

**Black Queer Preaching:
A Close Reading of Bishop Yvette A. Flunder's Sermon, "Silent No More"**

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Abstract: *There is limited scholarship on African American queer preaching, which may be in part due to homophobia and heterosexism in the Black church. This essay addresses this scholarship gap by providing a rhetorical analysis of a sermon by Bishop Yvette A. Flunder, a Black, same-gender loving congregational pastor. Using the rhetorical analysis modeled by Kimberly Johnson in *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit*, I categorize the sermon, "Silent No More," as a womanist critical engagement sermon and identify accompanying rhetorical tools used by Flunder. Additionally, I argue that the "coming out" motif in the sermon represents queer womanist rhetoric. Through the lens of Yvette Flunder, Black queer preaching is deeply wedded to the African American preaching tradition with the use of lived realities as text, vivid imagery, and the celebratory close. Ultimately, this rhetorical analysis provides insight into the preaching of one of the pioneering Black queer women pastors of the 21st Century.*

Introduction

There is a lack of scholarship on African American queer preaching in the field of homiletics, which may in part be due to patriarchy and heterosexism in the Black church. In the book, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word*, Teresa Fry Brown states that one of the many congregational perceptions of her answering the call to ministry was that her sexuality had changed.¹ The change of Fry Brown's sexuality presumably means that church folk would now perceive her as lesbian or homosexual, rather than heterosexual. The perceived congregational response speaks to the homophobia in the Black church. Unfortunately, the same homophobia in the Black Church is reflective in the Academy and in society at large. Karen Baker-Fletcher writes, "I suspect that for many [womanists, our silence about homosexuality] is for the same reason that many gays and lesbians hesitate to come out of the closet: fear of losing a job, of being thrown out of church, ostracized in the community."²

Despite homophobia, scholars have published collections of African American sermons that include queer preachers. *Those Preaching Women: A Multicultural Collection* edited by Ella Pearson Mitchell and Valerie Bridgeman Davis was published in 2008. The collection included the sermon titled, "Silent No More," written by Yvette Flunder, who identifies as a Black same-gender loving woman with spiritual formational roots in the Pentecostal Church of God in Christ denomination. In *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons*, Frank A. Thomas and Martha Simmons published two sermons from queer preachers, Peter J. Gomes and Anna Pauli Murray in the final chapter, "From Black to African American and Beyond 1969 to the Present." Gomes was the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard Divinity School and Pusey Minister at Harvard's Memorial Church, who identifies as "a

¹ Teresa Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 13.

² Monica Coleman, "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 5 (Fall 1989), 88.

Christian who happens as well to be gay.”³ Whereas, Anna Pauli Murray was less vocal about her sexuality and gender publicly. The public knows much about Murray’s struggles with identity and intersectionality through personal papers, journals, and diary entries. In 2021, a documentary film titled, “My Name is Pauli Murray,” was featured at the Sundance Film Festival. The documentary highlighted the life of Murray, a non-binary, Black lawyer and activist who was influential in the fight for Civil Rights and gender equality.⁴

In *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, Betty Collier-Thomas features eight of Murray’s sermons. The sermons highlight her prophetic voice on an array of topics, including women’s ordination and the equal creation of both men and women. Published in 1998, this collection of 38 sermons from 14 Black women preachers demonstrates their activism during the 19th and 20th centuries. Collier-Thomas provides a brief biography of each woman as well as contextual analysis of the societal milieu during which each sermon was preached.

