

Richard W. Voelz. *Tending the Tree of Life: Preaching and Worship through Reproductive Loss and Adoption*. Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2018. 123 pages. \$13.

Pastoral care in Christian congregations is laced with conundrums, especially when it connects with preaching and worship. In the context of a service, do we speak or offer silent presence? Does a particular need for care within the congregation warrant public solidarity and comfort? Or does the family's need for privacy cause us to avoid the subject in preaching and worship altogether? Writing primarily to pastors, preachers, and worship planners (with the tacit assumption that one person fills all three roles), *Tending the Tree of Life* by Richard Voelz offers a tender gift, liturgical support, and homiletical solidarity for and with congregants grieving the cycles of reproductive loss or navigating the harrowing process of adoption.

Voelz understands these conundrums of care on account of his pastoral and personal experiences. He writes passionately to "improve the conditions of, and provide resources for, preaching and worship as congregational experiences as they relate to reproductive loss and adoption" (7). He hopes that pastors will rethink their decision to keep silent about or avoid altogether any engagement with these family issues in the course of preaching and worship. Perhaps lack of knowledge or resources makes silence and avoidance more preferable. *Tending the Tree of Life* provides ample engagement and resources, with an explicit interest in offering healing and wholeness.

Voelz's interdisciplinary scholarship intersects with biblical studies, homiletics, pastoral care, theology, and sociology that focuses specifically on issues of infertility and adoption. If specialists in any of these fields find Voelz's treatment wanting, it is because these disciplines are engaged for specific practical means rather than for deep disciplinary discourse. The book is aptly located in this series of guides to practical ministry for the ongoing needs of clergy in parish ministry.

Two of the book's primary assumptions are that the time and space within which worship happens are formative, and that preaching and worship are meant to address the whole person and a wide variety of human experiences (22-23). Based upon these assumptions the author spotlights harmful practices in both preaching and worship. He lists biblical texts and narratives, as well as images or metaphors of God, that are frequently used with good intention yet prove damaging to those dealing with the emotional trauma of reproductive loss. He calls out language that hurts and theologies that inflict harm or create confusion.

Preachers will find helpful alternative perspectives on particular "texts of terror"—ways of engaging a hermeneutic of the wounded, and prophetic or disruptive homiletical methodologies that challenge dominant, harmful theological views. Clergy will also discover new and more helpful language for addressing these areas of congregational vulnerability. Worship planners will find suggested liturgies and rituals that reach out to and stand in solidarity with persons caught in the unfortunate matrix of reproductive loss and adoption. Ultimately, Voelz achieves what he set out to do with this volume—to help pastors and worship leaders break the silence and avoid avoidance around reproductive loss and adoption, as well as offer new perspectives and suggest helpful resources as a way forward.

Yet *Tending the Tree of Life* may not be helpful for everyone. Although adoptees are included in the conversation, they are not given the scope of attention Voelz gives to adoptive parents. Anecdotes from the author's own experience ground the claims here. Stories curated from adoptee and birth parent perspectives would have rounded out the book and balanced questions such as, "What does it mean to prepare ourselves for a loss, knowing that the loss will

be a blessing to others?” (106). For families preparing for the loss embedded in an adoption plan, that kind of question might better be addressed in hindsight than foresight. Additionally, while the author rightly calls out the “adoption chic” mentality and the “commodification of children,” these are issues more pertinent to primarily white and/or middle-class persons who have the wherewithal to seek corrective medical help for reproductive issues, and to afford adoption (112). Clergy who deal with congregations of minoritized social standing will not find here the kinds of existential issues faced by families of color who deal with reproductive loss and an adoption system marked by specific racial biases. That being said, readers within the author’s social location will likely find the book a valuable, compassionate, and enlightening resource.

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