthetic, economic, religious, etc. But Niebuhr argues that radical faith existed before this type of life sphere containment. "Israel's great prophets were legal reformers, ethical seers, purifiers of religious cults, theological critics, political advisers, poets, perhaps originators of a new literary style or even exponents of new types of aesthetic sensibility."<sup>20</sup> Radical monotheistic faith comes through social action. God participates with us in our world but is not limited by it. As Eli demonstrates, preachers create social connections for listeners, inviting them to participate in and reflect a transcendental relationship with a Holy Other.

### **Eli "Preaches" into Ecological Relationship**

This essay has already touched on Eli's preaching posture in this narrative. In considering Samuel as the listener, we see Eli preach as he uses social action to create a new paradigm for his listener to enable greater connectivity with God. He works within his own categories of understanding to discern to whom the voice might belong, and effectively helps Samuel generate a new category of his own. Eli reflects the preacher by appropriately orienting Samuel toward the voice of God and helping Samuel build a framework to participate in God's initiating social action. It would be easy to focus on the connection between God and Samuel in this narrative. However, God works through the social framework, requiring the involvement of a wider community of relationships, namely Eli. While this type of revelatory social action is not limited to the act of preaching, it does show the type of social action occurring in the sermon. Preaching searches for connectivity points within our social scope through which radical faith and relationship with the Holy Other make an appearance.

The interaction between these three actors also reveals a power dynamic at play. By withholding further direct revelation from Samuel, God empowers Eli to offer an initial shape to their following interaction. Eli discerns who the voice might be. Eli tells Samuel what to do and say next. Eli offers a reorganization of Samuel's existing knowledge to create a new avenue through which Samuel can now participate in a holy social act. Preachers are granted this powerful opportunity to solidify, reshape, deconstruct, and create categories of understanding in connection to both others and the Holy Other. This then begs the question that developmental psychologist Patricia Miller raises, "Who decides what forms of knowledge are important and which ways of thinking are valid?"<sup>21</sup> These questions resonate throughout both sociological and theological scholarship. They demand that we consider the power dynamics at play in the utilizing, shaping, and reshaping of shared categories of understanding. The mainline consciousness of most communities has a continued history of marginalizing the experience of members who do not fit the majority.

Feminist developmental psychology attempts to remedy this through a foundational epistemology of interconnectivity. This concept does not disagree with Mead or Niebuhr's sociological claims, but feminist scholars stress the importance of interaction that moves beyond cognitive knowledge to relational social bonds.<sup>22</sup> Melissa Welch-Ross echoes Miller's

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia H. Miller, "The Development of Interconnected Thinking," in *Toward a Feminist Developmental Psychology*, ed. Patricia H. Miller and Ellin Kofsky Scholnick (New York: Routledge, 2000), 45.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 54.

sentiments but adds a linguistic layer that contributes to the epistemological difference between traditional developmental and feminist theory models. For traditional modes, language is used to express or describe the phenomenon, while feminist theories recognize the power of language to actually shape the self's lived experience.<sup>23</sup> This resonates with theologian Rebecca Chopp's scholarship. She similarly argues about the power of language to shape and transform experience. Language participates in the foundations of our faith. "The medium of theology, after all, is words, and words about God as well as words about words need careful attention in the present era."<sup>24</sup> She continues on to suggest that our language is not simply descriptive but transformative. To speak freedom is not a hollow, descriptive claim, but has the power to effect emancipation.

Language has the power to create embodied change as humans imagine new ways to speak and thus new ways to relate and to live. This reality challenges us to go beyond a tactical methodology that simply analyzes social action. Our analysis must respect the power dynamics at play as the preacher engages the social reality of the listener. We cannot be purely descriptive in our analysis of how preaching solidifies, shifts, deconstructs, or creates because this type of engagement is automatically connected to transformation and to relational aspects of our listeners. To respect the power of this kind of transformation, we must also emphasize an epistemology of interconnectivity.

