

Boundaries of Belonging: The Necessity of a Global Homiletic Conversation

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Abstract: *This article reflects on the challenges and importance of extended, global homiletic conversations. Drawing on my experience as a Westerner teaching preaching in the Pacific, the article asserts the necessity of global homiletic conversation as a guard against hegemonic preaching practices and as a productive agent of cultural destabilization. This is particularly true when defining the contours of postcolonial preaching. By moving preaching into postures of Spirit-dependence similar to Mary's dependence on the Spirit in Luke's gospel, global homiletic conversation can facilitate sacramental performances of embodied relation between preachers, their changing communities, and Christ.*

On the north coast of the largest of Fiji's islands, the village of Naiserelagi sits on a hill-top perch. A Catholic church stands at the summit, surrounded by brightly painted, tin houses. Driving the narrow, dirt road to the summit is harrowing, but tourists do it nearly every day because of the mural inside St. Xavier's sanctuary. The *Black Christ* triptych was painted in 1963 by Jean Charlot, a French artist, and it fills the wall behind St. Xavier's altar [Figure 1]. It shows a dark-skinned Jesus on the cross, draped in a traditional Fijian masi cloth. On his left are indigenous—or iTaukei—Fijians bringing gifts of honor: Pacific plants and mats, and a tanoa bowl used for the ceremonial drinking of kava [Figure 2]. More provocatively, on his right are Indo-Fijians bringing gifts associated with Indian culture, a culture brought to the island when Indian laborers were imported by the British to work the sugarcane fields during the island's colonial period [Figure 3]. The working conditions of these indentured laborers, or *girmitya*, amounted to little more than slavery. Many had no option but to make Fiji their home. Today, Indo-Fijians make up 35 percent of the Fijian population, most of them Hindu or Muslim. The *Black Christ* mural is a representation of a multicultural, multi-religious paradise—a picture that mirrors Pope John Paul II's memorable phrase turned tourist slogan: "Fiji: the way the world should be."¹ One year after the Pope's 1986 visit, the first of four coups ripped apart this fragile political ecosystem, with boundaries drawn along ethnic and religious lines. The Indo-Fijian population had grown, and indigenous Christians feared the loss of their political power and the legal protection of their lands. Calls for a Christian state coincided with Indian families being driven from their homes. The last coup, in 2006, used the threat of ethnic unrest as an excuse for a military takeover, and though the current government draws heavily on the language of secularism and democracy, this language is often used to control and silence dissent on both sides of the ethnic divide.² All this to say, beneath the welcoming smiles of Fijians, there are walls of distrust. Despite the slow, steady progress of grass-roots peace organizations, indigenous Fijians can feel that their status as first peoples and their way of life are at risk, and Indo-Fijians can feel like second-class citizens in a country in which they have lived for generations. Particularly within the indigenous Methodist church, a church that I have come to

¹ Sam Howe Verhovek, "Ethnic Crisis in Fiji Threatens a South Seas Eden," *New York Times*, June 7, 2000, accessed April 11, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/07/world/ethnic-crisis-in-fiji-threatens-a-south-seas-eden.html>.

² Matt Tomlinson and Debra McDougall, "Christian Politics in Oceania," in *Christian Politics in Oceania*, ed. Tomlinson and McDougall, (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 15.

know and serve over the past three years as a theological educator and mission partner, there is a deep suspicion of difference.

In her thesis, “Painting Paradise for a Post-Colonial Pacific,” Caroline Klarr notes that St. Xavier’s guest book is filled with the names of foreign tourists, but very few locals. It seems there are superstitions, particularly among the Indians and Fijian Methodists who live in this northern region, around this artistic ode to diversity and enculturation.³ What are the intentions of this Black Jesus painted by a foreigner? At minimum, there seems to be something missing in the picture’s rounded forms and placid faces. Where is the grit and pain of past 30 years? Where are the questions about the future and the all-important question about land? It is a picture, perhaps, of what the West would love to believe possible about this island and about the world: diversity without cost. Even the crucified Christ is serene. It is a picture of *belonging* without *boundaries*, and yet, as most any Pacific Islander will tell you, boundaries—particularly the boundaries around land, identity and community—are important. Jione Havea notes that for Pacific people, “borders are homes.” Despite their contradictions and their potential for abuse, “borders are necessary. They are places where people feel they belong.”⁴

