

Preaching as an Act of Spirit: The Homiletical Theory of Howard Thurman¹

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Abstract: *Howard Thurman receives little mention in many contemporary discussions on preaching. Yet, his era recognized – at least in part – his homiletical genius. In 1953, Thurman was named one of the twelve greatest preachers in the United States by Life Magazine.² The field of homiletics still has much to gain by revisiting Thurman’s genius in preaching. For Thurman, preaching is more than an exercise that gives voice to biblical, theological, doctrinal, and social studies. Thurman views preaching as an act of spirit. This is the thesis I uphold in this paper. First, I will broach briefly the significance of Thurman by traversing his professional accomplishments. Second, I will expose the basic tenants of Thurman’s homiletical theory. Finally, I will suggest implications for Thurman’s integration into homiletical study.*

The Significance of Howard Thurman

Howard Thurman, born in 1899 and a native of Daytona Beach, FL, had a profound career as a preacher. He was formally educated at Morehouse College, Rochester Theological Seminary, and Haverford College. In 1932, Thurman was appointed to the faculty of Howard University’s School of Religion and, in the course of his tenure, was designated the dean of Rankin Chapel. Thurman was the third person (and the first African American) to ever be named the dean of a university chapel in the United States. In 1944, Thurman moved to San Francisco to co-pastor the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, an interdenominational church with a mission to cross lines of race, class, and culture (and later the lines of faith). This was the first church of its kind to be born in the United States.³ Nine years later, he accepted the position as the Dean of Boston University’s Marsh Chapel. Thurman was the first African American dean of a Caucasian university chapel.

Thurman’s impact was quite impressive. He conversed with great minds such as Rufus Jones, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Marcus Boulware, in his survey of African American orators in the twentieth century (1900-1968), names Thurman the African American theologian of his era and marvels at the depth of his sermons.⁴ Both Ralph Turnbull and Joseph Washington feel that Thurman makes a unique contribution to the canon of African American preachers,

¹ This presentation is taken, in large measure, from my dissertation: Patrick D. Clayborn, “A Homiletic of Spirituality: An Analysis of Howard Thurman’s Theory and Praxis of Preaching” (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 2009).

² Mark Kauffman, “Great Preachers: These 12 – and Others – Bring Americans Back to the Churches,” *Life*, April 6, 1953, 126-133.

³ Unitarians, Universalists, and Quakers, while having churches or societies in the United States, did not begin in the United States. Rather, they began in Europe. Many of the Pentecostals emerging from the Asuza Street Revival in 1906 formed churches that were integrated in race, class, and culture; however, they became segregated within fifteen years. See the section on Black Pentecostals in C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church and the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 76-91.

⁴ Marcus H. Boulware, *The Oratory of Negro Leaders: 1900-1968* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 184-187. Boulware’s writing surveys the leading speakers within the African American community and asserts that their mission is to condemn racism, mold racial consciousness, instill pride in African Americans, and promote unity among all races.

particularly in the areas of theology and spirituality. They also marvel at how Thurman's apparent inactivity in the Civil Rights Movement did not diminish his ministerial proficiency.⁵ Thurman's historic ministerial and homiletical career – with many more highlights and impressions than are named here – broke down many racial (as well as class, cultural, denominational, and religious) barriers before the formal Civil Rights Movement reached widespread prominence and is worthy of more than a mere mention in the field of homiletical history.

Thurman's Homiletical Theory

Thurman's View of Worship

In order to comprehend Thurman's homiletic, his understanding of worship must first be realized. Thurman, in his essay "Worship and Word," describes the sermon as "a part of the total worship experience."⁶ He defines worship in this way:

The act of worship is the highest act of celebration of the human spirit. It is the moment of all moments when the worshipper "images" [one's self] in the presence of [one's] God, when [one] has a sense of encounter with the supreme object of [one's] devotion, where [one] is stripped of everything that is not literal and irreducible in [one's self] and the ultimate grounds of [one's] self-respect are laid bare to [that one]. In such an experience and at such a moment, [the person] is not a Unitarian or a Trinitarian, an American or a European, male or female, white or black, but a human spirit in vital touch with what [that person] recognizes as the God and Creator of [one's own] spirit. It is as if the tidal wave of communal fellowship which [one] experiences in the congregation casts [one] up to the surface, and [that one] stands there alone.⁷

Thurman states that the human spirit encounters God in worship. Thus, he contends that a service of worship speaks "to the timeless needs and aspirations of the human spirit."⁸ From Thurman's definition of worship, he suggests that corporate worship results in each participant encountering God individually. However, Thurman maintains that "the service of worship is communal and only incidentally is there a stellar role."⁹ He bases this thought on the assumption that the contributions of every person in a worship service are equally significant regardless of that person's leadership status. Therefore, the worship service has a nature of commonality which addresses and has room for each worshipper's particularity:

Those who come to worship...come as human beings.... They want to be understood, to be cared for, to have their spirits warmed by human fires.... This is the common tie that

⁵ Ralph Turnbull, *A History of Preaching Volume III: From the Close of the Nineteenth Century to the Middle of the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974), 206-209; Joseph Washington, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 105-112.

