

Promissory Narration: Toward a Revised Narrative Homiletic in an Age of Identities

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Abstract: *This essay offers a third way of thinking about experience and identity in narrative preaching—a homiletical-theological one in relation to the character of the gospel as promise. I begin by building on a trajectory of research that sees an intimate relationship between biblical narrative and promise, especially the work of Ronald Thiemann, Christopher Morse, and James Kay. With Kay’s help, I then turn to an especially rich opportunity for revising what Morse first called promissory narration by means of Carolyn Helsel’s appropriation of Paul Ricoeur’s The Course of Recognition in relation to the problem of white racism. In the process, I will also bring Ricoeur’s work on promise and narrated identity to help rethink how promissory narration might help narrative preachers work through a course of recognition and transformation of identity in ways that move past the liberal/postliberal impasse about experience that has dogged especially white narrative homiletics.*

One of the most enduring problems of narrative preaching is itself a central homiletical-theological issue: the relationship of gospel to experience. In liberal hands, narrative preaching tends to focus on the movement from experience to gospel by means of narrative form. Following the insight of Stephen Crites’ “The Narrative Quality of Experience” in a Tillichian mode, liberal views often seek to correlate the shape or form of biblical narrative with human narratives in order to evoke some sense of the gospel in the retelling in hearers.¹ In postliberal hands, the focus on narrative preaching bracket matters of form altogether. Biblical narrative—not our human narratives—in deep connection to communities and their practices, is precisely how the gospel *re-describes* human experience. Biblical narrative exists not to confirm our own worlds or experiences, but to carry hearers into the world of the text in all of its otherness. In doing so, a postliberal view of biblical narrative assumes that the Bible *forms* identity insofar as it makes Christian faith recognizable.

This essay offers a third way of thinking about narrative preaching—a homiletical-theological one in relation to the character of the gospel as promise that complexifies the gospel/experience relationship, as well as identity. I begin by building on a trajectory of research that sees an intimate relationship between biblical narrative and promise, especially Ronald Thiemann, Christopher Morse, and James Kay. I will, in the course of this essay, retrace some of that history so as to locate my narrative reflections with respect to eschatology. For my part, I see an especially rich opportunity for revising what Morse first called promissory narration by means of Carolyn Helsel’s appropriation of Paul Ricoeur’s *The Course of Recognition* in relation to the problem of white racism and identity. Helsel, as we will see, relates Ricoeur’s understanding of narrative movement (mimesis) in textual hermeneutics to his view of the transforming self as a

¹ Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39:3 (Sept. 1971), 291-311.

moment of self-recognition (idem>ipse>self-recognition) in his later work.² In what follows, I will also bring Ricoeur's work on promise and narrated identity to bear in order to rethink how promissory narration might help narrative preachers work through a course of recognition and *transformation* of identity in ways that move past the liberal/postliberal impasse over narrative's relation to experience and gospel that has dogged especially white narrative homiletics.

Promising Narrative: A Recent History

We begin with a caveat: not all of the figures in the history of scholarship that follows here actually use the phrase "promissory narration." They do hold in common an interest in drawing on the literature of speech act theory to explain various elements of how the language of promise works in context: distinctions between denotative and constative speech, the identification of difference between language's locutionary function in relation to its illocutionary and perlocutionary force,³ promise as a "self-involving" speech act,⁴ and the dual agency of a promise as spoken by one and performed by another.⁵ The point with what follows is not to reduce the three figures below together without remainder, but to identify that all of these theologians and homileticians see that biblical narrative and promise actually stand in some sort of necessary prior relation. It is this *juxtaposition* of narrative and promise that distinguishes them from much of the traditional liberal and postliberal ways of understanding biblical narrative in relation to experience and gospel.

Ronald Thiemann's *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise*

Thiemann's book aims to describe a non-foundational theology of revelation predicated on the notion of God's prevenient grace. According to Thiemann, God's gracious prevenience could once be assumed as a "background" doctrine, but after the Enlightenment the doctrine itself becomes a position which must be justified. Thiemann wishes to argue that the best way to understand revelation is "in use," but not in a purely functionalist way as Kelsey does.⁶ Instead, the vision that Thiemann has is of "narrated promise," where a unified sense of narrative is joined to the external promise of a dual agency in scripture and liturgy. This notion allows revelation to be both "extra nos" and "pro me." Thiemann writes, "Let all Christian interpretation proceed in a manner which recognizes the absolute primacy of God's promising grace."⁷

² Ricoeur goes so far in his important work *Time and Narrative* (vol. 1, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 53, to speak of three mimetic moments (mimesis 1>mimesis 2>mimesis 3), which seems to stand in some parallel to the three-fold description of the course of recognition.

³ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962) and his "Performative Utterances [1956]" (in *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1961). See also John Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁴ Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement: A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator* (London: SCM, 1963). In his later work, Evans walks back some of the extent of his claims about the logic of self-involvement, but, as Richard Briggs notes in *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 2001), 159-66, does not totally abandon its value either.

⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁶ David Kelsey, *Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

⁷ Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 149. The material on Matthew in the subsequent paragraph is summarized from chapter 6 of the same volume.

Thiemann's notion of "narrated promise" is best exemplified in his chapter on Matthew's designation of Jesus as Son of God. The text narrates Jesus' unfolding identity as Son of Abraham (heir to national promises), Son of David (heir to kingship promises), the named Jesus who saves (the people from their sins), and in the unfolding narrative of Matthew 4 and beyond "Son of God," the one who bears God's intentions. One gets the sense from reading Thiemann that his view of promise in narrative is subtle and reflective of the text's ambiguity. In fact, Thiemann takes pains to point out that the character of God is *absent* from the Matthean narrative at crucial points. God does comment that Jesus is God's Son, the bearer of God's intentions, at crucial points such as Jesus' baptism and again at the transfiguration. The middle section of Matthew's narrative, however, is where Jesus' identity is disclosed as authoritative healer, forgiver of sins, and in the cross as representing precisely the intention of God for sonship: suffering and resurrection. The end of Matthew's narrative proves crucial, theologically speaking. God's raising of Jesus fulfills what God intends (the resurrection prediction is fulfilled in the report in the divine passive in chapter 28; he is raised implies that God did the raising and that God fulfilled promises). The promise/fulfillment motif and its connection to the various visions of sonship earlier on (David, Abraham, etc.) underline God's reliability in the promise. The notion of gospel appears in the text a few times (unlike the word promise, which is really only narrative embodied, not thematized). The gospel at the beginning is linked to Jesus preaching of the kingdom, but by the end of the gospel is linked to Jesus himself, especially when the universalizing mission is connected with the anonymous woman's anointment of Jesus before his death, which will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached in all the world. The connection between narrative and promise here becomes important at the very end where the risen Christ is granted all authority and *himself gives a promise*: Lo, I will be with you until the end of the age. With this narration, the promises of God are not only narratively validated (from the OT on), but carried forward by a Jesus whose identification in divine sonship takes on exalted form in a preview of Trinitarian unity (in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

In my view, Thiemann's perspective on narrated promise is only of some help for the problem for narrative preaching we have identified above. Thiemann's book is indeed concerned with narration and identity (and therefore postliberal) with promise as a narrated thematic content and in-use context. The language of promise for Thiemann really provides a frame and a set of linguistic rules that makes sense of how God or Jesus can promise anything, but is not so helpful for thinking about how, say, narrative preaching itself can bear such a promise in light of contemporary experience or identities. One crucial implication of his work may be his acknowledgment of the rhetorical force of narrative: the role of point of view and judgments about characters help us to voice theological claims that in turn lead to promise language. With Thiemann, there are only some indirect ways narration can come to theological claims that join remembrance, recognizability, and identity to the forward-looking stance of promise.

Christopher Morse and *The Logic of Promise in Moltmann's Theology*

A few years earlier, Christopher Morse broached the idea of promissory narration in his treatment of Moltmann's theology—and in a way that does move the needle on experience.⁸ Morse argues that one of the ways the early Moltmann gets in trouble in the American scene is in his disparagement of *experience*. Morse contends that Moltmann actually has a specific agenda here, though, that separates him from some (though perhaps not all) Barthian ways of thinking about revelation. For Moltmann, experience in the North American sense of the word is