Boundaries of Belonging

For those who living far away from home, boundaries and belonging become personal things. So, I will speak personally for a moment. I did not drive to the northern side of the island to see the *Black Christ*. I drove there to see his mother. I had done my doctoral research on the pneumatology of performance, drawing on Mary’s Spirit-inspired labor in Luke’s nativity texts as a conversation partner. The altar transept of St. Xavier’s had a less well-known Charlot mural depicting the Annunciation, and I was curious. Commentators have suggested that Charlot’s painting of Mary tries to depict Fiji’s amalgam of cultural influences, as well as the diversity in his own cultural background [Figure 4]. Her skin is lighter in tone than her crucified son, and her hair is an auburn hue. She wears a pink dress, perhaps in homage to the Virgin of Guadalupe, to whom Charlot was particularly devoted.⁵ Most strikingly, Mary weaves a traditional Fijian mat, the skilled art of an *iTaukei* woman. Charlot’s Mary stands on shifting borders of national, cultural, and ethnic identity. Or maybe, she floats above them—belonging to all, but not bounded by any.

My eyes weren’t drawn to the pink dress, nor to the mat she wove. Instead, I noticed her eyes. They were painted blank – creamy almonds in an upturned face. There were no pupils, color, or expression [Figure 5]. And I found myself asking, Protestant that I am, *what do those expressionless eyes signify?* Are they some kind of Catholic code for spiritual insight, some symbol of removed-from-the world purity? Did they represent a kind of divine vision beyond the sight of ordinary mortals? There was a part of me that envied this unbound Mary, able to transcend so many cultural spaces. She seemed at ease weaving her Fijian mat, sporting her Mexican pink, tossing back her auburn hair. This was a woman interculturally competent in the extreme—but I worried about those eyes. What had this transcendence cost her? What had she lost? Where was the angle of her perspective? Where was her finite, particular gaze? In her role

³ Caroline Klarr, “Painting Paradise for a Post-Colonial Pacific: The Frescos of Jean Charlot,” (PhD dissertation, Florida State University, 2002), 170-71.

⁴ Jione Havea, “Engaging Readings from Oceania,” in *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s)*, ed. Jione Havea, Elaine Wainwright, and David Neville (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 7.

⁵ Klarr, 159.

of cultural virtuoso, embodying the diversity of shifting traditions, she seemed to have lost her boundaries.

Perhaps those blank eyes reveal a secret that Charlot painted into his mural in spite of himself—a secret he did not have words to name. Without boundaries, Mary becomes blind. In losing herself and the particularity of her limits, she loses her ability to see. And here the personal becomes political again, because in Charlot’s vision of a post-colonial paradise, there is a link between this loss of personal particularity and the loss of political vision. Mary’s eyes are a reminder that idealizing the boundaries of the one leads to an idealizing of the boundaries of the other. They remind us that idealizing and ignoring are two sides of the same coin.

This is not a new insight for Catholic and Protestant feminists who have made repeated critiques of Mariological traditions that divinize the embodied limits of the Madonna.⁶ Such theologies not only blind us to Mary’s human particularity, they create universal norms for femininity and blind us to diverse, ordinary women who do not fit her ideal. Susan Griffin reflects on her experience of motherhood this way: “All around me floated archetypal mothers, Italian Madonnas...while my own experience waited blind and dumb—unspoken.”⁷ For those who debate the meaning and worth of Mary in the Christian tradition, this is not new ground. But it is less familiar ground for those whose concern is the meaning and worth of the preacher.

