Un-mastering Homiletics Interculturally: Gospel, Belonging, and Communion for In-Class Sermon Feedback

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Abstract: *Facework offers more than a useful intercultural theory for enhancing the homiletics classroom by attending to individual face needs like belonging, competency, and autonomy in threatening moments like in-class sermon feedback. Facework in my class also provided a framework in sections for mentoring preaching students as homiletical theologians in their own right, as evidenced by a description of classroom practices as well as student responses to an anonymous survey in 2020. Furthermore, when illuminated by Willie Jennings's groundbreaking work on theological education in* After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging, *such attending to face needs and mentoring might begin to deepen homiletical education in our interculturally challenged environment of white supremacy.*

Facework and Mentoring: Goals for an "Introduction to Preaching" Course

In Spring 2020 a team of Boston University School of Theology PhD teaching fellows (TFs) and I inaugurated a mentor-oriented vision for the teaching of preaching based on the key principles of facework theory. Our initial goal was to integrate the teaching and learning of preaching with respect to both task mastery and identity formation—a central aim of the theory.[1] Facework, an intercultural communication theory as elaborated in the literature of instructional communication for basic college speech courses, notes how in-class discussions of student speeches pose a threat to basic human face needs: specifically, belonging, competency, and autonomy.[2] While facework theory's ability to account for face needs in teaching and learning has tremendous implications for instructional communication in speech settings, its value for our work in giving in-class sermon feedback extended further: as a way of doing homiletical-theological education. Student preachers in our class were not only developing preaching skills (in other words, "task mastery"), nor even solely forming identities (which are always negotiated in classroom feedback), they were doing so while becoming reflective homiletical theologians in their own right.[3] As a result, the instructional team as mentors set the goal of fostering small groups capable of contributing to task mastery and identity formation in preaching along with a

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[1] The importance of task mastery and identity formation for intercultural instructional communication is beautifully treated in a brief seven-minute video (accessed October 23, 2021) which can be viewed at https://uportland.mediaspace.kaltura.com/media/Dr.+Jeff+Kerssen-Griep/0_7k7htob2.

[2] For a full and ample treatment of facework theory and its potential in the homiletics classroom, see the opening pages of the first article in this special issue of *Homiletic*, Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby, "The Witnessing Community: Cultivating Face-Attentive Learning Environments for In-Class Sermon Feedback." The "face-attentive" concern in her subtitle refers to the very human face needs that I identify above. Readers may also wish to consult my introduction to facework theory and homiletical-theological pedagogy from an earlier issue of this journal, David Schnasa Jacobsen, "Sermon Feedback as Facework: Task and Identity Goals in Mentoring Homiletical Theologians," *Homiletic* 43, no. 2 (2018): 3-12. For an exceedingly helpful look at facework's value for instructional communication see Jeff Kerssen-Griep, April R. Trees, and Jon A. Hess, "Attentive Facework During Instructional Feedback: Key to Perceiving Mentorship and an Optimal Learning Environment" *Communication Education* 57, no. 3 (2008): 312-332.

[3] The chief goal of my preaching courses is to help students become more than technique- or even identity-savvy, but homiletical theologians for whom task mastery and identity formation are theologically crucial. See *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015).

growing awareness of their own "working gospel" or "gut gospel" in relation to the preaching task.[4]

The course syllabus's concern for student task mastery and identity was therefore framed by informal assessments of students' understanding of the gospel at the beginning and end of the term. Students' "working gospel" or "gut gospel" was assessed in an ungraded exercise at the beginning of the course as part of a video-taped discussion in sections. The end of the course featured yet another such assessment, this time in the form of an oral student presentation followed by a group discussion that integrated the section's feedback by means of Ron Allen and Clark Williamson's criteria for discerning gospel: coherence, intelligibility, and moral plausibility.[5] This oral presentation/discussion at the end was designed to be integrative of the course and a self-conscious product of group theological reflection. This final ungraded assignment would be an occasion to move from one's working theology of the gospel to that of incorporating ongoing critical reflection in the company of one's section and TF/mentor. The hope was to see preaching in deep relation both to homiletical theology as *dispositio* or *habitus* and as *scientia* or critical reflection, a pedagogical moment that aims in classroom practice toward Edward Farley's vision of a unified *Theologia*.[6]