To further the scholarship on African American queer preaching, this essay explores Black queer preaching through the lens of Yvette A. Flunder. The rhetorical analysis of Flunder’s sermon “Silent No More” deepens our understanding of Black queer preaching by answering two relevant questions. What is queer rhetoric in Black preaching? And, how might Black, queer preaching differ from Black preaching? Using the rhetorical analysis modeled by Kimberly Johnson in *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit*, I categorize the sermon “Silent No More” as a womanist critical engagement sermon and identify accompanying rhetorical tools used by Flunder. Additionally, I argue that the “coming out” motif in the sermon represents queer womanist rhetoric. Furthermore, the rhetorical analysis reveals Flunder’s homiletical method, homiletical theory, and other preaching characteristics unique to Flunder. Ultimately, the analysis discloses that Flunder’s Black queer preaching is deeply wedded to the African American preaching tradition with the use of lived realities as text, vivid imagery, and the celebratory close.

The Sermon – “Silent No More”

“Silent No More” is a sermon written by the Rev. Dr. Yvette Flunder who identifies as a Black same-gender loving woman with spiritual formational roots in the Pentecostal Church of God in Christ (COGIC). Bishop Flunder is the Senior Pastor of City of Refuge United Church of Christ (UCC) and the Presiding Bishop of the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries. Bishop Flunder is a pioneering, openly same-gender loving, Black woman pastor who has ministered to those on the margins of society and religion for over 30 years. In 1991, she founded City of Refuge UCC in San Francisco, California. In 2003, Flunder was consecrated as Presiding Bishop of The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries (TFAM), a multi-denominational coalition of over 100 primarily African American Christian leaders and laity. She is considered a prophetic preacher who speaks truth to power seeking justice and social action in support of those on the margins.

The sermon “Silent No More” was published in *Those Preaching Women: A Multicultural Collection* edited by Ella Pearson Mitchell and Valerie Bridgeman Davis. According to the forward written by Katie G. Cannon, this collection of sermons demonstrates

³ Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds. *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 676.

⁴ *My Name is Pauli Murray*, directed by Betsy West and Julie Cohen (Amazon Studios, 2021), 1:33.
<https://www.amazon.com/My-Name-Pauli-Murray/dp/B09DMPMWCP>.

excellent exegesis of the biblical text and the contextualization of the canon with real lived experiences. “Silent No More” was chosen for the close reading as a clear representation of Flunder’s astute biblical exegesis, her homiletical theory, and her queer theology of preaching. The close reading examines the sermon within the context of the life of Yvette A. Flunder to categorize her rhetoric which expands our understanding of queer preaching.

Even though Flunder does not identify herself as a womanist preacher, I characterize the sermon as womanist based on the focal theme exemplifying the critical engagement tenet of womanism as identified by Stacy Floyd-Thomas, a womanist ethicist, and then re-interpreted as womanist rhetoric by Kimberly Johnson, a womanist rhetorician. Floyd-Thomas builds upon the work of Alice Walker, Katie G. Cannon, and other womanist scholars. Alice Walker coined the term womanism in the book, *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden: Womanist Prose* which was published in 1983. Then, the late Katie Geneva Cannon, a pioneer in the womanist movement, appropriated the term womanist in relation to Black women’s ethics in biblical interpretation using Black women’s literature as sacred text.

In *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit*, Kimberly Johnson re-interprets Floyd-Thomas’s definitions of the womanist tenets for use in the fields of rhetoric and homiletics. The re-interpretation allows Johnson to categorize womanist sermons and characterize womanist rhetorical tools in preaching. In the book, Johnson provides close readings of one sermon from five self-proclaimed womanist preachers to demonstrate how these women adapt the tenets of womanist thought rhetorically in the church. Johnson categorizes the womanist sermons under one of the four tenets of womanist preaching. Each chapter is structured by first defining the womanist tenet evident in the sermon, and then providing the close reading. Lastly, Johnson characterizes womanist rhetorical tools used in the sermon to establish womanist rhetorical models in womanist preaching. Johnson’s work is the rhetorical precedent for womanist preaching.