My area of homiletic research circles around the subject of performance, a topic I find theologically and ethically critical. The embodied event of a preacher’s performance in the pulpit is, in many quarters of Protestant tradition, a place of sacramental encounter. In Calvin’s thinking “it is a settled principle” that the sermon has the same office as the sacraments: “to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace.”⁸ The sermon is a place where the community and individual are reconfigured by the Spirit within the boundaries of Christ’s body. It is a place where the boundary between heaven and earth, time and place, and text and context become thin. But for all its mystery and transcendent potential, the performance of a preacher in the pulpit is dangerous. It can paint a paradise that does not exist. In its request that a preacher embody a text or tradition or communal dialect, it can ignore the boundaries of a preacher’s particular gaze, the angle of her perspective, her *limited* vision. It can idealize—or ignore—the boundaries of *her* body, and in so doing, it can make her blind. She may, for example, find herself saying “all lives matter,” instead of “black lives matter.” She may find herself fearing borders of difference in the world, borders that she has fought hard to dissolve in her own presentation of herself. Alternatively, she may engage difference in the manner of *Eat, Pray, Love*,⁹ where the transcending of personal boundaries takes precedence over genuine embodied relationships with people who are tired of being painted into Western murals of self-realization.¹⁰ She may even set up her own unbound, interculturally-competent Self as a norm.

In 2015, *Homiletic* devoted the majority of its issue to the question of postcolonial preaching. I wholeheartedly applaud the insights shared. Growing out of the work of theorists like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, as well as the insights of biblical scholars like Fernando

⁶ See, for example, Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

⁷ Susan Griffin, “Feminism and Motherhood,” in *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood* (New York: Seven Stories, 2001), 35.

⁸ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 953.

⁹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

¹⁰ Sandip Roy, “The New Colonialism of *Eat, Pray, Love*,” *Salon.com*, accessed April 3, 2017, http://www.salon.com/2010/08/14/i_me_myself/.

Segovia, a postcolonial homiletic attends to the ways that colonial ghosts linger in our pulpits. In particular, it points to the ways that homiletics has privileged American or Eurocentric practices and forms. At its core is the belief that, in the words of the issue's editorial Introduction, "Identities are not fixed self-possession...they are realized precisely in relationships marked by intercultural interactions."¹¹ Words like "hybridity" or "third-space" mark this discourse, even as their meanings are contested, attempting to break down colonial dichotomies and essentialisms.¹² It is work that I find invigorating and particularly necessary in North American churches like the one I attended before leaving for the Pacific. In that New Jersey congregation, nine native languages were represented on a Sunday. It was a context crying out for a postcolonial attentiveness to hybridity!

But the past three years of working with pastors in the Methodist Church of Fiji has taught me a different perspective. This dialogical, hybrid-loving, fluid-identity language is deeply discomfiting at Davuilevu Theological College, the heavily *iTaukei* seminary that called me to teach preaching. Furthermore, it would be patronizing to dismiss this resistance as solely colonial indoctrination. These are indigenous Christians who are seeing the borders of their church diminished by flashy, well-financed denominations headquartered in the US. They are seeing their culture dissolved by rapid globalization and the literal borders of their shorelines disappearing from rising tides. Their deductive, authoritarian 3-point sermon style has roots, certainly, in missionary training from fifty years back. It also, however, has roots in the *vakaturaga* ethic – the chiefly ethic that grounds traditional understandings of role and right behavior.¹³ It has roots that predate the 1835 missionary arrival. It is not only that Fijian Methodists fear the loss of boundaries because they fear change, it is also that boundaries around role, identity and appropriate behavior are deeply rooted aspects of a culture that prizes communal unity and order. "If a Fijian is nothing else," a student says to me, "he is well-mannered."

There is, therefore, something about this postcolonial conversation that gives me pause. It seems too convenient that something called "postcolonial" would be an idea comfortably familiar to me, and yet cause such fear and sorrow for many of my Davuilevu colleagues. That lovely, multi-ethnic creativity, that fluid, third-space where new possibilities emerge – it sounds like an idealized home I would make for myself. But Fiji is not my home. There are boundaries to my belonging.