To make this move within a social development model of analysis, we must include a framework to set parameters within the social action of sermons. Joshua Daniel offers a possibility for this type of interconnective framework. He engages both Mead and Niebuhr, showing how the connectivity between them reveals a tension among multiple dimensions of social belonging. An *ecological conscience* emerges from this tension, bringing the self's patterns of a particular role in relationship to God into the multiple social dimensions in which the self participates. The religious dimension does not override the social dimension but re-ecologizes social roles, moving through the self's multiple ecologies to bring the primary patterns found in relationship with God through them. This forces the self out of isolating knowledge of God and others to bring the self into participation of relational being with God and with others who are also beloved by God. The self necessarily must participate in a vast "network of interconnections with past and present, remote and immediate social forces and relations, that constitute God's realm."<sup>25</sup> Daniel argues that this type of ecological interconnectivity has four characteristics: a holistic experience, a negotiation of multiplicity, the recognition of fallibility, and the work of enduring tragedy. By bringing these characteristics into sermon analysis, we can move beyond simple descriptions into transformation that empowers interconnected relationship.

The first characteristic of ecological interconnectivity, a holistic perspective, moves beyond purely discursive elements into a fully embodied reality. This does not discount the significance of language which undergirds Niebuhr and is at the apex of symbolic gesture for Mead. However, it recognizes that the social act requires full-bodied participation and language

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<sup>23</sup> Melissa K. Welch-Ross, "A Feminist Perspective on the Development of Self-Knowledge," in *Toward a Feminist Developmental Psychology*, ed. Patricia H. Miller and Ellin Kofsky Scholnick (New York: Routledge, 2000), 112–113.

<sup>24</sup> Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 10.

<sup>25</sup> Joshua Daniel, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Reading of George Herbert Mead: Correcting, Completing, and Looking Ahead," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 44, no. 1 (2016): 111, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12133>.

affects the embodied experience. Bringing this into context for the preacher, it requires them to think about how their presence interacts with the categories of understanding that belong to the community. As a woman within a conservative tradition, I have frequently been the first or near-first female preacher in multiple pulpits, a space designated male for the entire memory of the community. My embodied presence as a female automatically creates a shift in categorical understanding for the listener, if not deconstruction or rejection. This holistic experience must also take the listener's fully embodied experience into consideration. The Sunday after the Charleston church shootings in 2015, I attended worship at a primarily white Protestant church in northeastern Indiana. No one addressed the tragedy outside a brief moment of sorrow for the loss of life in a congregational prayer. The social action in reference to a profound event, or lack thereof, further reified categories of white supremacy. A preacher engaged with a holistic perspective would understand that a primarily white community normally carrying on in worship after the hateful massacre of Black Christians embodies and solidifies the division between Black and white Christians, alongside a dismissal of racist structures that empower that division. The listeners' holistic embodiment contributes to social action.

Preaching with an ecological conscience anticipates how words affect the listener's embodied reality. Particular events or external realities contribute to a preacher's understanding of the listeners but preachers also often sense a general attitude, describing congregations as *tired*, or *excited*, or *sad*. These descriptors hint at an understanding of the embodied reality of the generalized other. The preacher must explore these avenues of embodied reality and then decide how to speak transformation into those experiences. However, preaching holistically does not require the preacher to go-with-the-embodied-flow. Preaching forgiveness, for example, in a congregation struggling with deep tension due to a harmful incident in its midst, might bring comfort to the generalized other, allowing them to move beyond the incident. But the quick move to resolution for the majority likely comes at the cost of a minority of particular others. Preaching forgiveness to those ears puts pressure on the victims or the marginalized to do emotional work for the larger group in order to maintain a status quo and perpetuate their embodied experience of violence. Transformative preaching in this case would consider both the general and the particular other and lean into the tension, requiring the generalized other to face their embodied reality in a different and perhaps more challenging way. Preachers must navigate the interconnective framework of their listeners with a careful ear and a discerning heart. This is difficult and preachers can miss the mark, but with intentional and careful engagement of the listeners' embodied reality, sermons can speak a transforming word which reverberates into their lived reality.