⁶ Howard Thurman, "Worship and Word: A View of the Liberal Congregation and Its Sermons, October 16, 1962," TMs (photocopy), Contemporary Collections – Howard Thurman Papers, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, 1.

⁷ Ibid., 4. Given the timeframe in which Thurman wrote, much of his language is not gender inclusive. Thus, in this and following quotations, the masculine pronouns are replaced with those that are gender inclusive.

⁸ Ibid., 1. Here, Thurman is considering the ideal worship service.

⁹ Ibid.

binds and holds. They come from a wide variety of personal and private predicaments.... In the service of worship, each must find [one's own] place, and for each somewhere in the service must be found a moment which claims [that one] and speaks to [one's] condition.¹⁰

Since the service of worship attends to a person's innermost being, Thurman advocates for great sensitivity in its construction. Each element should be carefully selected and ordered. All of the components chosen "must be subordinate to the mood and need of worship."¹¹

With this understanding of worship, Thurman proposes that the sermon is usually conceived by preachers in one of two manners. The preacher can see the sermon as "independent of the so-called worship experience,"¹² which separates the preaching moment from the rest of the service and challenges the communal momentum that the worshippers have helped to create. On the other hand, the preacher can view the sermon as "an integral part of the creative experience which is shared by all the worshippers."¹³ Thurman identifies with the latter perspective and claims that this understanding "confirms and sustains the unity" of the worship service.¹⁴ In more precise terms, he states:

Ideally, the sermon is a lung through which the worship service breathes one breath and the worship service is the lung through which the sermon breathes one breath. When this is achieved, the worshippers sense that through the sermon, all the meaning that they had been experiencing up to that moment is made uniquely available to each as [one's] private insight, despite the collective and binding act of the worship experience itself. I think this is what is meant when a worshipper says to the preacher, "It's as if you were speaking directly to me."¹⁵

Thurman feels that the sermon is intimately connected to the worship service and that, in like manner to the service, the sermon must support "the human spirit in its great quest for meaning, for significance, and for intentional living."¹⁶ In this way, the entirety of the worship service is a continual flow of spiritual nurture and guidance for all worshippers.

Thurman's View of the Sermon

The sermon, for Thurman, is an outgrowth of the preacher's spiritual and academic preparation. He states:

The sermon is the distillation of the thinking, reading, observation, brooding and mediation of the preacher. The assumption is that it is [one's] privilege to withdraw from the traffic of life periodically and regularly in order that [one] may take the kind of long hard look at the world, the society, [one's] fellows, and speak the authentic word which

¹⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

will stimulate the mind, inform even as [one] kindles the emotions, and inspire [one's] fellows to live the good life responsibly.¹⁷

Interestingly, Thurman does not depict the preacher's sermon preparation as just the study of a biblical text. Rather, the preacher prepares by studying texts, praying, and observing human affairs. Even though the preacher may withdraw from the normal flow of life in order to ready himself or herself for preaching, Thurman points out that the preacher, though fulfilling a specific mission by preaching, is still "making the same journey" as those with whom he or she is preaching.¹⁸ Therefore, the sermon must be inclusive – attending to speaker and hearers as equals in the human quest for meaning.

In addition to being inclusive, the sermon has several more tasks according to Thurman. He states that the sermon must stimulate the mind, inform and kindle the emotions, and inspire hearers to live responsibly. By placing emphasis on the sermon stimulating, informing, kindling, and inspiring the hearers (reminiscent of Augustine's homiletical requirements to inform, delight, and motivate listeners), Thurman indicates that preaching must address the whole person – head and heart. Thurman also declares that the preacher must do three things in the sermon: project the goal of a community that "includes more and more the entire human race,"¹⁹ point out the path by which this goal can be realized for the individual and the collective, and uncover the "resources upon which...people may draw that can be enabling in this process...resources which...are to be found in God."²⁰ The preacher must do this dynamically. Thurman does not feel that the preaching moment should be tranquil or bereft of passion:

The sermon is not a lecture...not merely an academic or intellectual exercise for the mind; it is not a commonplace homily that lulls into quiescence or sedation; no--the sermon must always have the smell of ammonia about it. It must be vital and contagious.²¹

Hence, the sermon is intimate and alive. This is due, in part, to the preacher's spiritual attentiveness. According to Thurman, "[t]he preacher...must speak out of the struggle of [the preacher's] own spirit and out of the insights which sometimes [the preacher] must wrest from the stubborn and often recalcitrant grip of hard idea and whole rational process."²² Here, Thurman attributes his line of thought to his homiletics instructor at Rochester. The professor told Thurman's class that the preacher is not required to preach a great sermon. Instead, the preacher must wrestle with a great idea.²³

For Thurman, *the preacher's wrestling with a great idea – in both sermon preparation and the preaching moment – is an act of spirit*. In his essay "The Word," Thurman frames this thought well.²⁴ The preacher's wrestling in sermon preparation is an engagement with her or his imagination:

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 7.