The subject of this article is the necessity of a global homiletic conversation. **First and foremost, such conversation is necessary because, without it, even the best attempts to balance the scale of homiletic privilege will prioritize Western practices and forms all over again, by whatever name.** Postcolonial preaching in Fiji will look different than it looks in Latin America or Asia, and it will certainly look different than it looks in North America. Having

¹¹ Yohan Go, David Schnasa Jacobsen and Duse Lee, "Introduction to the Essays of the Consultation on Preaching and Postcolonialism," *Homiletic* 40 v.1(2015): 3, accessed April 3, 2017, DOI: [10.15695/hmltc.v40i1.4116](https://doi.org/10.15695/hmltc.v40i1.4116).

¹² Homi Bhabha defines hybridity as the "problematic of colonial representation...so that the other 'denied' knowledge enters the dominant discourse and estranges the basis of its authority," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 162. Jeffrey Staley wonders if a more "radical challenge" to colonial hybridity is required in his discussion of clothing in Mark's gospel and the semiotics of clothing in 19th century Protestant mission work, "'Clothed in Her Right Mind': Mark 5:1-20 and Postcolonial Discourse," in *Voices from the Margin*, 3rd ed., ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 326.

¹³ Unaisi Nabobo-Baba notes the extended use of monologues related in monotone, didactic fashion, as one important learning practice of traditional *iTaukei* culture, in *Knowing and Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach* (Suva: University of the South Pacific Press, 2006), 119-120.

eyes to understand these differences is no easy task. A North American homiletician spent a summer in Africa and was shocked at the imperative tone and moralism in the sermons he heard, qualities the preachers themselves attributed to missionary training from decades prior. He noted the lack of narrative form, despite the importance of storytelling in African oral traditions. He worried about the absence of liberation theology and theological nuance. And yet, he found an African church full to overflowing. What had his preliminary assessment missed?¹⁴ And how do we move from these preliminary assessments to the difficult work of extended, relational conversation? Such conversations are the disorienting work of years, but I assert that they are worth the effort. They teach us again the grace and challenge of being bounded creatures, reminding us of the limits of our vision. In so doing, these conversations can teach us how to see.

Boundaries of *Belonging*

A young man named Jone, a 17-year old altar boy from St. Xavier's, approached me in the sanctuary that day to answer my questions. I'd read something about an outdoor grotto devoted to the Virgin Mary on the church grounds and asked if we could visit it. His face lit up. "It's on the way to my school! I stop there twice a day to pray."

It was a longer distance than I expected, a mile or more from the cathedral. An overgrown path winds through taro fields and makes use of a wooden board to cross a stream. But finally, Mary appears [Figure 6]. She is perched in a stone alcove, protecting the valley, looking for all the world like plaster-of-paris lawn statuary. Her eyes have been painted to look to heaven, but above her head, wasps' nests have clustered in the arc of the alcove. I'm tempted to say they were bees, which would be somehow more romantic and Marian—but these were wasps. As a result, Mary looked less concerned with heaven and more concerned about those swarming insects above her head [Figure 7]. "Don't worry," Jone smiled. "No one ever gets stung."

This Mary was bounded on every side. She was bolted to the Fijian land, and even in her difference she played her role. She did what was expected. One might think she was out of place, but only if one had no appreciation for the Fijian performances of piety that claimed her. This blond Madonna had been made part of the landscape of the Naiserelagi people. She was Jone's Lady, regardless of the color of her hair. Her commitment to stand guard over his family had won his heart. She wasn't trying to be anything she wasn't. She wasn't cool or edgy or forward thinking. She stood solid and unchanging, or at least she seemed to. And no one was stung – until someone was.

Cyclone Winston was one of the worst recorded cyclones in the Southern Hemisphere. Six months after it hit Fiji, I revisited that grotto. The grounds were unkempt. The grass was dry, and downed trees blocked the trail. Mary herself seemed stranded. From where she stood, she had a view of Naiserelagi hill and all those brightly painted tin homes around St. Xavier's church. Except now, the village was gone. The trees that shaded the village were gone. A 12-year-old boy hit by debris as he ran to the church—a boy who I'm sure Jone knew—was gone. The earth beneath her feet had changed, and she didn't seem to know how to respond. She seemed very alone.