In “Chapter Five – Critical Engagement,” Johnson examines Claudette Copeland’s sermon, “What Shall We Do for Our Sister?” The sermon is categorized as a critical engagement sermon. Johnson argues that “critical engagement sermons seek to culturally critique society’s oppressive forces by challenging the ways in which we view people’s problems and by forcing us to confront our own internal system of beliefs, so that we can collectively combat external systems of belief.”⁵

According to Johnson, in this sermon Copeland addresses the misconception that breast cancer only affects the woman who has it. In Copeland’s storytelling, she suggests that there is a rippling effect of breast cancer which impacted her spouse, her church community, and others. Copeland discusses the need for communal change regarding how the community responds to breast cancer. For instance, Copeland talks about watching church women vie for her husband while she was receiving treatments for breast cancer. In Copeland’s most vulnerable state, some members of the church community were not supportive. Some women saw an opportunity to replace her as the Pastor’s wife. Through her testimony, Copeland challenges the way society views breast cancer and mastectomies. The cultural critique regarding the misconceptions of breast cancer is the major theme of Copeland’s sermon. She addresses the misconceptions for purposes of a communal change of behavior, exemplifying a critical engagement sermon.

Johnson notes that there can be similarities between critical engagement sermons and traditional communalism sermons. Both may contain cultural critiques with elements of self-

⁵ Kimberly Johnson, *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 79.

improvement while uplifting the community. However, critical engagement sermons emphasize a change in communal behavior and traditional communalism sermons focus on self-improvement in order to become a better member of society. Therefore, Copeland's sermon reflects critical engagement and not traditional communalism.⁶

Furthermore, Johnson highlights the rhetorical tools and the purpose of each tool used by Copeland in the sermon, "What Shall We Do for Our Sister?" The list does not exhaust all the tools that could be used in critical engagement sermons. However, the list begins to characterize rhetorical tools used in womanist preaching. The rhetorical tools include the use of the following: female and male biblical characters in order to balance the gender conversation, breast metaphor to create enthymematic identification and to ease the comfort level, and embodiment/embodied meditation to challenge the way we view other people's struggles and the way we respond.⁷

Using Johnson's work as a model, I categorize Yvette Flunder's sermon "Silent No More" as a critical engagement womanist sermon. In "Silent No More," Flunder critiques society's oppressive forces that create an exclusive gospel message. She challenges the ways in which we view the day of Pentecost to combat the external forces of our collective phobias and "isms" in religion and society. As a critical engagement sermon, Flunder critiques the traditionally normative religious ideology of exclusivity based on the Old Testament scripture of Numbers 11 as well as her childhood experiences in the Black Pentecostal tradition. She describes the exclusivity in both religious contexts. Based on religious protocols, there are those who are authorized to be used by the Spirit and those who are not. Flunder uses the New Testament scripture in Acts 2 about the day of Pentecost as an alternative perspective that both challenges the norm and offers a corrective perspective of the inclusivity of everyone.

After presenting the evidence that supports the notion of inclusivity for all, the womanist rhetorician encourages human rhetorical agency that inspires people to change their behavior. Flunder's celebratory charge inspires the audience to be silent no more by spreading the inclusive Gospel. The focus of Flunder's sermon is a change in communal behavior; therefore, based on Johnson's evaluation of womanist preaching, critical engagement reflects the appropriate categorized womanist tenet.

Flunder's "Silent No More" incorporates several rhetorical tools reflective of womanist preaching, some of which are characterized by Johnson in *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit*. Each tool is used for a specific purpose in the sermon. The table below outlines the rhetorical tool, provides the sermonic example, and explains the purpose of the tool used in the sermon.

Table 1. Rhetorical Tools in the Sermon – "Silent No More"

Rhetorical Tools	Sermonic Example	Purpose of Rhetorical Tools
Imagery	Description of the disciples on the day of Pentecost	To invoke a vicarious experience that connects the audience to the biblical characters
Old Spiritual Song	"Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody"	To emphasize the communal behavioral change

⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁷ Ibid., 85.

Multiple Scriptures	Acts 2: 1-12 Numbers 11	To reinforce the core theological belief of the Holy Spirit
Personal Testimony	Flunder growing up in a Joshua church	To help the audience identify with Flunder's early religious experiences that are similar to the biblical text
Metaphor	The Pentecost message is a "coming out" message.	To explain that Pentecost is about going out into the world and sharing the inclusive gospel message

Queer Womanist Rhetoric in African American Preaching

In “Silent No More,” Flunder’s use of the “coming out” motif represents queer womanist rhetoric. Flunder describes the day of Pentecost as a “coming out event,” whereby the disciples are endowed by the Holy Spirit in the upper room then empowered to go out and spread the inclusive gospel. The delineation of “coming out” queers the interpretation of the text and represents queer womanist rhetoric. The fact that Flunder is queer does not inherently make the “coming out” motif queer rhetoric. Historically, “coming out” became a cultural concept and political tactic within the gay and lesbian community in 1978 during Harvey Milk’s political campaign. “Openly gay elected government official Harvey Milk famously made ‘Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are’ the slogan of his campaign to defeat the Briggs Initiative, or Proposition 6, which would have banned gay teachers from working in public schools in California.”⁸ Milk encouraged persons to come out to their friends and family to build allyship, which could lead to greater social acceptance.

Based on the lived realities of queer persons, “coming out” has layered meanings for individuals and communities. For individuals, “coming out” is the process of disclosing an unknown fact about oneself, historically related to sexuality and/or gender. “Coming out” represents a physical expression of authenticity as a means of identity formation for persons whose authenticity is outside of normative cultural and religious boundaries. With regard to the community, “coming out” associates the person to the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) community. Being part of the LGBTQIA+ community moves persons from the heteronormative community to the margins. The marginalization or “othering” of persons is addressed by Flunder in the sermon.

As queer womanist rhetoric, the phrase has implications in all four womanist tenets: radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement. Womanist radical subjectivity rhetoric “reflects the journey toward identity formation, self-love, and self-worth, along with a moment of epiphany that empowers a woman to escape her oppressive situation.”⁹ In the lives of queer persons, the “coming out” journey is a process toward identity formation with a moment or moments of epiphany that empowers persons to be liberated and fully authentic.

The biblical text explores the disciple’s journey of identity formation before and after the endowment of the Holy Spirit. Before the Holy Spirit, the disciples ministered with the oppressive force of exclusivity that marred the gospel message. After the disciples experienced the Holy Spirit, they went into the community to teach a liberating, inclusive gospel. The epiphany is the endowment of the Holy Spirit that empowers the believers to share the gospel to any- and everyone. Radical subjectivity emphasizes the journey of transformation, going from

⁸ Abigail C. Saguy, *Come Out, Come Out, Whoever You Are* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1.

⁹ Johnson, op.cit., 13.

ministering an exclusive gospel message to that of an inclusive gospel through the endowment of the Holy Spirit.

Womanist traditional communalism rhetoric “seek(s) to heal and liberate both self and community through its rhetorical Jeremiad that calls people back to the beliefs and values of one’s own community.”¹⁰ For “coming out” to represent traditional communalism rhetoric, the assumption is that acceptance as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, intersex, and asexual is the original belief of the community. For an individual to “come out” is to accept their evolved understanding of their sexuality and/or gender as the original intent. According to Johnson, the goal of traditional communalism rhetoric is to focus on the self-improvement of the individual to become a better person in the community.¹¹

In the biblical text, Flunder implies that “coming out” with regards to the inclusivity of the Gospel is the prescribed value of the religious community based on her use of Numbers 11. To paraphrase the scripture; Joshua, Moses’ successor, was upset that the elders, Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp with the people of Israel. The protocol was for the priest to gather at the Tent of Meeting, isolated from the people. At the Tent of Meeting, the priests would receive the power of the Spirit. Then, the priest would come down from the Tent of Meeting and prophesy to the Israelites at the camp. Joshua wanted to stop the elders from prophesying whereas Moses, the leader, wanted more people to prophesy. Moses’s desire for everyone to prophesy is the envisioned value of the religious community. The implication is that if more people prophesy, more persons contribute to the uplifting of the community.