The point of a course that begins with one's "gut gospel," however, is to help students cultivate a *constructive* theological vision which goes beyond mere dry, propositional claims. A "gut gospel" or "working gospel" is deeply related to students' embodied lives and social locations. The teaching team was committed to the notion that a student's "working gospel" had to pass muster with the bodies in the room, beginning with the student's own and with classmates in the section. Over the two halves of the course, students were asked to come to terms with their own embodied responses to biblical texts and situations to do their homiletical-theological work, whether in the first half with Anna Carter Florence's inherently embodied and dislocative exercises of "attending" and "describing," or in the second half in situationally focused discussion groups that dealt with traumatic situations emerging from COVID-19 which deeply affected the students and the hearers they loved. Across both halves of the course, the gut gospel the students began articulating had to pass through the prism of their own lives and had to make sense in light of the real human beings in their sections, whether the sermonic frame was provided by a biblical text or a situation that called forth gospel speech.[7] The fact that all this

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[4] André Resner's notion of "working gospel" appeared in an insightful article, "Reading the Bible for Preaching the Gospel," in the *Collected Papers of the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics*, 223. Most recently, Resner elaborated on his notion of working gospel in "Do You See this Woman? A Little Exercise in Homiletical Theology" in *Theologies of the Gospel in Cont*ext, 19–24. Resner goes on to develop his own tripartite taxonomy of gospel in his later work, "" in *What's Right with Preaching Today* (M. Graves and A. Resner, Eds.; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 154-83. Frank Thomas has developed this notion even further with his exploration of the impact of the gospel as "working gospel" and "mystery" on what Thomas calls the moral imagination in preaching in *Surviving a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), chapters 1-2.

[5] Clark Williamson and Ronald Allen give their most fulsome iteration of these criteria in *A Credible and Timely Word: Process Theology and Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1991) 71-82, 101-111.

[6] Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 32. Farley's vision in this book is important here not as a mere criterion for assessment, but as part of a desire to renew theological education beyond its role within the Enlightenment university and its division of labor between theology (usually understood as systematic theology) and theological disciplines, like homiletics. Farley wished to see the whole of contemporary theological education embrace a unified vision of *theologia* that integrated theology as *disposition* and *scientia*.

[7] The primary textbooks for the course were Anna Carter Florence's *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: WJKP, 2004) and lectures based on my co-authored book with Robert Kelly, *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009). Lisa Thompson's text, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* (Nashville:

took place as COVID-19 began to confine students and the instructional team to Zoom by mid-March underlined both the course's challenge and its value. How do we preach gospel in this time and place *and in the (virtual) presence of these bodies*? We were not equipped to answer this question but knew it would be key to acknowledge somehow our bodily displacement. This explicit focus on embodiment, while an emerging part of my work, has a long pedigree in the field of homiletics.[8] For the instructional team the specific pedagogical angle of vision was to see how embodiment would inform a theological hermeneutic relative to one's working gospel.[9]