¹⁴ Ronald J. Allen is cautious and respectful in his analysis, making clear the limited and "soft" nature of his data and sharing his observations with his African colleagues for feedback. He himself highlights the challenges of global homiletic analysis and the need for further, in-depth conversation. "African Homiletics: A Soft Report," *Homiletic* 16 v. 1 (1991): 5-9.

This, finally, is the problem with boundaries, for all of their importance. This is the catch-22. Even in our need for them, bounded traditions and practices have their own dangers. They can bolt one in place, as time rushes by. They can secure a preacher to her context, but then when context changes, one is left feeling displaced and unsure. Boundaries can become rigid and dead, what Gayatri Spivak calls a “performative” rather than a “performance”: the product of something over and done, rather than the process of something becoming.¹⁵ As such, boundaries can be abused, not only in their exclusion of those without power, but also in their preservation of agendas that inform the status quo. Fijian historians will testify that it was the British government who restricted Indians from visiting *iTaukei* villages in order “protect” the boundaries of culture, a preservation that served the Crown’s larger economic and political agenda.¹⁶

Naiserelagi, then, has one transcendent Mary and one Mary bolted to the earth. Somewhere in the difference between these two lies the challenge facing contemporary Fijian Methodist pastors. How does one honor boundaries of difference in a way that keeps those boundaries alive and connected to the outside world? How does one keep the boundaries of identity, land, and community vulnerable to change, without allowing for their erasure? How does one keep the boundaries of embodied practices and embodied histories and embodied culture vibrant and bright without letting those same boundaries isolate the church from the next generation, from the outsider, and from the very land that is changing under its feet?

Many Fijian preachers do their best to embody the Marian protector, to ward off wasps with fervent prayer, to do what is expected of them by their communities, to stand solid and unchanging in the face of rapid globalization and make sure no one gets stung. They do their best to hold tight to the boundary they know and understand, the “performative” boundary, rather than a boundary “performed.” But in the process, some are recognizing the loss of a boundary’s greatest blessing: the blessing of relationship. To treat boundaries as rigid and unchanging is to ignore the blessing of belonging in the world—a blessing first taught to us by boundaries themselves. Reflecting on her experience of pregnancy, Iris Marion Young draws on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty to argue that our bodies are the first boundaries we know, and while they separate us, they connect us as well. They are the places where we touch, and they bear witness to those connections.¹⁷

And this is the second reason why a global homiletic conversation is so vital. It not only reminds us of our limits. It reminds us that we are connected. Such conversation does more than show us of the boundaries of our belonging. It shows us that belonging is found on the edges of our boundaries. Tongan theologian Winston Halapua, describes it as the paradox at the heart of *moana* theology, i.e. ocean theology. The ocean marks the border and boundary of Pacific nations, but it also serves as bridge. It serves as the medium of connection and the vehicle of contact. It allows for vulnerability to the outside world, even as it provides shape and structure

¹⁵ Gayatri Spivak, “A Borderless World,” lecture at The University of Arizona, accessed April 3, 2017, https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=E3LYRYR_-XA.

¹⁶ Sashi Kiran, “For Peace Which is True,” *Fiji Times*, September 29, 2016, accessed March 17, 2017, <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=372628>. See also, Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec, “Introduction: Themes in the Study of the South Asian Diaspora,” in *South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 10.