²³ Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1956), x.

²⁴ Howard Thurman, "The Word," TMs (photocopy), Contemporary Collections – Howard Thurman Papers, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston.

It is the peculiar quality of mind that enables [one] to stand in [one's] own place, defined by the uniqueness of [one's] life's story, and project [one's self] into another person's life or situation. [That one] makes sounding there, looking out upon life through the other's eyes, even as [the one] remains [one's self]. It is to inform one's self of the view from "the other side." Most children have this; it is my guess that it is one of the reasons why the Master insisted that we must become as children if we are to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.²⁵

It is the preacher's Gift of Imagination that enables [that preacher] to make available to [the] hearers the outpourings of a compassionate spirit, a tender heart, and an understanding mind. At such moments of outpouring in [the] pulpit, the word becomes flesh and [the preacher] shares with God in the great work of healing and redeeming and blessing.²⁶

However, Thurman feels that imagination must be guided by facts. Imagination that disregards factual accuracy is exaggeration:

[Exaggeration] is apt to be a vehicle for exhibiting one's ego, for the vanity of "point making" and various other forms of self-aggrandizement. A disciplined imagination is very different. Its function is to provide windows for the mind and spirit to look out upon the landscape and see the mighty works of God among the children of [humanity].²⁷

Imagination is the gift that allows the preacher to relate to her or his hearers. This is why Thurman believes that the preacher's imagination must be accompanied by social relevancy and historical accuracy:

The preacher must take the time, the care, and must have the marked integrity that will demand of [that preacher] that [the] facts be correct, accurate. (To speak personally for a moment. I always assume that there is at least one person in my congregation who knows more about the facts I am presenting than I do. There is the widest range of movement in the interpretation of facts but the facts themselves must be the facts, honestly and accurately set forth.)

In addressing [one's self] to the times in which [the preacher and the preacher's] people are living, [the preacher] must take pains to know what [the preacher] is talking about. Wherever possible, [the preacher's] information must be first hand. [The preacher] must not lean too heavily upon authorities unless in [the preacher's] judgment they have won the right to be authorities. This means study, investigation, reading, digesting. And that takes time. It is the preacher's sense of fact that is the raw material which [the preacher's] gift of imagination uses to discern the Hand of God at work in the world of [humans] and things.... Always [the preacher's] first question is, What are the facts?²⁸

²⁵ Ibid., 46.

²⁶ Ibid., 47.

²⁷ Ibid., 45.

²⁸ Ibid., 48; Thurman is also revealing his sense of humility.

A preacher's imagination cannot ignore the reality of world affairs and human conditions. Furthermore, a preacher must strive to learn these affairs and conditions through rigorous and often lengthy study. This can - and in certain subjects must - include consulting experts.²⁹ However, the preacher should never feel as if his or her mastery of the facts makes him or her an absolute authority about those facts. As a matter of fact, the preacher's goal is not to become an authority of those facts; rather, the preacher must take his or her mastery and attempt to detect – even interpret – God's movement in the world.³⁰ The preacher couples this discernment with an identification of the listener's social location and needs (through the gift of imagination) in order to preach effectively. Yet, the preacher's sense of fact (as well as his or her gift of imagination) is only sealed by the preacher's careful attention to his or her spirituality:

The miracle of holy insight that pervades the brooding mind of a [person] who seeks to understand the will and the purpose of God, as revealed in the events in the world of [humanity] and nature, is the special grace that comes to the preacher who has put [one's] mind and life at the disposal of God.

All of this is to say that the preacher must address [one's self] to the problem of the day under the aspect of the Eternal. In [one's] interpretation of these problems, [one] must remain true to [one's] calling and [one's] dedication.³¹

Facts do not outweigh the preacher's spirituality. The preacher's spirituality helps her or him to interpret the facts that she or he learns. Thus, the preacher's gift of imagination and sense of fact are to operate under the light of the gospel and through the preacher's encounter with God.

Likewise, Thurman considers preaching as an act of spirit in which the preacher communicates her or his wrestling to the hearers. Note how Thurman designates the act of preaching:

For me the sermon is an act of worship in which the preacher exposes [the preacher's] spirit and mind as they seek to reveal the working of the spirit of the living God upon them. It is a searching moment! The atmosphere is one charged with the dynamics of worship and the surrender and commitment which worship inspires.³²

To say that Thurman's homiletical theory is one of spirituality is not to profess a farfetched claim. Instead, this thesis exposes the "warp and woof" of Thurman's preaching ideal.