Womanist critical engagement rhetoric “seek(s) to culturally critique society’s oppressive forces by challenging the ways in which we view people’s problems and by forcing us to confront our own internal system of beliefs, so that we can collectively combat external systems of belief.”¹² For “coming out” to reflect critical engagement rhetoric, the focal implication of the individual “coming out” is to change the communal behavior in a manner that eliminates the societal oppressive forces. In essence, the individual experiences a progression toward self-love and self-worth that leads them to live authentically by accepting their queerness. Then the critical engagement rhetoric calls for individuals in the community to evaluate their own homophobia and heterosexism. The individual evaluation may lead to change in the communal behavior of becoming less oppressive. Instead of marginalizing queer persons, the community is to become more accepting and welcoming. The individual’s “coming out” changes the communal behavior while modifying the identity of the community. Thus, the critical engagement womanist tenet has dual aspects of self-improvement and communal behavior change. According to Johnson, even though critical engagement has a duality, the focal emphasis is a change in communal behavior.¹³

In the sermon “Silent No More,” Flunder references the oppressive force as the exclusivity of the gospel based on the believers’ attempts to confine the Holy Spirit to places and people of their choosing. Flunder states that the Holy Ghost slipped out of the tabernacle, slipped out of the tent of meeting, slipped out the upper room, and slipped out of the Azusa Street revival. Some said that the Holy Spirit is not supposed to show up in Asians, motor cyclists,

¹⁰ Ibid., 37.

¹¹ Ibid., 98.

¹² Ibid., 79.

¹³ Ibid., 98.

transgendered persons, nor illegal immigrants.¹⁴ According to Flunder, the Holy Spirit “comes out” to demonstrate the inclusivity of the gospel by showing up in presumably unexpected places and in unlikely people. Specifically in the text, the Holy Spirit showing up in the upper room compels the disciples to “come out” and spread an inclusive gospel message. The disciples’ behavior changes the behavior of the community, which also changes the identity of the community.

Womanist redemptive self-love rhetoric “redeem(s) a woman by removing the socially perceived shame of a woman away from her actions.”¹⁵ According to Johnson, the rhetor offers a perspective that re-imagines the woman as a heroine. “Coming out” represents redemptive self-love rhetoric, as the rhetor removes the perceived shame of being queer from the actions of “coming out” and/or staying closeted. One reason some queer persons remain closeted is the fear of the internalized shame within the community if living authentically. Paradoxically, some queer individuals feel ashamed of being queer when closeted for not living their truth. Redemptive self-love removes the shame from the individual’s actions to focus on the ability to unashamedly love self in spite of what others think.

In the introduction, Flunder describes the disciples as shamed followers of Jesus, hiding from the public in the upper room. She says, “Imagine a group of disjointed theological subversives still suffering scratches and bruises from journeying with Jesus down the road less traveled. This was a group for whom it was a risk to show their faces in public - they were guilty by association. They had been with Jesus, and Jesus had been arrested, tried, convicted, and executed because he had spoken truth to power and spread a welcome table.”¹⁶ In the sermon, Flunder removes the disciples’ shame by celebrating the Holy Spirit “coming out” in an unlikely place of the upper room and among unlikely people, the disappointed disciples. The Holy Spirit “coming out” reimagines the disciples from being villains to heroes, from teaching an exclusive gospel to a gospel of inclusivity.