¹⁷ See Iris Marion Young’s discussion of transcendence and immanence in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, “Pregnant Embodiment,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 49.

to the land itself.¹⁸ Extended conversation across cultural difference reminds us that the boundaries of interpretive communities were not meant to quarantine us. They were not, in the words of Kristine Culp discussing the boundaries of the church, meant to “deny vulnerability or escape ambiguity.” They were meant to be places of “conversion, repentance, empowerment and healing” because boundaries are places where “real and ongoing change” is possible.¹⁹

Performances of Sacramental Encounter

This understanding of boundaries as a performance of real and ongoing change is not just a postmodern invention. It was core to the theological anthropology of the Reformers. In the thought of the early Reformation, the material body of a believer or congregation was not an essence unto itself, but a lived performance of faith, empowered by the Spirit of God. Julie Canlis names the “relational ontology” at the center of Protestant thought.²⁰ For Calvin and Luther in particular, “being” was not a static noun to which a predicate was added. The self was defined in lived relation with Christ, which means that human existence was limited, dependent and relational. It was bounded by borders which belonged in time.

This understanding of humans as having relational borders had profound implications for Protestant approaches of sacramental performance. Thomas Davis charts Martin Luther’s movement from the Catholic understanding of the sacrament as an *opus operatum* (literally, “a work done”) to an understanding grounded in performance and time. This new understanding of the sacrament was an *opus operantis*, “a work being done, in process, in which one is intimately involved.”²¹ At issue was a shift away from a localized, guaranteed, sacramental Presence to a sacramental understanding grounded in event and relation. Gayatri Spivak might say that it was a move from the “performative” to “performance.” The difference, of course, is that for Luther, the performance included Divine actors and necessitated Divine intervention. The Reformers had a strangely contemporary appreciation for the difficulty of honoring boundaries of belonging. One did not find those points of genuine embodied contact through natural means. When dealing with preaching or the sacramental elements in particular, it was the Holy Spirit that made such relationality possible – both between human and divine and within the community itself.

And this, perhaps, is the most important reason why a global homiletic conversation matters. It cuts to the theological core of what can seem an ethical impossibility. Engaging boundaries of difference is fraught with challenge. There are dangerous shoals and rip-tides in these ocean waters. To stand in this “liminal” space, to use the language of Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers,²² is to try to balance preservation with vulnerability, silence with speech, and the value of the particular against the danger of the provincial. It does not simply use difference as a backdrop to bring one’s own tradition into clearer relief, as if Others were a mirror through which we might better see ourselves. It risks relationship and change, and there is no guarantee that we’ll get it right.

I do not advocate for global homiletic conversation in order to collect exotic preaching

¹⁸ Winston Halapua, *Waves of God’s Embrace: Sacred Perspectives from the Ocean* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Kristine A. Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* (Louisville: WJK, 2010), 103.

²⁰ Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 72.

²¹ Thomas J. Davis, *This Is My Body: The Presence of Christ in Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 22.

²² Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 37.

practices, like Western tourists in a handicraft market. I certainly do not advocate for global conversation to arrive at some univocal, transcendent form, or even to reaffirm the distinctives of our particular interpretive communities. I advocate for a global homiletic conversation because it destabilizes our boundaries, even as it reminds us of their necessity. It reminds us that we are borders performing, with each other and with God. It reminds us that we are limited, dependent and relational beings. *And in so doing, global homiletic conversation rearticulates our need for a profound theology of the Holy Spirit every time we speak about sermon performance.*

When Catholic feminist Elizabeth Johnson discusses her concerns about various Mariological traditions in her context, she is not only worried about the ethical consequences of regulating women's bodies and behaviors based on a Marian ideal. For her, letting Mary be particular and human is more than an ethical issue. It is a theological issue. She notes that in traditions that idealize the Mother of Christ, the mediating, empowering, intercessory work of the Spirit is outsourced to Mary.²³ Pneumatology suffers because Mary has no need of the Spirit. She stands in for Christ in his absence or loses herself in his presence. And yet, in Luke's gospel, Mary does neither of these things. When the overshadowing of the Spirit brings Mary into embodied relation with Christ, she does not disappear—but the borders of her body *are* changed.