⁸ Christopher Morse, *The Logic of Promise in Moltmann's Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

problematic because promise itself has an event quality that breaks open reality. Experience, by contrast, assumes something is already given in reality and that anything new can be extrapolated from it. In this sense, Morse ends up comparing promise to symbol in a way that helps to elaborate the difference: “A promise is not of the same logical type as a symbol which articulates and thereby lifts to the level of conscious referentiality some pre-linguistic or formerly unconscious state of being....[T]he language of promise does not illumine a prior experience of history which is already in some sense felt or apprehended apart from the instrumentality of this language; it creates this experience.”⁹

To deal with this difference between promise and experience, Morse brings in a form of analysis of ordinary language to help bridge the gap. He calls it “promissory narration.”¹⁰ Following the work of two historiographers, Morse embraces the notion of narratives as being essentially followable, generating interest, and moving toward a conclusion. There is in history a sense that historical narratives require some plausible sense of coherence that makes it possible to follow them, that history is studied because we perceive that some aspect of it “speaks to us” in an interesting/relevant way, and that any narrative receives its meaning by moving toward a telos, a future that gives it meaning. The difference, of course, is in the nature of the resurrection event, which doesn’t beget anything like historical evidence that can be used. At the same time, the telic orientation of narrative invites the question: to what extent is the event of resurrection not so much history as extrapolated, but history *making*, the effects of which (a community, a mission) can be historically studied and narrated. Promissory narration pushes our readings of resurrection narratives (e.g., he is risen, he has gone before you to Galilee) in ways that make some theological and historical sense, though in a more tensive way.

To my mind, Morse does not so much cover the specifics of narration as he rather describes its significance in relation to promise. Narrative is more or less the means by which promise is offered in a way that is followable and telic, but still discontinuous with present experience. Morse’s writing about narrative with the work of historiographers in view might also prove useful for thinking generally about narration, proclamation, and eschatology, but it does not yet help as a fully developed homiletical-theological ground for narrative preaching. That said, there is an implicit future/telos in narration that is perhaps itself the link to integrating eschatology into narrative preaching along the lines of Tom Long’s recent suggestions.¹¹ This telic notion has the potential of at least cracking open overly closed readings of both experience and identity.

James Kay and “Preaching as Promissory Narration” in *Preaching and Theology*

Kay approaches the language of promissory narration from a different point of view. He aims in his writing to paint a comprehensive picture of how a theology of preaching not only helps to describe the contemporary structure of homiletic theory, but may begin to point a way out of the impasses in which it finds itself.¹² Along the way, Kay traces a history of the new

⁹ Morse, *Logic*, 89.

¹⁰ Ibid., chapter 4.

¹¹ Tom Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: WJKP, 2009), 126, where Long says, “Eschatological preaching affirms that life under the providence of God has a shape, and that shape is end-stressed: what happens in the middle is defined by the end.” With Long, the language of eschatology places both a limit and possibility over what we can claim to know and dismiss as impossible. The “end” places a book end on the series of events we experience and even reframes the muddle in the middle that we experience day to day. Long may be offering something analogous for Morse’s vision of the relation of promissory narration and experience.

¹² James Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2007).

homiletic and the rise of postliberal homiletics as developments out of Bultmann and Barth respectively. Kay offers a very good history along with a theological commentary that adds significant insight. The New Hermeneutic, which is post-Bultmannian, is about preaching like Jesus in his parables: Jesus' own awareness in his preaching is key to evoking a sense of presence that new homileticians hanker after with their narratives and stories in relation to experience. By contrast, Campbell and postliberals follow Hans Frei to argue for a rather denuded sense of presence narratively offered in terms of Jesus' cumulatively rendered identity. Here, says Kay, two of the three forms of the Word of God (revelation, scriptures, and preaching) are collapsed into the one: the story of Jesus in the scriptures. Such ways of thinking about biblical narrative, says Kay, involve theological loss.

In the final chapter, "Preaching as Promissory Narration," Kay aims to bring the book's whole argument to a conclusion. Using the work of Christopher Morse on promise and Austin and Searle on speech act theory, Kay argues for a form of promissory narration that carries forth the best of the post-Bultmannian and postliberal projects in homiletics. The narration of the story is important, but also renders in the process the promises of God, which are more than simply formatively remembered, but as an act of concurrence self-involve the divine in the moment of preaching. With the help of Moltmann and Morse, Kay hopes to heal the two-sided heart of homiletical theory and theology. Along the way, and into the conclusion, he imagines that the notion of "concurrence" also signals a way of speaking about how theoretical elements (like rhetoric or poetics) might relate positively to his theology. As long as theology (and God) take the lead, we can use rhetoric and poetics in chastened ways that aid the interpretive goal of any good theology of preaching: by making sermon discourse "fitting" to its hearers in their contemporary context.