The second characteristic of ecological interconnectivity is the ability to negotiate multiple communities in an attempt to find balance. Both Mead and Niebuhr contend that the self participates in multiple communities. These communities range in size and purpose. They include abstract communities (like college graduates, surfers, or North Americans) to concrete communities (like employees of a particular company, Girl Scout troops, or Detroit Tigers fans). They range in size from country populations to the nuclear family. This requires preaching to move beyond the particular categories of one idealized community, especially because Niebuhr argues that it cannot exist alongside a radical monotheistic faith. The church rejects radical faith the moment it becomes a closed society because God becomes associated with the particular principles and beliefs of that religious group rather than the other way around.<sup>26</sup> To prevent this

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<sup>26</sup> Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 28.

type of closure, the preacher must bring multiple social communities to bear in the sermon, both to acknowledge the holistic perspective of the listener and also to recognize that God's action is not limited to their singular sphere. The initial move into multiplicity is easy for many preachers as they themselves participate in different communities. However, navigating these spheres effectively to create balance requires much more intent and comes with increased difficulty. Preachers need to consider the multiplicity beyond themselves and the social communities represented in the listening body. Ecological interconnectivity requires recognition and interaction with the world beyond the walls of the church.

Several years ago, I attended a white Protestant church that had a partner church in Guatemala. One particular worship service focused on the trials that their partner was currently enduring, unable to access basic resources due to civil unrest. After the service I heard some people happily talking about the potential border wall that undergirded their candidate's election campaign. I was shocked at the disconnect between what had just occurred in worship and this conversation only moments afterward. Reflecting back, I now realize that multiple communities were present within worship, and they were entirely disconnected. Despite the relatively similar venue and peer group, these congregants acted within two different social communities: a religious one where the people of Guatemala had significant need, and a political one where the people of Guatemala become part of a faceless enemy amassing at the United States' border. Here the multiple worldviews of these particular listeners did not overlap; they were drawing from two different categories of understanding for the same group of people based on their current social action. Preaching occurs in spaces like this, where multiple communities overlap both for the listener and for others viewed by the listener.

Preaching with ecological interconnectivity must begin with honest assessment about the communities represented (physically and verbally) in our midst, and those that are not, through intent and oversight. Who we choose to engage and how we choose to represent them says something about our own community and our preaching. Consider: How do my sermons talk about other groups of people? Do I primarily draw from the same type of illustrations for examples in preaching? With whom do I expect my listener to primarily empathize? Do I ever use stereotypes or easy tropes about groups of people? Do I hear people talk about others outside of worship differently than we talk about them inside of worship? These are just a few questions a preacher can use to begin to navigate the multiplicity of communities in their preaching, to reflect on potential deficiencies, and to heighten awareness of community engagement. This reflection should indicate next steps for preachers to take toward increased interconnectivity. Here the preacher must consider where they might need to create new connections, shift others, or deconstruct harmful patterns. These steps come with difficulty because both preachers and communities fall into categorical habits. But the work of navigating communities toward ecological interconnectivity is worthwhile as the sermon curiously spirals out from the local listening community to explore new patterns of God's holy action throughout all of creation.

The third characteristic connects to the second as preachers must presume fallibility in categorization. We rely on categories of understanding to interact with our world in often automatic and subconscious ways. To understand the generalized other of a baseball team, we pull from categorical concepts like game rules, competition, and team markers. Sermons similarly draw from categories the preacher shares with the listener to communicate something about God, about ourselves, and about others. An illustration which bemoans paying taxes presumes that every listener categorically understands taxes as a bad thing and that every listener actually pays taxes. Problems arise when categorical boundaries become rigid to the point of

limitation through exact identification. I recently preached at a church where I used the formula “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is the Mother of us all.” For some of my listeners, this brought about a deeply negative reaction. Although this church does not theologically teach that God is gendered male, it remains a firm category tacitly agreed upon. My use of the term “Mother” to describe God was a social act, deconstructing a fixed gender category about God, that some listeners could not join me in completing. These congregants could not see God as mother despite clear examples of heavenly Motherhood in biblical imagery. Although theologically incorrect, the gender category for God had become firm for many of my listeners. This offers an obvious example of how social realities create fixed but fallible categories of understanding.