When one recognizes that one is limited *and* vulnerable, which is finally the beating heart of what performance in the world (and pulpit) is all about, one faces the question of trust. Where do we place it? Given these limits and vulnerabilities, in what can we put our confidence? Each generation of preachers comes up with its own answer to this question, or perhaps more accurately, they come up with two. The first is the answer preachers speak aloud—the answer that usually points to Jesus. But the more telling answer is the one they reveal in their practice. This may include rhetorical prowess, hermeneutic norms, pastoral purity, narrative form, or cultural expertise. The specific skill changes across time and place. What stays the same, however, is the hope that if preachers do this one thing right, all will be well. In the messy practices of preaching, we hunt for sacramental guarantees, rather than sacramental understandings grounded in event, relation and a Spirit we cannot control. And who could blame us? There is so much at stake when a preacher stands in the pulpit. The wasps circle. The storms gather. We want proof that we have done this thing that God has asked of us. We want proof that we can transcend our limits, or at least cover over our vulnerabilities.

There comes a day, however, when preachers discover that they can be neither of Naisserelagi's Marys. We can't transcend boundaries of culture and context with unnatural insight, and we can't protect congregations from the wasps and storms of change. When that day of realization comes, preachers can do one of several things. We can walk away from our callings, feeling as if we have failed. More dangerously, we can begin to wear a mask, hiding that failure from the world and pretending to be more than we are. Or, we can do something different. We can claim the truth that our calling has never required the transcending of the world or its preservation. This isn't our job, just as it wasn't Mary's. Our calling requires risky performances of sacramental encounter, relating to the world and to God from the vulnerable, destabilized stance of one standing, fully human, in the Spirit's shadow. Through that Spirit, at the boundaries of human flesh, word and community, preachers find a belonging in the body of Christ.

The Labor of Relationship

Feminist philosophers like Helen Buss have asked why pregnancy is not used more

²³ Johnson, 80.

frequently as a metaphorical resource for the relational activity of self-making, with “concepts of barrier, connection and conduit combined.”²⁴ Faafetai Aiava, a Samoan theologian living in diaspora, uses the Samoan word for womb and embrace, *alofa*, to ask a similar question. Is there something about pregnancy that provides a “relational” reference point for identity formation?²⁵ Does it give us a way to talk about boundaries and belonging together? Pregnancy is a broad metaphor, and it is dangerous to deal with it in the abstract. I wonder, however, what pregnancy meant for Mary. What did that embodied relation with a Savior, brought about by the Spirit, ask of her? The angel told Mary that she would “conceive,” “bear” and “name” a living Word (Luke 1:31). What kind of dependence did that take? What kind of commitment to hospitality? What kind of daily courage? To my mind, those are the sorts of things asked of preachers.

They are also, I suggest, things asked of 21st century teachers of preaching who would reject Western homiletic hegemony. It would be comforting for me to summarize my three years of teaching preaching in the Pacific with bullet points of lessons learned or to stabilize the boundaries of my experience as a consumable product. But for all the points of cultural connection in my years of Fijian instruction, there were as many points of dislocation and disorientation. There were moments of warm recognition and joyful discovery, such as one student’s suggestion that the “Lowry Loop” could be best imaged in the Fijian context as a dive for sea cucumbers. There were moments of deep hermeneutical insight, informed by the multivalent meanings of a Fijian *ibe*, or mat. But there were also markedly different understandings of a gendered body, different understandings of divine sovereignty in relation to the problem of climate change, and profoundly different levels of trust in the values of secular democracy. After three years, my conclusion is very like the conclusion of the homiletician reflecting on his African sabbatical: the conversation is just beginning. There is so much I do not see. But to my mind, this is the work of 21st century homiletics.

The concrete question of “how” is part of that work and deserves prolonged attention. In the short space of this essay, I offer only scraps gleaned from several years of daily chapel and communal living with future Fijian pastors. Here is what I know: the work will take time—much more than is convenient—and it will risk lived relationship. It will be guided less by an attempt to create a “shared vision” of the homiletic discipline’s future and more by an attempt to create a vision of its “shared future.”²⁶ As such, it will risk the authority of well-worn categories and tropes. It will require a willingness to be repeatedly wrong. That’s what makes it hard.