In my view, Kay, like Thiemann, does not give sufficient information to resolve the problem of biblical narrative for the practice of narrative preaching that I am exploring here. His interest is really at the level of preaching and preacher in relation to God. At the same time, Kay does offer ways to imagine promissory narration as a linking of homiletical theo-rhetoric and poetics in practice. Kay's concern is that promissory narration provides a kind of middle way between an insufficiently theological view of narration in the new homiletic, which gives up the kerygma about Jesus for the sake of articulating his parabolic faith in similarly "enacted" sermons, and the closed narrative world of postliberal theology and homiletics, which foregrounds Jesus' identity, but fails to connect that identity to anything other than a carefully rendered literary character through the narration itself. As a result, Kay's vision of promissory narration takes narrated identity seriously but joins this to a theological naming of the promise: what I call a rhetoric of promise joined to a narrative of identity.¹³ It is this relationship that also allows contextualization to happen: the reiteration of the promise presupposes that we have contemporary hearers in view who are not merely incorporated into Bible land, but spoken gospel promise into their own present reality in faith and hope.

Narrative, Promise, and Recognition:

A Homiletical-Theological Vision for Narrative Preaching

Promissory narration has been shown to have a variety of meanings in the preceding review. Promissory narration (or narrated promise) sometimes embodies theological concerns,

¹³ This is true so long as one observes Kay's caveat about assuming God is bound in the same way to our theological musings in preaching. One cannot presume upon divine grace, though in preaching, as a moment of concurrence, one can invoke it. See Kay, 57.

hermeneutical orientations, and can help to organize elements of homiletical theories. From here, however, we turn to consider recent literature on “recognition” which might cause us to reconsider how promissory narration pushes us beyond the intramural concerns of liberal and postliberal narrative perspectives. My argument is that proper attention to recognition, specifically the dynamics of Ricoeur’s *The Course of Recognition*, reframes the way in which promissory narration functions—now with a more differentiated and dynamic way of thinking about identity.

Carolyn Browning Helsel and “The Hermeneutics of Recognition: A Ricoeurian Interpretive Framework for Whites Preaching about Racism”

Helsel is attempting a practical-theological work involving critical race theory and the hermeneutics of recognition of Paul Ricoeur.¹⁴ Her goal is to get white preachers talking about racism and to do so in ways that are not ideal but meliorative. Part of her work has to do with how to explain the reluctance of white preachers to take on the topic and *the difficulty of even getting white preachers to acknowledge their identity*. Another part of this is dealing with the reality of an inadequate theological view of sin, drawing in part on the work of Stephen Ray in *Do No Harm*.¹⁵ To this she adds a theory of gift giving in the service of a kind of mutual gratitude that arises out of bringing now seen identities into dialogue through Ricoeur’s hermeneutic of recognition.

To my mind, Helsel’s work represents on a secondary level a key shift in the way the field of homiletics uses the work of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur’s writing has until now been influential on preaching through his work on metaphor, the hermeneutics of suspicion, the surplus of meaning, the dialectic of understanding and explanation, and in narrative—in short, through his hermeneutics of texts. While this influence has been far-reaching, with Helsel’s work, the interpretive wisdom of Ricoeur is brought to bear in a new way: not just texts, but with respect to identity—specifically, to the hermeneutics of the self. While this element is not necessarily new in Ricoeur’s work, Helsel’s use of it to identify the importance of recognition and identity in the preaching task in North American homiletics is new.¹⁶ Helsel’s work repositions the field of homiletics to use the Ricoeurian notion of recognition as means of broaching the role of identity in interpretation.¹⁷ Helsel’s insight is to bring a Ricoeurian hermeneutics of the self to the center of homiletical theory and in relation to the problem of white racism and white fragility. Her vision invites white preachers to bring identities, now “recognized,” into the interpretive ambit of white preaching as an expression of the very mutual gratitude toward which Ricoeur’s theory of recognition tends. Resistance to white racism finds in Ricoeur’s “course of recognition” an interpretive frame for doing identity work in white preaching.