²⁹ Ibid., 49; Thurman cites government, politics, war and peace as examples of topics that necessitate consulting experts. He believes that these and other subjects are so complex that it is difficult to form a sense of fact. For this reason, Thurman majored in economics at Morehouse College instead of theology. See Mary Jenness, *Twelve Negro Americans* (New York: Friendship Press, 1936), 151: "But in order to start from the broadest possible foundation [for ministry, Thurman] majored in economics. 'I wanted to come into the ministry with my eyes wide open to the way people have to live,' he says." Jenness does not give a source for Thurman's quote. Also see Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 61. Thurman's systematic theology professor Dr. George Cross told Thurman to avoid "superficial books" and to read works that have such depth that they increase his ministerial efficiency.

³⁰ Thurman's hesitation in leaning too heavily on authorities is not just an issue of focus. This also reflects Thurman's suspicion that the voice of experts may undermine the preacher's spiritual attentiveness. Thurman's hope is that the knowledge of authorities will inform, invigorate, and liberate the preacher's spiritual attention.

³¹ Thurman, "The Word," 49.

³² Thurman, *Growing Edge*, ix-x.

Yet, Thurman does not divorce his spiritual view of preaching from the mechanics therein. Thurman gives this insight:

Preaching is a skill, a technique and an art. It requires a particular kind of discipline because the critical tool is the spoken word. *The preacher must be on friendly terms and intimate terms with the private life and particular history of the word. The critical tool for the preacher is the word.*³³

Thurman expects the preacher to be a master of words; however, this authority should cooperate with that preacher's spirituality. This keeps the preacher from being just an etymological expert; rather, she or he is "alive with the meaning which [she or] he thinks and feels and shares."³⁴ Moreover, the preacher's command of words should not result in an exercise of eloquence; rather, her or his ever expanding vocabulary must attempt to convey the heart of her or his thinking. It follows that the spirit of a sermon, the spiritual dynamic within the preaching moment, is directly related to the spirit of the preacher and that of the congregation. "All this means that the sermon is the vehicle through which the word becomes flesh and bone for preacher and congregation."³⁵ Somehow the preacher's spirituality, the result of her or his encounter with God, the preacher's wrestling with a grand idea, and the preacher's sense of the needs of her or his listeners is most often communicated through words. With his rich understanding of human speech, Thurman is not amazed by the human tendency "to worship the sound of [the human] voice."³⁶ He believes that this idolatry is based on the fallacy that communication is satisfied by mere speech. Consequently, Thurman is not surprised at the mistrust humanity gives to silence.³⁷

However, Thurman is clear about the value of silence in preaching. He writes, "...[I]t is out of silence that all sound comes; it is in stillness that the word is fashioned for the meaning it conveys."³⁸ Thus, silence becomes just as useful as speech for Thurman. Evans E. Crawford highlights the sermon pause as one of the most powerful homiletical devices Thurman employs in his preaching.³⁹ In the pause, Thurman highlights the premier task of the preacher: communication. Communication, for Thurman, is not based solely on spoken words. He notes

³³ Thurman, "Worship and Word," 6-7; emphasis mine.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Thurman, "Worship and Word," 7.

³⁶ Thurman, "The Word," 39: "Human speech, the spoken word, is perhaps the greatest single miracle in human life.... The spoken word is the great revealer of the secrets of the mind and the heart. I hear a series of sounds coming from you -- these sounds are transformed within me into meanings inside of my own mind, these meanings trigger certain responses that are at once judgments of value which inspire actions and reactions of various kinds.

What a priceless possession is the gift of speech! To be able to make sounds, convey specific meanings and deliberate notions, to be able to put at the disposal of another the feelings that nestle within the inner life, to be able to reveal one's self in symbols which make clear and do not betray -- this is the miracle and the gift of the spoken word. It is with the word that man [and woman become] human and thus makes possible the circles of relationships which make fast his [and her] sense of self. It is the word that gives man [and woman] power to hurt where no panacea can touch, to harness the wild horses of the mind and make them the burden bearers of the heart, to give wings to earthbound values until they lose themselves on far horizons -- it is the word that can create or destroy, splinter or make whole, redeem or damn."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Evans E. Crawford and Thomas H. Troeger, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 16-33.

that there was communication among humans before human speech developed and that contemporary humanity often returns to this kind of communication:

It is for this reason that even now when feelings move to their profoundest level we become inarticulate, speechless. It is as if the mind dropped back into a vast continuum. Have you not observed that there comes a time in any profound relationship between two human beings when words seem at once inadequate, too limited? Communication, then, takes place in a dimension of relatedness which obtained prior to the spoken word.⁴⁰

For Thurman, the critical tool of the preacher, the spoken word, is a limited tool because it – regardless of its ability to be rich in meaning – cannot convey the fullness of the gospel. How then can one receive God’s message? Thurman suggests that communication happens in a dimension of relatedness. This is the space the preacher, in her or his encounter with God during sermon preparation and preaching, carves out with her or his imagination. Thurman clarifies the idea of a dimension of relatedness:

...[T]he word, with all of its limitations and strictures, if it is to illumine the mind and warm the heart with the dynamics of the gospel, it must be a part of what I am calling, for convenience, a community of meaning. There can be no communication between people through the medium of language if the agendas are not the same. It is the common agenda of meaning that gives to the word its power to communicate. If when I talk to you I am talking from one agenda of meaning which is different from your agenda of meaning, then what I am saying cannot be heard by you. The assumption in our religion is that the religious experience is the essence of the common agenda out of which the word is spoken and by which the listeners listen. To state it categorically and in fine: *The testimony of the spirit of which the preacher’s word is a form of witness finds a response in the witness of the spirit in the heart of the listener. The common experience of the living God is the continuum of meaning out of which the preacher preaches and with which the listeners listen.* A preacher may be brilliant, eloquent, erudite, and articulate, but a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal if his [or her] words are not a witness to the spirit. A preacher may be slow of speech, fumbling with ineptitude, even unlettered, while the word that [the preacher] utters strikes fire to the heart. There is no substitute for the preacher’s experience with the words to which [the preacher] gives utterance.⁴¹

Thurman’s dimension of relatedness is a spiritual dimension. It is born out of the religious experience – the spirituality – of both the preacher and the listeners. The preacher has an encounter with God and chooses words that attempt to convey the meaning of that interaction, witness to the spirit of that interaction, and hopefully reflect the spirit of the encounter listeners may have with God. Even though language (and silence) cannot fully express what the preacher needs to say, the preacher speaks out of and to the common place of religious experience by establishing her or his spirit alongside that of the listeners as the community of meaning – or the dimension of relatedness. When the meaning of an experience is too large for language, Thurman proposes locating and employing words that invoke the spirituality of the preacher and the

⁴⁰ Thurman, “The Word,” 40.

⁴¹ Ibid., 44-45; emphasis mine.

listeners. Thus, “meaning [will] transcend the limitation of language and move directly into the stream of the life of the hearers.”⁴²

Therefore, preaching – the preacher’s wrestling in sermon preparation and in the preaching moment – is an act of spirit. Thurman’s homiletic clearly defines preaching in this manner. Spirit, in this case, does not deny academic study in favor of imagination and prayer; rather, spirit requires study to accompany the spiritual disciplines of the preacher. Spirit, for Thurman, does not evoke traditional Trinitarian dogma and imagery. Instead, spirit is inclusive of God’s spirit and the human spirits of both preacher and hearers. Subsequently, in the act of preaching, Thurman believes that the preacher relates the encounter of her or his spirit with God’s spirit in sermon preparation to the encounters the hearers’ spirits have had with God’s spirit prior to the preaching moment in the context of worship, where the spirits of God, preacher, and hearers are in communion.

Advancing the Homiletical Discourse

While Thurman’s homiletical theory has a number of implications (which will be addressed in the final section), his idea that common religious experience is the ground for theological communication has much to offer to the field of homiletics.⁴³ Though Thurman designates the word as the critical tool for the preacher, he recognizes that communication of meaning in the sermon is not ultimately dependent upon language. Rather, Thurman’s homiletic is based on a communal, pre-lingual spirituality.

Thurman’s thought differs from that of David Buttrick. For Buttrick the sermon is primarily a linguistic and conscious event: “Sermons are a movement of language from one idea to another, each idea being shaped in a bundle of words. Thus, when we preach we speak in formed modules of language arranged in some patterned sequence. These modules of language we will call ‘moves.’”⁴⁴ Furthermore, Buttrick posits that the language used by the preacher forms in consciousness:

“In designing separate moves a preacher will be attempting to form conceptual understanding in communal consciousness. Thus, moves will be shaped in such a way as to form in consciousness, as do most human understandings – as a gestalt of modeling, imaging, affective attitudes, and concept.”⁴⁵

Without this formation, according to Buttrick, the sermon is devoid of meaning.⁴⁶ For Thurman, on the other hand, human communication is built largely on elements which are pre-conscious and pre-verbal. He states, “For language is late in the development of [humanity] on the planet.”⁴⁷ Here, communication consists of utterances (and pauses) that are mediated by the feelings (religious experience) of those involved in discourse.⁴⁸

⁴² Ibid., 43.