But the labor is worth the effort. It is ethically imperative if we are committed to respectful and honest engagement with our world-wide family of faith. More than this, the labor is theologically revelatory. Global homiletic conversation testifies to our provisionality. It reminds us that boundaries of tradition or text or preacherly persuasion will never be worthy of our trust, but Someone is. In her book, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers*, Jewish author Avivah Zornberg notes, “When God behaves in ways we do not understand, one

²⁴ Helen M. Buss, “Antigone, Psyche, and the Ethics of Female Selfhood,” in *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, eds. William Schweiker, John Wall, and David Hall (New York: Routledge, 2002), 76.

²⁵ Faafetai Aiava, “From ‘in-between’ to ‘in-both’: Dehyphenating Diasporic Theology from a Relational Perspective,” (paper presented to the Relational Hermeneutics Conference, Pacific Theological College, Suva, June, 2016).

²⁶ Thanks to David Hooker, who draws on the work of Byron Bland for this formulation. “Transforming Community,” *JustPeace*, May 5, 2016, accessed March 23, 2018, <https://justpeaceumc.org/transforming-community/>.

effect is to make him real in his very opacity.”²⁷ At the limits of our understanding, preachers find One who is not ours for the taking—a Spirit-mediated gift, unbound by sermon text, impassioned delivery, or communal norm. But thanks be to God, this Someone is revealed *in* and *through* those shifting boundaries. Sarah Coakley says it like this: “Revelation—even the face of the incarnate Christ—has always required discernment, an epistemic transformation” brought about by a “tangle of practices” and a “radical dispossession to the Spirit.”²⁸ *Revelation, in other words, is a gift that is pneumatologically mediated through faith-filled work.* The difficult, vulnerable, transformative boundaries of global difference invite us to the labor.

²⁷ Avivah Zornberg, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2015), 167.

²⁸ Sarah Coakley, “The Identity of the Risen Jesus: Finding Jesus Christ in the Poor” in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, eds. Beverly Gaventa and Richard Hays (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 308.

Appendix:

All photographs taken by the author at Naiserelagi parish, Fiji, December, 2014.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

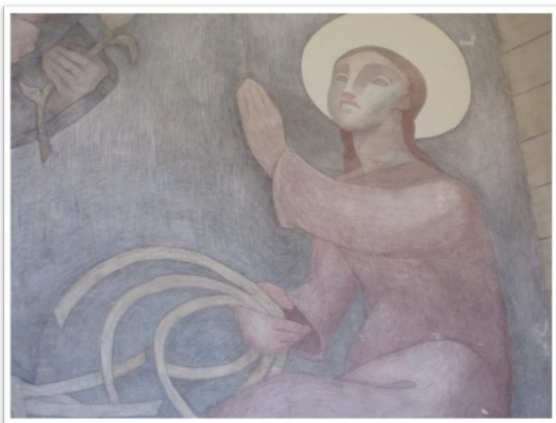
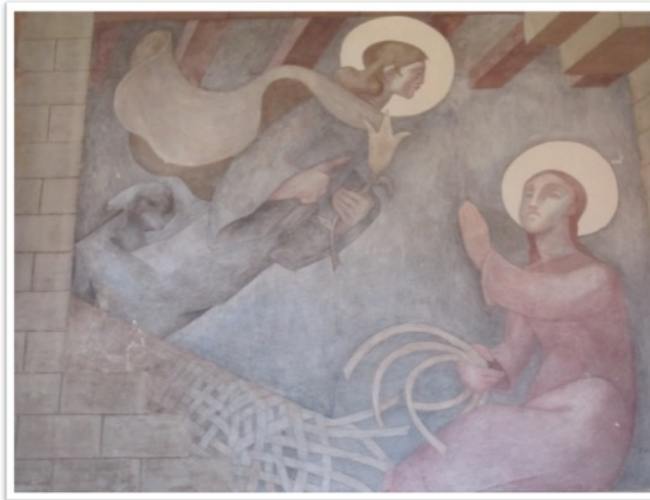


Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

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