The Close Reading of “Silent No More”

Close reading is an interpretive analysis that examines texts within the contexts in which they are given. Andre E. Johnson states that “a close textual reading allows for the historical and biographical approach of a rhetorical biography as well as a theoretical approach that emphasizes the text and thereby enables the critic to tease out more nuances of the text.”¹⁷ In the close reading of “Silent No More,” I will discuss the ways in which queer womanist preaching is deeply wedded to the Black preaching tradition through the lens of Yvette Flunder. Flunder’s use of vivid imagery, a hallmark of Black preaching, sets the scene in a palatable way by providing more depth to the biblical exegesis and allows the contextualization of the day of Pentecost. Additionally, components of Flunder’s homiletical theory engage the Black liberation preaching tradition. These components include the Holy Spirit; the homage to three canons: the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Lived Testament; justice as a theo-ethical hermeneutic, the African American Pentecostal tradition; and music, including both Gospel and negro spirituals. And lastly, the close of the sermon is indicative of Flunder’s homiletical method of a

¹⁴ Ella Pearson Mitchell and Valerie Bridgeman Davis, eds. *Those Preaching Women: A Multicultural Collection* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2008), 134.

¹⁵ Johnson, op.cit., 59.

¹⁶ Pearson Mitchell and Bridgeman Davis, op.cit., 133.

¹⁷ Andre E. Johnson, *Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 6.

celebratory charge to the audience. Collectively, these components inform Flunder's queer preaching that undergirds her queer emancipatory praxis.

The sermonic scripture of "Silent No More" is taken from Acts 2:1-12 (New International Version).

1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **2** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3** They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. **5** Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. **6** When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. **7** Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? **9** Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome **11** (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" **12** Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

From the introduction to the close, Flunder structures this sermon with four distinct moves.¹⁸ Each move transitions the audience to another layer of the contextualization of the day of Pentecost. The moves give insights into Flunder's queer biblical hermeneutic, early religious experiences, queer theology, homiletical theory, and theology of preaching. The sermonic moves are as follows:

1. The Introduction - A Contextualization of the Sermonic Text (*Biblical Scripture*)
2. The Description of the Holy Spirit (*Core Theological Belief*)
3. The Comparison of Similar Thematic Text (*Lived Text*)
4. The Sermonic Close (*Celebratory Charge*)

Each move underscores Flunder's homiletical method, the structure of her sermons, which consists of the contextualization of the Biblical scripture, an explanation of a core belief, an incorporation of the lived text, and a directive of a celebratory charge. The presentation of the biblical text is a contextualization of the sermonic text. Flunder rarely just summarizes the scripture. She uses metaphors, adjectives, poignant descriptors, and other vivid imagery to situate the listeners in the text. Flunder's descriptors reduce the distance from the text to the listeners by

¹⁸ "Moves" is a term referenced by Henry Mitchell: "Homiletical moves are meaningful modules or groups of words and sentences that describe the images used to express in the concrete what we cannot adequately verbalize in the abstract." Mitchell differentiates between moves and points saying that, "points are made to score in the intellect while moves involve the whole person in experiential encounters of body, strength emotion, intuition, mental processes and spirit." Henry Mitchell, *Celebration & Experience in Preaching*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 23.

relating the text to contemporary settings. Core theological beliefs are “characteristics that determine God’s trustworthiness.”¹⁹ The core theological belief is drawn from the scripture. Examples of Flunder’s core beliefs include her preaching motif of “coming out,” justice-oriented ministry, the unction of the Holy Spirit, the radical inclusivity of the gospel, and the love of Christ. Flunder always includes lived experiences that enrich the sermon through humor and humanization. And lastly, she concludes with a celebratory charge as a directive behavioral change for individuals and communities.

Flunder’s homiletical method as outlined in “Silent No More” encompasses the broader concept of homiletical theory. Homiletical theory is the academic examination of disciplines in the understanding of the methodological functionality of preaching. The general categories of homiletical theory include the nature and purpose of preaching, hermeneutics, the authority of scripture, and language. These categories unearth the proclaimer’s beliefs about preaching that inform each sermon. The characteristics evident in “Silent No More” include Flunder’s queer biblical hermeneutic, the authority of biblical and lived text, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, these topics correlate to Flunder’s queer theology of preaching that represents her understanding of African American preaching from the context of her early religious experiences within the Black Pentecostal tradition, religious music, and her identification as a same-gender loving Black woman.