One special note about our teaching team's ongoing facework practice, especially in the sections. Facework theory, insofar as it attends to threats to "face needs" during speech feedback in the classroom, finds its natural homiletical analogue in the practice of in-class *sermon* feedback. Facework encourages meeting the face needs of "belonging, competency, and autonomy" so that students are able to attend to learning homiletical tasks trusting that they are "seen," or put differently, that different identities in the room are respected and recognized in the learning process. One additional thing the teaching team tried was to practice these feedback moments at various stages in the course—not just after student sermons. Facework theory informed the group discussion times when students first articulated their oral "working gospel" and when they reflected critically on their understanding of gospel in a written assignment at the end of the course. When students received feedback on a public scripture reading, we used the same facework format to help familiarize students with what they would face when it came time to receive sermon feedback (see below). In other words, attending to face needs became a way of doing much of the public-facing feedback that a basic preaching course might have to do. This way of organizing our teaching moments allowed us to build facework into several other parts of the course and gave opportunity in particular for the teaching team to build face-to-face mentoring relationships into the task work and ongoing identity formation that went in to learning the constituent parts of preaching. This gave the teaching team other in-class moments in which to deepen the mentoring work they hoped to do and link those moments to the learning outcomes of the course, especially the course-long growth in theological wisdom and gospel reflection.

Facework and Mentoring in Practice: A Format for In-Class Feedback

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Abingdon, 2018) also played a large role in centering embodied experience and answerability to life "on the ground" for the course. As a result of the drastic change to the course in March 2020, the syllabus assignments underwent substantial revisions. Instead of preaching a second sermon that was situational, the final sermon assignment was to develop a situational sermon "primer" for people reflecting on what it might look like to preach a sermon in light of some crucial aspect of COVID-19 for a specific group of people.

[8] The literature of embodiment works often at the intersection of homiletics and performance theory (Charles Bartow, Jana Childers, Richard Ward, and Ruthanna Hooke). Embodiment has also played a large role in homiletical work informed by feminist theory (Christine Smith, Anna Carter Florence, and Karoline Lewis), womanist theology (Teresa Fry Brown, Lisa Thompson) and other liberationist perspectives (Christine Smith and James Harris). Luke Powery's work in relating embodiment and culture to homiletical theology has been especially helpful to enlarging my own take on its importance, in *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012) and later in his article, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See: A Spirit(ual) Approach to the Interpretive Task of Homiletical Theology," in *Homiletical Theology in Action: The Unfinished Theological Task of Preaching* (David S. Jacobsen, Ed.; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 85-107.

[9] Special thanks here to Boston University doctoral students Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby and Nikki Young, whose deep interest and emerging research projects in embodiment and theology prompted me to familiarize myself with a bibliography that includes trauma studies (Judith Herman, Bessel Van Der Kolk, and with respect to "white body supremacy," Resmaa Menakem), social flesh (Mayra Rivera), and most recently carnal hermeneutics (Richard Kearney).

In practice, of course, the use of facework in our class was a growing edge for us all and was implemented with some unevenness in practice. Our aim was to give feedback to a student for a sermon (or presenting their theology of the gospel, or a scripture reading, or even a random question about practice) in the following format:

1. The TF/instructor began after the student's sermon or reading with a description of what he/she/they heard, speaking directly to the student preacher. We wanted to begin all of our in-class responses with largely descriptive language that helped the student feel seen. In this way, we really hoped to attend to the preacher's identity from the beginning.
2. The TF then led the class in identifying strengths of the sermon, and with respect to the Anna Carter Florence text we used, focusing on narrating and confessing what the student preacher believes about it. These moments helped the teaching team (the TFs and me) together with classmates to highlight the competencies of the student preacher.
3. From here, we shifted to ways students might improve upon their work. This could tend, of course, to be yet another iteration of the old "critique sandwich" whose revision is a crucial part of this pedagogical exercise.[10] We sought to handle this "face threat" in a way that either emphasized autonomy and competency of the student preacher or maximized respectful dialogue between students and the teaching team. In other words, comments that named a concern about the student's sermon were often framed as questions or as "I wonder…" statements. When it came time to propose an alternative way of doing some particular part of the preaching task, even those were to be presented to students in plural forms: you could try X, or perhaps you could do Y, or Z might help you do it this other way. This presentation of options may seem a small thing but its significance is large insofar as it is designed to preserve the agency and competency of the student in his/her/their learning of preaching. From time to time, this section could also become a time for the teaching team or a student just to pose questions—the idea being that a question becomes an opportunity for student preachers to articulate alternatives on their own.
4. This is also why in this final part of the format the in-class sermon feedback time concludes with the student preacher *talking back to the teaching team and the class*. The teaching and learning of preaching took on a deeply dialogical form. Often times, the questions were such that they posed moments for theological reflection as a class on a specific claim made in the sermon. Sometimes, this even touched on the students' "working gospels" being articulated in the section. With this final moment of talk back, the agency and autonomy of the student is placed at the center in a face-to-face environment.

