

Michael A. Brothers. *Distance in Preaching: Room to Speak, Space to Listen*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014. 189 pages. \$20.

I thought many times of Kahlil Gibran's oft quoted mantra from *The Prophet* of spaces in togetherness as I read Michael Brothers' latest work, *Distance in Preaching: Room to Speak, Space to Listen*. This excellent work in the field of homiletics (one that dabbles in speech performance studies as well) explores the aesthetic of distance in preaching for the field of homiletics today.

Why do we need a greater understanding of distance for preaching today? To set the stage, Brothers opens his book by noting a shift in his classroom. At the beginning of his teaching career at the university Brothers observed that university communications students preferred distance between the speaker and themselves, reflected by responses such as "You were too close for comfort; you forced me to back away" (2). Meanwhile, his seminary students longed for more proximity and intimacy from their peers, reflected in comments such as "Reach out and talk to us!" or "You seemed distant" (2). But in his seminary classroom today, Brothers observes students putting up walls when student-preachers encroach too much in their personal space in the sermon. This reflects for Brothers the desire among today's ecclesial listeners for aesthetic distance in communication that university students in speech performance had already named. And so, Brothers asserts, a "change of hearing" has taken place once again in preaching.

The bridge between the two forays of distance in speech performance studies and distance in homiletics is the late Fred Craddock. Some of my favorite rhetorical work is early in the book as Brothers narrates the setting of Yale's campus in 1978 as Craddock delivered the Lyman Beecher lecture and formally introduced the concept of aesthetic distance in performance studies to the practice of preaching (9ff). After this creative setting of the stage, Brothers offers a brief but thorough introductory overview of speech performance studies for readers new to that field in general and aesthetic distance as a concept in speech performance in particular (Chapter Two).

Returning to homiletics, he turns to Craddock's adaptation of aesthetic distance in preaching (Chapter Three). Brothers, through Craddock, argues that listener participation in the event of the sermon ironically requires distance from the preacher—distance in her posture toward the text and context but also distance in her delivery—but this distance, strangely enough, requires the preacher to know her context. It is the dance between the shores of text, context, preacher, pulpit, and pew that creates the delicate balance of enough room for listeners to feel welcomed to enter into the sermon event but not feel forced into that moment (too much proximity) nor feel as if the preacher is too clueless to offer any real welcome to those in the particular pew of a particular church (too much distance). This is how the Living Word is given room and space to transform congregations, collectively and as individuals: space in the church's togetherness.

Next, Brothers negotiates a hearing with Craddock's biggest critics, for his use of distance in particular: postliberal homiletics (Chapter Four). While Craddock found an aesthetic of distance as vital to his homiletic, homileticians Mark Ellingsen and Charles Campbell aim for aesthetic "absorption" in their homiletic, namely absorption into the world of the biblical text.

After a brief overview of postliberal theory and theology, Brothers places Craddock and professor of literature Louise Rosenblatt in dialogue with Ellingsen and Campbell. Brothers convincingly argues for the unworkability in performance of postliberal preaching from its

theory. The postliberal homiletic renders in preaching an unintentional distance between gospel and life as it is lived that postliberal preachers cannot bridge by absorption tactics. That is because, for postliberal preachers, the good news is in the text and the world of the text, not in this world. Listeners, Brothers claims, are not satisfied with being called to absorption away from this world each week and into the distant location of gospel in the text-world. A theory that does not take hearers in preaching seriously will not have the means to provide adequate guides to sermon performance. Such is the case for postliberal homiletics (136).

I found myself surprised to reach the conclusion and two sermon examples so suddenly. Perhaps this was an intentional move, one that reflects aesthetic distance for our field. This move allows Brothers to crack open the door for another project exploring distance in preaching through other avenues, such as virtual preaching or satellite churches. I would also love to have Brothers in conversation with Lance Pape's project from the same year, *The Scandal of Preaching* (2014) as it seeks to reclaim postliberal preaching for times such as these. Who is right in the end? Do we need distance or absorption in our preaching? How does Pape's Tillichian revision of Campbell's postliberal homiletic address Brothers' critique of the unworkability of Campbell and Ellingsen's theories in practice? Certainly articles will be written on such themes. Ultimately, Brothers' thorough research coupled with his cogent writing render this a project that students and teachers of preaching should add to their collections as well as all those working preachers out there who would like to breathe a bit of energy and creative space into their sermon preparation and delivery.

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