1.The Introduction: A Contextualization of the Sermonic Text

The introductory sentence explains the milieu of the day of Pentecost with emphasis on the characterization of the disciples. Flunder describes the disciples by saying, “Imagine a group of disjointed theological subversives still suffering scratches and bruises from journeying with Jesus down the road less traveled.”²⁰ This first sentence represents a hook, a shocking sentence that grabs the audience’s attention. The descriptors “disjointed theological subversives,” “suffering scratches and bruises,” and “the road less traveled” surprise the audience’s consciousness. A hearer may not expect the disciples to be described using these signifiers.

Flunder’s use of adjectives describing the disciples sets the tone of the sermon. The phrase “a group of disjointed theological subversives” captures the confused state of mind of the disciples as well as the religious ideology of Jesus that went against the grain of other religious norms. “Still suffering scratches and bruises” references the physical injuries of the disciples, possibly from running to safety following the crucifixion of Christ. The phrase “journeying with Jesus down the road less traveled” provides insight into Flunder’s understanding of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus’s ministry was along the margins of church and society.

The last sentence of the introductory paragraph summarizes Flunder’s theological perspective of the ministry of Jesus. Flunder writes, “They had been with Jesus, and Jesus had been arrested, tried, convicted, and executed because he had spoken truth to power and spread a welcome table.”²¹ The phrase “speaking truth to power” is credited to Bayard Rustin, a leader of the Civil Rights Movement who helped organize the 1963 March on Washington.²² In the

¹⁹ Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching as Celebration: Digital Lecture Series and Workbook*, rev. ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hope for Life International Books, 2018), 33.

²⁰ Ella Pearson Mitchell and Valerie Bridgeman Davis, eds. *Those Preaching Women: A Multicultural Collection* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2008), 133.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bayard Rustin, *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters*, ed. Michael Long (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2012), 160.

context of the Civil Rights Movement, speaking truth to power represents a religious leader or social activist confronting a political government of their injustices through non-violent protest politics. The religious leader or social activist demands just socio-economic policies through protests and other elements of activism. Therefore, in Flunder's use of "speak truth to power," she implies that Jesus was a non-violent, religious leader who confronted the government regarding their unjust laws and demanded socio-economic change.

The justification of Jesus's crucifixion as spreading a welcome table speaks to Flunder's understanding of the inclusive nature of the ministry of Jesus. Furthermore, Flunder delineates the welcome table by recognizing that Jesus kept the company of people from diverse religious backgrounds, different ethnic groups, various social classes, as well as Jews, Gentiles, and women.²³ The inclusivity of ministry remains a paramount theme throughout the entire sermon with Flunder articulating inclusivity as the message of Pentecost.

The metaphor of the welcome table has been rooted in the Black church tradition since slavery. Early versions of the hymn, "Oh, Den My Little Soul's Gwine to Shine," are noted to have been sung by an enslaved child who was separated from his mother.²⁴ The earliest versions symbolize the eschatological hope of the enslaved: being with Jesus Christ in heaven, sitting at Christ's welcome table as a sign of dignity, humanity, and love. Modified versions of the song were sung during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. The modified hymn represents the hope of the oppressed to one day be welcomed at earthly tables that are exclusionary. The Civil Rights version titled "I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table," became an anthem for the Movement.²⁵

In the second paragraph, Flunder elaborates on the three descriptors in the hook. The first sentence of the second paragraph states, "These believers were discouraged by the recent events that had befallen their movement."²⁶ Flunder addresses the disappointment of the disciples due to the execution of their leader. Jesus's death marks the seeming failure of the religious movement, 'the Way' - the first name for the Christian community. Flunder states that "the crowds fell away because it had become politically and physically dangerous to be a member of the Way, and many chose a safer, more prescribed religious expression."²⁷ The crowds falling away indicates a level of celebrity popularity that turned into marginalized shame. The danger of being a follower of the Way explains why the road with Jesus was less traveled. Flunder's imagery sets the stage for the day of Pentecost when the disciples are bewildered, disappointed, and hiding in secrecy in the upper room, in desperate need of a sign of affirmation.