The reality was that our in-class practice was not always consistent, especially insofar as we on the instructional team were all still learning how to do this together. I think the hardest part to

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[10] The phrase "critique sandwich" refers to offering sermon critique between two affirmations as a way of making critique palatable and making the interpersonal work of learning preaching as task mastery feasible. I first encountered the term in G. Robert Jacks, *Getting the Word Across: Speech Communication for Pastors and Lay Leaders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). In doing so, Jacks aimed to couch task-oriented feedback theologically in a desire to see "growth in grace," p. 226.

learn—and here I speak from my own experience as instructor—was how to do the descriptive piece well immediately after the student preached. What I would aim for was (1) a matter-of-fact description of what I heard the student preacher say without an evaluative take on my part. It was easy for me, however, to let this section go long and morph into (2) the strengths of the sermon. Attending to face needs here, and affirming identity in particular, is always an important purpose that deserves its own moment—a student preacher needs to be "seen" first and foremost. I realize that this remains a growing edge for me. By contrast, encouraging student preachers to improve their work (3) always seemed to be hardest for their classmates. Over time, this section began to broaden out in some of my other teaching settings to include what I called "questions, concerns, and wonder-ments." I tried as a facilitator through such language to help the class (or their TF/mentors) to develop ways of engaging *learning* the task of preaching with more than one way of posing the concern, and one hopefully commensurate with the classmates' own relationship to the student preacher who had just spoken.

Student Survey Responses: Face Needs and Growth as Homiletical Theologians

The ultimate integrative piece, however, was the theological growth that the course as a whole was promoting. To that end, I developed an anonymous survey instrument that would allow me to sense how belonging, agency, and autonomy helped to facilitate theological integration around the preaching task. The survey was presented to students on the final day of class and in conjunction with our usual electronic course evaluation instrument. Fourteen of our twenty-two students participated in the survey; nearly 64% of the class. Most of the questions were open-ended and left space for students to describe and reflect upon their learning in the class. The first question, however, presented them with a choice: "Do you feel your autonomy, agency, and sense of belonging in the class as a preacher/theologian were honored in this course?" Of the fourteen students surveyed twelve responded "yes" and two responded "partially." No student who took part chose "no" for an answer.

The quality of the respondents' affirmation of belonging (and other face needs) is more precisely reflected in their answers to the other questions. Their other responses allowed them to articulate their own growth as preachers who were theologians in their own right. Across several of the survey questions, student respondents discussed the value of the intentionally shared work we did as dialogical theologians with one another. One student wrote: "That gospel is both deeply personal and deep[ly] co-creative. We are constantly creating with one another and shaping how our gospels are formed." Another student pointed out the same dialogical value in the interpretive practices we cultivated in the mentored sections: "Having the space to workshop with the readings and with fellow theologians was so valuable. Being able to contribute to other and having my own thoughts nurtured and developed was an important part…." Another student mentioned how sermon feedback from the instructional team was important for both grounding in belonging and developing as a theologian in their own right: "…they have given me a lot of constructive comments that makes me believe that I belong here, that I can be a preacher. So, I am very grateful for this opportunity to be with these amazing teaching team and fellow theologians of the Word." The students' comments are far from uniform. In fact, one student was explicit about a feeling of failure. Even so, their varied responses were consistently rich in one way: many linked their theological growth in gospel to a sense of *belonging* and an ability to engage in shared dialogical work after preaching their sermons.