¹⁴ Carolyn Browning Helsel, “The Hermeneutics of Recognition: A Ricoeurian Interpretive Framework for Whites Preaching about Racism,” (PhD Diss., Emory University, 2014). An updated version of her work can be found in her recent publication, *Preaching about Racism: A Guide for Faith Leaders* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2018). I use her 2014 dissertation in this article because of the more detailed treatment of Ricoeur’s work that it offers.

¹⁵ Stephen Ray, *Do No Harm: Social Sin and Christian Responsibility* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002)

¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (K. Blamey, Trans.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁷ In fairness, Jake Myers in his book *Preaching Must Die* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017) draws in part from Ricoeur’s *One as Another* in his chapter on identity. Beyond that, however, this stream of Ricoeur’s thought seems to have garnered scant attention apart from Helsel’s sustained work.

At a key point in her argument, Helsel talks about receiving identity from others, which whiteness in its estranged form fails to do.¹⁸ As an antidote to this inability of whiteness, she draws on the work of theologian J. Kameron Carter who shows how Maximus the Confessor offers a way of healing a form of uncritical, self-received identity by means of Christ's reopening of human nature both to God and itself.¹⁹ For Helsel's argument, what is at stake here is whites' inability to bring identity into a dialogical reality that can account for its transformation, especially in terms of an *unacknowledged* white identity that has a distorted sense, a self-received identity, and is thus reified by virtue of its power over others.

Part of the problem, with respect to the issue of narrative preaching in particular, is that narrative is employed in much of the preceding literature review as a focused means of making identity "recognizable," that is, standing in clear, co-constitutive relationship to biblical narratives and the church. There is a sense in its most conservative version that biblical narrative "forms" identity and in conformity with the church as a community of practice for whom that narrative particularly matters. What if, however, the unitary focus on identity and narrative within this tradition has been misplaced? What if the sole issue is not purely "recognizability" over against culture but "receivability" or *transformation* of identity as well? Canadian cultural critic Andrew Potter in the book *The Authenticity Hoax* has noted how a view of identity that gets stuck at the level of purely replicating a traditional identity cannot account for all that happens in the course of a living cultural identity. For Potter identity is not so much an inherited block as a living, tested, and thus transformed reality in relation to others.

A healthy culture is like a healthy person: it is constantly changing, growing, and evolving, yet something persists through these changes, a ballast that keeps it upright and recognizable no matter how much it is buffeted by the transformative winds of trade. In this sense, a culture is like a society's immune system. It works best when it is exposed to as many "foreign" bodies as possible.²⁰

The difference is that Potter describes this cultural engagement as a natural, dynamic metaphor of a healthy body. For Helsel, together with Carter and his reading of Maximus the Confessor, this dynamic openness of identity becomes a matter of theological import. Finding reconciliation through a more dynamic, dialogical identity is being rooted deeply in the Godness of God. Helsel quotes Carter favorably on this point:

In Christ, the gesture of ecstatic openness to God in human self-fulfillment, which is the gesture to receive oneself from God, is necessarily a gesture of openness to all created beings as revealing God. "To be" ecstatically is to receive oneself from other human beings precisely as the receiving of self from God. Hence, being named from God entails being named from other human beings. In undoing whiteness as a theological problem, Christ leads human nature out of this disposition.²¹

¹⁸ Helsel, "Hermeneutics of Recognition," 153.

¹⁹ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 345-46.

²⁰ Andrew Potter, *The Authenticity Hoax* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 203.

²¹ Carter, *Race*, 353.

With Helsel's framework, I contend, it becomes possible to reconcile as well a Ricoeurian orientation to self with that of the text.

How does this happen? As Helsel herself notes, Ricoeur relates his recognition project in its second step, the shift from idem/recognition to ipse/self-recognition, to a narrative concordance of action *through memory and promise*.²² She notes how Ricoeur appeals here both to memory and promise; memory helps in the present to preserve the idem from the past while promise helps in the present with its future orientation that the self might keep to one's word and commitments (promise) despite change over the course of time.²³ It is here, moreover, where Ricoeur links narrative to promise. It is in narrating ourselves that the shift from idem/identity to ipse/identity *changes*, or is transformed. The course of recognition is here, at this moment, a narrative movement within identity *transformation* that renders persons responsible and capable of action. The transformation, moreover, is specifically related to the "other." Here we begin to cross over from the hermeneutics of text and the hermeneutics of self to the hermeneutics of *action*. That said, it is just as important to remember that the focus of a promise is not on an object, but to a *beneficiary*. Ricoeur ends by locating human promises within a framework of a linguistic past, and a giving of promises, by which our promising can endure, even as we acknowledge how promises can and do go awry. Yet even here the paradigmatic nature of the *divine* promise to Abraham represents just such an anchoring for our promise and action with respect to narrated identities.²⁴ To speak of promissory narration is more than Ricoeur's largely anthropological vision of memory and promise; it entails a God whose promises ground human ones.