⁴³ I am indebted to John McClure for pointing this out to me.

⁴⁴ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 23.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 40: “Unless each move, at the outset, structures in consciousness, a sermon will not mean!”

⁴⁷ Thurman, “The Divine Encounter – In Crisis, 9 March 1952,” audio cassette, Contemporary Collections – Howard Thurman Papers, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Thurman's pre-linguistic grounding for theological communication is also quite different from some of the ideals of narrative preaching, especially those in the postliberal mode. The "biblical narrative...stands at the heart of narrative preaching's project."⁴⁹ For Thurman, the shared, pre-lingual, spiritual dimension is the core of preaching. Narrative preaching's response to Thurman is that "the world of biblical narrative stands in contrast to the narratives of the world and claims a primacy over them."⁵⁰ The postliberal voices of narrative preaching warn against Thurman's view. For them, the dimension of relatedness as an approach to preaching and faith undermines the uniqueness of Jesus.⁵¹ Charles Campbell, a noted postliberal narrative homiletician, states, "Jesus is not a unique subject independent of us, but is rather absorbed into human experience and general 'truths' about life; he is not the subject of his own predicates, but is, in fact the predicate of another subject: 'human experience.'"⁵² Campbell would worry about Thurman's shared, pre-linguistic, spiritual grounding making Jesus solely human – ordinary. For Thurman, Jesus was both human and divine; however, Jesus' divinity, for Thurman, was something every person could achieve.⁵³ Campbell claims that this robs Jesus of his uniqueness. Thurman's ideas suggest that Campbell's stance makes Jesus the object of religion, i.e. it makes Jesus equal to God. Regarding Jesus as religious object (God) brings a divisive nature according to Thurman. This view sets the Christian religion as better than other religions since its primary teacher has equal status with God.⁵⁴ Thurman contends that his stance does not lessen the significance of Jesus. Jesus' significance is rooted in the quality of his encounter with God. Jesus' resultant spirituality inspires humanity to follow his model.⁵⁵ This is the spirituality that Thurman hopes to achieve in the dimension of relatedness.

Thurman's idea of shared, pre-lingual, spiritual experience grounding preaching is also different from the ideal of inductive preaching. According to Richard Eslinger, "For an inductive approach, the real, lived experience of those within the community of faith is essential to the formation of the sermon and, in conjunction with the text, provides the sermon's message."⁵⁶ Fred Craddock is the key figure in adding this type of pastoral sensitivity to the homiletical discipline. Craddock maintains that preaching should have movement so that the sermon creates interest and "allows the hearers to arrive at a common destination."⁵⁷ On the surface, one may think that Craddock and Thurman are in sync. Yet, Craddock's inductive emphasis is conscious and verbal while Thurman's dimension of relatedness is pre-conscious and pre-verbal.

Though Thurman's vision for preaching is incongruent with several viewpoints in the homiletical field, Crawford identifies where Thurman's communal, pre-linguistic, spiritual dimension for preaching resonates: the call and response of African American preaching. Crawford, a student of Thurman at Boston University, knows well the ambivalent relationship between the Black Church and Thurman and how Thurman's style of preaching was vastly different from the whooping/chanted sermons that (whether correctly or not) have come to

⁴⁹ Richard L. Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 58.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 196. See also Eslinger, 74.

⁵³ Clayborn, 97-99.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 99, note 169.

⁵⁶ Eslinger, 48.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

symbolize African American preaching. Nevertheless, Crawford proffers Thurman as an example of call and response preaching from the African American religious tradition. Here is his testimony:

Howard Thurman advanced my theology and spiritual formation through the use of pause and silence. The climate of silence he offered revealed my need to recognize its significance, and to accept it as something shared by the preacher with the entire congregation. I had majored so long in my concept of preaching as content that I had become deaf and blind to the importance of “climate.” As I became more familiar with Thurman and his spiritual quest, I realized that in both his preaching and praying he sought not to pray for you but to create or establish a climate where he could pray along with you. If that is not participant proclamation, then I do not know what is. It is a true profile of silence shared.⁵⁸

Crawford points out that Thurman’s pre-linguistic, pre-conscious, shared, spiritual dimension – which provides a base for Thurman’s theological communication – is displayed in Thurman’s pauses and moments of silence in his sermons. Through silence, Thurman sought to be connected to his hearers by setting a mood. Not only did Thurman establish a climate, but he also created a space for his hearers to join in the silence. Here, Crawford is claiming that call and response in African American preaching is not monolithic.