Revising Facework in the Context of Eurocentric Theological Education: Belonging, Communion, and Gospel in Willie Jennings' *After Whiteness*

This linking of student responses in particular to matters of belonging resonated with me even more after I read Willie Jennings's *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. What's more, Jennings's work helped me to understand what an interculturally-informed homiletical-theological pedagogy was actually up against in a theological context dominated by whiteness.

From his time as an academic dean, Jennings knew to attend carefully—both to what people said *and their bodies*. His understanding of theology in a white dominant institution includes what he calls its habitation: theology's way of ordering bodies within the cultural orientation of whiteness. Jennings's way of listening to bodies and reading thoughts, of "knowing the secrets" of how bodies in theological institutions work, allows him to bring readers along with him and yet also to recognize what we already know deep down, even when it appears as tacit knowledge. And he does this thick description not just as anyone but precisely as a lover of God.[11]

On this basis, Jennings makes two key theological moves in the introduction to his book on the de-formational impact of whiteness on Western theological education. The first is to recognize not just the importance of belonging, but its theological significance as *communion*.

> *I hope to show that the deepest struggle for us all is a struggle for communion.* Theological education is supposed to open up sites where we enter the struggle to rethink our people. We think them again, but now with others who must rethink their people. And in this thinking together we begin to see what we had not seen before: we belong to each other, we belong together. Belonging must become the hermeneutic starting point from which we think the social, the political, the individual, the ecclesial, and most crucial for this work, the educational. Western education (and theological education) as it now exists works against a pedagogy of belonging.[12]

In setting a hermeneutic of belonging at the center of theological pedagogy, Jennings posits a theological vision of communion, a kind of "…God drenched life attuned to life together."[13]

Yet even communion finds its ground in a promising yet troubled space for pedagogy: the gospel itself as translated across cultures and tongues. Built into a gospel that is translatable, argues Jennings, is "a dynamic filled with possibilities and problems." Gospel for Jennings is one of the key ways in which a pedagogy of belonging pushes back against the homogeneity of Western theological education. The gospel enters language, culture, and life as lived and connects people in all their particularity to the loving God. Jennings calls this the "true root" of theological education. Yet, in actuality, both the possibility and *the problem* of the gospel's translatability is tied up with its boundary-crossing capability. In fact, says Jennings, translatability is the very place where the problem of theological education becomes clear. Boundary crossing can also be used as a tool of hegemonic and homogenizing forces—in this case, to reproduce whiteness in the habituated form of the purpose of Eurocentric theological education: the white self-sufficient man. Will theological education use the boundary crossing

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[11] Willie Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 2.
[12] Jennings, *After Whiteness,* 10.
[13] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 12-13.

nature of the gospel to reproduce whiteness and its kind of mastery in theological education or will it be a place where the boundary-crossing translatability of gospel leads to belonging, to *communion*?

Conclusion

Facework does not provide all of the answers to pedagogy. The struggle to develop a classroom space where in-class sermon feedback can work in tandem with a commitment to belonging or communion and a gathering around the theological task of naming gospel goes on. The fact that it all happens under conditions where Eurocentric hegemony and the homogeneity of whiteness continue to thrive mean that homiletical educators will need to attend ever so carefully to belonging, agency, and autonomy, to be sure. However, it also means that homiletical educators, particularly those with privilege, will need to learn to exercise power differently in the classroom. There will be times when this entails nurturing a critical capacity among students as we help them in the words of the instructional communication scholar Jeff Kerssen-Griep to "peer behind the curtain" of our own power and the institution's power in the classroom. More than that, however, the intercultural theory that is facework can launch a process of mentoring that begins to push beyond what Jennings describes as the "mastery" of the white, self-sufficient man that is the tacit curriculum of Eurocentric theological education to something that is shared, respectful, life-enhancing, and theologically dialogical. And in that moment, we may just find ourselves "un-mastering homiletics," engaging in a real dialogue around homiletical theologies, and struggling together in our classrooms to let gospel speak, again and again and again.