Navigating diverse communities will also help the preacher develop this aspect of their ecological preaching because multiplicity softens categorical boundaries. By creating multiple access points through a multi-community perspective, preachers not only offer wider access to the listener, they also demonstrate relational action that moves beyond a closed community. This enables preachers to break categorical strongholds. The easiest way to locate a starting point for such work is to consider where the taboo, the forbidden, the never-spoken in your community reside. These topics may exist because the community has created a fixed category which precludes another. What might it mean for a congregation that relies heavily on war imagery to hear more nonviolent aspects of God’s character in the sermon? How would a congregation that values right behavior hear a sermon that explores God’s honoring of deceptive acts like those committed by Jacob and Tamar? Which categories are we protecting by avoiding others like addiction, excessive personal debt, and sexual assault? Swaths of embodied realities in different communities are often ignored because fixed categorization limits the preacher. Depending on the strength of the prescribing categories, multiple examples over time may be needed for transformation to occur, even if a perfect balance will never be found. Yet the presumption of fallibility frees the preacher from trying to achieve a perfect goal and instead challenges them to continually seek new ways to navigate multiplicity. Working to create flexible categorization, the preacher speaks a transformational word that empowers the listener to break out of limited, partial understanding and dive into multifaceted possibility.

The fourth and final characteristic of ecological interconnectivity acknowledges the tragedy involved in negotiating multiple social worlds. The complexity of life results in communities ultimately at odds with one another, forcing some type of choice. Preachers who recognize layers of multiple social worlds in the lives of their listeners also know the significance of their choices between these worlds when crafting a sermon. I have often heard about good sermons leaving much of the exegetical work on the cutting room floor in order to focus on one part by choosing to leave out another. This does not indicate a lack of worth in the material left out of the sermon but reflects a choice that the preacher must make and loss in what remains unused. Any social action in preaching involves choice. Deconstructing categories obviously involves some sort of loss, but it is not absent from the others. Even reifying a category involves using words to add strength to one instead of another. Reaction to loss will vary depending on what is being left out or behind. At times loss can bring about joy and hope when the category is toxic, at other times loss can generate fear as a fixed category has proven less stable than believed. The preacher needs to assess the type of loss and respond appropriately in order to edify the listener, especially if the loss involved prevents the listener from joining in the social act. Transformation requires payment in the currency of loss. Ecological

interconnectivity acknowledges and integrates this type of work by presuming that we must learn how to endure tragedy.

Understanding the fourth characteristic of tragic dynamics prepares the preacher to take the necessary risk involved in the first three elements of an ecological conscience, holistically navigating multiple communities with honesty, intentionality, and a willingness to break categorical strongholds. No preacher can do this perfectly, especially because the presumed fallibility of our understanding removes goals which provide markers of success. Paradoxically, the tragic element of loss enables the preacher to take these risks because in presuming its existence the preacher learns how to negotiate transformative action with it. The preacher presumes the grief associated with transformation but moves forward with curiosity and hope for how the sermon might resonate throughout the life of the congregation. Who might find new freedom in broken categorical strongholds? Who might understand a new facet of God's holy being through the incorporation of a new voice, a new community? The preacher learns to preach more boldly as they learn to navigate tragedy because the fear of choices, consequence, and transformation itself recedes due to new competence that begets new confidence. Preaching that embraces the tragic element is marked by humility, curiosity, and a willingness to proclaim boldly. It speaks words of transformation, having wrestled with the choice of what to leave behind and a determination to navigate the consequences of those choices.

The transformational aim of ecological interconnective preaching seems like a daunting task, a juggling act as more and more balls of community, categories, and multiplicity get added to the mix. Yet the methodology of analyzing how sermons solidify, shift, deconstruct, or create categories of understanding within social action can offer the preacher both clarity and a way forward. It enables them to clearly see the tools they are using as well as gaps they are overlooking. With this kind of examination, the preacher can move beyond simple description to offering transformational social acts: the kinds of social acts that empower a listener to relationally connect with small hands reaching out to the running faucet right before she remembers to shut it off.