Interestingly, Crawford could not perceive this in his first encounter with Thurman. When Crawford and his wife first heard Thurman pray, his wife said that it was a chief moment in her spiritual life. Crawford was confused because the lengthy silence of Thurman’s prayer led him to think that Thurman was being overly dramatic. Crawford, after hearing his spouse, began to understand that his “professional expectations and habits” prevented him from connecting with the very thing that Thurman was offering – “silence.”⁵⁹

The notion of pause is not overlooked in homiletics. The pause is usually viewed as the device that provides transitional assistance in preaching. According to Buttrick, pauses serve to separate moves and to give greater attention to the upcoming move.⁶⁰

However, Crawford is uncovering something more profound with Thurman’s use of silence. Silence is pre-lingual and preconscious. Silence is the context for sound. Silence is easily shared. While Buttrick lifts up the dramatic effect of silence and pause, Crawford offers an alternative observation:

Nobody made use of the pause like Howard Thurman. Students who have traveled hundreds of miles to hear him speak, have been known to call him great just for rising, standing at the pulpit or podium, rubbing his hands over his face, and looking skyward before uttering his first word. His pauses initially seemed to embody what speakers call “the dramatic pause.” Yet the pause for which he is well known seems to go beyond the merely dramatic. The spells of silence that were a part of his speaking are related more to meditation, and are best called “meditative pauses” given what went before and after them.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Crawford, 27-28.

⁵⁹ Crawford, 27.

⁶⁰ Buttrick, 37.

⁶¹ Crawford, 26-27.

Just as a preacher's preparation in exegesis, history, sociology, theology, pastoral care, homiletical form, language, and delivery can become apparent in the preaching moment, Thurman's spiritual preparation was evinced in the pauses and silent moments of his preaching. Thurman claims that a discipline of meditation will result in a life that is submitted to the movement (or rather stillness) of meditation. Thurman says, "[I]t will lay hold upon us with its healing, without being bidden. What we discipline ourselves to use will in time use us. This is the experience of all who have accustomed themselves to meditation...."⁶² In addition to connecting with his hearers, Thurman hints that he connects with God during his homiletical pauses.

Furthermore, God may be the initiator of one or more of Thurman's pauses. According to James Earl Massey, another disciple of Thurman, "[i]n the pulpit, Thurman was prepared *for* preaching but he did not view his forethought as his final thought; he remained open in the pulpit to catch aspects of insight that he had not sensed while planning his sermon design."⁶³ This is why Crawford states that Thurman's use of pause "represents a deeper dimension. Maybe it can be called a 'devotional pause.'"⁶⁴ Perhaps, Thurman was listening to God in the silence. He may have been allowing his hearers to listen for God. Thurman was possibly creating space for him and his hearers to just be. In all these options, the encounter with God is possible. The encounter with God in these moments of homiletical pauses is pre-lingual, preconscious, shared, and spiritually formative. This is the dimension of relatedness for Thurman.

Establishing a dimension of relatedness was one of Thurman's chief goals. In so doing, Thurman pushes the field of homiletics to look at the work of Stephen Yarbrough and certain other philosophical pragmatists.⁶⁵ Yarbrough's conception of communication has some parallels to Thurman's dimension of relatedness. Yarbrough notes the several of the pragmatists' ideas on discourse study: "Language...does not exist. Utterances, however are real...every utterance, true or false, alters the world...Discourse is motivated by the perception of differences...The best

⁶² Thurman, "The Dilemma of the Religious Professional: Hester Lecture III, 10 February 1971," TMs (photocopy), Contemporary Collections – Howard Thurman Papers, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, 6. Thurman gave this lecture at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, CA. See also *Ibid.*, 6-7. In his use of the word "all," Thurman is referencing the large movement of youth in the early 1970s – particularly in his area of northern California – to meditation in venues outside of Christianity. Though he does not name it specifically, Thurman is probably citing the movement to Transcendental Meditation. For the history of that movement see Douglas Cowan and David Bromley, *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 48-71.

⁶³ James Earl Massey, "Thurman's Preaching: Substance and Style," in *God and Human Freedom: A Festschrift in Honor of Howard Thurman*, ed. Henry J. Young (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1983), 117.

⁶⁴ Crawford, 28.

⁶⁵ I am indebted to John McClure for this insight. See Stephen R. Yarbrough, *After Rhetoric: The Study of Discourse Beyond Language and Culture* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999); Yarbrough, *Inventive Intercourse: From Rhetorical Conflict to the Ethical Creation of Novel Truth* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006); Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (London: Blackwell, 1986), 307-319; Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Michel Meyer, *Meaning and Reading: A Philosophical Essay on Language and Literature* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1983); Meyer, *Of Problematology: Philosophy, Science, and Language*, trans. David Jamison and Alan Hart (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Meyer, *Rhetoric, Language, and Reason* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

motivation for discourse, therefore, is inquiry about the causes of the differences we perceive....”⁶⁶ Although Thurman believed in the existence of language, he acknowledged the limitation of language. Further, communication (discourse) for Thurman is the ultimate concern in preaching and depends on utterances and silence. In the end, Thurman hoped to overcome the boundaries that divided people through his dimension of relatedness. Yarbrough seeks a similar telos in the study of discourse:

The enabling belief of discourse studies is that we and others live in one world and that each of us individually needs each other to survive healthily, happily, and productively in that world. Only through others do we think, feel, learn at all. Our differences from others interest us because those differences suggest causes that might affect us. Respectful discourse with humans – always ultimately an inquiry into our differences from them – is what makes us human. Whatever cuts us off from others, including the belief that our language or culture is incommensurable with theirs, lessens our humanity and diminishes our world.⁶⁷

Thurman worked in hopes that the world would be more and more human. Through words and silence, he preached about how all of creation is moving toward “common ground.” Thurman agrees that to block community lessens humanity. Additionally, he puts forth a theology – obstacles that divide humanity are “against life. If it is against life, I think it is doomed. If it’s against life, it’s against God. If it’s against God, it can’t stand.”⁶⁸

Implications

Howard Thurman provides an entrance into this intersection of homiletics and spirituality that is unique. While there are others (St. Augustine and Henri Nouwen for example) who are credited with having a homiletic that focuses on spirituality and worship, none stand in the place of Thurman. Thurman provides a perspective that is unashamedly African American and supportive of the movement to eradicate racism (even though there was a critical distance between Thurman and the formal Civil Rights Movement).⁶⁹ Thurman’s life witnessed a home country and Christian churches that enabled biases against minorities, women, and those of non-Christian faiths. In turn, the homiletic of Thurman sought “common ground” for race, culture, gender, and religion. Amazingly, he was able to exercise his homiletic from the pulpits of both the church and the academy.

⁶⁶ Yarbrough, *After Rhetoric*, 9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁶⁸ *Conversations with Howard Thurman*. Part 2. Videocassette hosted by Landrum Bolling (San Francisco: The Howard Thurman Educational Trust, 1976).

⁶⁹ Thurman’s spiritual view of preaching is perhaps retention of the view many ancient peoples of Africa held about oratory. For further insight in this area, see Jacob H. Carruthers, *Mdw Ntr: Divine Speech: A Historiographical Reflection of African Deep Thought from the Time of Pharaohs to the Present* (London: Karnak House, 1995), 39-88; Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 71-107; Adisa A. Alkebulan, “The Spiritual Essence of African American Rhetoric,” in *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations*, eds. Ronald L. Jackson II and Elaine B. Richardson (New York: Routledge, 2003), 23-40; Adetokunbo F. Knowles-Borishade, “Paradigm for Classical African Orature: Instrument for a Scientific Revolution?,” *Journal of Black Studies* 21, no. 4 (June 1991): 488-500.

Today, both the church and academy can benefit from Thurman's homiletic. In churches striving for interfaith and multicultural worship, Thurman's preaching is a natural fit. It allows each person to find God in her or himself and to build connections with others across all significant boundaries. In the religious academy, Thurman's model will foster interdisciplinary scholarship along the lines of biblical studies, studies in spirituality, homiletics, sociology of religion, Black Church studies, and theology. What is wonderful is that the application of Thurman – even in a theoretical field – urges scholarship to seek practical grounding.

The possibility of Thurman's promise is greatest in the homiletics classroom. Though his homiletical theory may not be sufficient for an entire course, his work can be very useful. For example, an introductory course on preaching can begin with discussions on spirituality and how spirituality is connected with preaching and the person of the preacher. An exploration into spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer and meditation) and their integration into sermon preparation can follow. At this point, extemporaneous sermon assignments may be given. Even though the student may have little or no preaching experience, the exercises will be helpful in that the student will be forced to rely on her or his spirituality in addition to her or his biblical knowledge.

Thurman's sermons and writings bring the matters of spirituality, particularly worship and spiritual formation, to the homiletical forefront. If taken seriously, Thurman's work can inspire homiletics instructors, who typically assume the spiritual foundation for preaching, to introduce issues of spirituality in their curriculums. For those homileticians who regularly participate in such an endeavor without Thurman's perspective, Thurman's homiletic broadens their pedagogy.⁷⁰

I hope that Thurman's voice will be upheld, pursued, and critically examined by the field of homiletics. With all of the violence done in the name of protecting boundaries, Thurman's homiletic is needed. It demands that all preachers wrestle with the God that crosses all borders and communicate the product of that struggle to all who are hungry for God. Thurman urges all who are called to proclaim God's Word to attend to the preaching vocation as an act of spirit!

⁷⁰ For example, Thurman's non-Trinitarian take on spirituality enlarges the conversation for those homiletics instructors who may normally depend on the Trinitarian work of James Forbes' *The Holy Spirit and Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).