Why does *narrative preaching* need such a Ricoeurian vision? When we preach, we engage narrative not merely to form the recognizable elements of identity, nor do we tell narratives, especially biblical ones, merely to evoke experiences already had. My view is that the interpretation of discursive narrative texts, juxtaposed with the recurring open vocative of the promise, helps bring identities in a course of recognition around the hermeneutical table of this text. In this way, promise helps narrative to dialogue with identity so that it is dynamic, fluid—better, recognizable and receivable in transformation. When preachers narrate, we do more than describe or even re-describe. Indeed, in promissory narration the voice of the promiser addresses the face of the ones promised such that the narrative offers more than a surplus of meaning, but a surfeit of gratitude in the mutual recognition of identities around the hermeneutical table.²⁵

Back to the Future: Toward a Hermeneutics of Narrative Text and Narrated Self through Promise

The impasse of liberal and postliberal modes of doing narrative preaching hinged on the questions of the relation of gospel to experience in liberal narrative homiletics and biblical narrative's identity-conferring, re-descriptive capacity for the church in postliberal homiletics. Early models of promissory narration, by contrast, sought either to develop a kind of grammar of promise in text and practice that bounded narrative or argued for a form of narration that also included a fundamental reworking of experience. Kay seems to have grasped that narrative and

²² Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 109-134, esp. 127ff.

²³ Helsel, "Hermeneutics of Recognition," 198.

²⁴ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 134.

²⁵ This joining of the two sides of Ricoeurian hermeneutics in connection with promise represents, to my mind, a fusion of the very possibilities inherent in struggles over narrative preaching with other-directed models of homiletical conversational, as in John McClure's *The Roundtable Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

promise were more than means of policing a boundary to Christian faith, but itself offered a juxtaposed difference that interrupted a premature settling of identity in the name of a recognizable tradition. For Kay, the juxtaposition of narrative and promise opened the question of narrated identity to the more contingent and contextual ways that promise addresses hearers beyond closed, self-contained narrative worlds.

What Helsel provides with her use of Ricoeur's *Course of Recognition*—and the way he links promise and narrative—is a way forward for a type of promissory narration capable of viewing identity as more than a static, recognizable essence. The promissory part, though rooted in the anthropological possibility of self-narration in Ricoeur, is grounded in the promises of which we ourselves are beneficiaries. The promise of promissory narration in this configuration does not simply inhere in the narrative itself as one more narrative feature but represents a juxtaposed theological and anthropological means of address and self-involvement by which identity is transformed from the recognizable to the faithful in praxis.

The notion of change and transformation in identity from idem to ipse to gratitude in mutual recognition makes Ricoeur's *Course of Recognition* powerful for dealing with white racism in Helsel's incisive project. With Helsel's work, it may now be possible to envision a form of narrative preaching that does more than bring out some already resident experience of gospel or conforms to some textually self-contained notion of identity, but actually narrates discursively—even as it is juxtaposed with a vocative, identity-altering promise—that interrupts attempts to bracket racialized others, as white fragility often does, with a profound promissory-narrated openness to the world. Richard Lischer once argued that eschatology and the resurrection of the crucified One place a slash across all of our overly self-enclosed, finished narratives.²⁶ Within the arc of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the text and hermeneutics of the self, there may just be space for promissory narration to help narrative preaching open itself more profoundly to others in gratitude: by means of promise and through the course of recognition.

²⁶ Richard Lischer, "The Limits of Story," in *Interpretation* 38:1 (January, 1984), 37-38. Lischer here speaks specifically of history, but it strikes me that it impacts preachers' own narrative-making capacities generally, even as we faithfully reactivate scriptural narratives in our sermons.