In summary, the two introductory paragraphs explain the context of the Day of Pentecost. The hearers are reminded of the grave disappointment, shame, and utter confusion of the disciples, the primary figures of the text. Flunder's use of vivid imagery is a hallmark of the African American Preaching Tradition. This imagery provides layered contextualization of her queer womanist biblical hermeneutic, which demonstrates her excellent exegesis. Flunder's queer womanist biblical hermeneutic reflects a theology of inclusivity that seeks to create a just world. Black Queer theology cares for all of those along the margins of religion and society.

²³ Pearson Mitchell and Bridgeman Davis, op.cit., 133.

²⁴ Thomas P. Fenner, Fredric G. Rathburn, and Bessie Cleaveland, *Cabin and Plantation Songs as Sung by the Hampton Students* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1877). Hathi Trust Digital Library. Accessed November 19, 2022, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=emu.010000709463&view=1up&seq=1>.

²⁵ American Experience, "Soundtrack for a Revolution: Lyrics of the Freedom Songs," PBS, Accessed November 19, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/soundtrack-lyrics/>.

²⁶ Pearson Mitchell and Bridgeman Davis, op.cit., 133.

²⁷ Ibid.

2.The Description of the Holy Spirit

One of the integral components of Flunder's homiletical theory is the power of the Holy Spirit. In this sermon, Flunder articulates the power of the Holy Spirit as filling the disciples with fearlessness and focus to share the revelation of God with diverse people.²⁸ She characterizes the endowment of the Holy Spirit experienced by the disciples in the upper room as a tarry service. Flunder describes the purpose of the tarry service as the disciples waiting for "affirmation, purpose, direction, and confidence."²⁹

Tarry services are part of Flunder's early religious childhood experiences within the Black Pentecostal COGIC. In "Silent No More," Flunder does not provide further detail with her own personal experiences in tarry services. However, in a sermon delivered at Emory University's Cannon Chapel on February 25, 2016, Flunder begins with an explanation of her religious background in the Trinitarian Pentecostal tradition.³⁰ The Trinitarian Pentecostal tradition believes in tarrying for the endowment of the Holy Spirit. In the sermon, Flunder retells her childhood personal experience of Pentecost, the day she tarried for the Lord with her "tarry coaches" and received the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues. According to Flunder, when she received the Holy Spirit, she rolled from the front of the church to the back of the church. She had dust bunnies in her hair from rolling under the pews. As she was rolling, she was speaking in tongues. She kept speaking in tongues as she got into the car and returned home. The knowledge of Flunder's childhood experiences with tarrying services provides further insight into Flunder's beliefs about the Day of Pentecost, particularly why she describes the upper room as a tarry service.

According to Flunder, the power of the Holy Spirit overwhelmed the disciples to the point that they could not keep their experience to themselves. Flunder states, "They may have felt the meaning of the words of the old spiritual: 'Said I wasn't gonna tell nobody, but I couldn't keep it to myself!'"³¹ Flunder's reference to the old spiritual provides insight into her experience as a gospel singer who calls herself a "traditionalist."³² The song, "Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody," is an old spiritual in the Black Church tradition.³³

In summary, the description of the Holy Spirit characterizes Flunder's core belief in the purpose of the Holy Spirit to empower God's people to spread the Gospel. The gift of the Holy Spirit can be experienced through speaking in tongues, as is the case on the day of Pentecost. For Flunder, the situation in the upper room represents a tarry service, which is unique to Flunder's early religious experiences in the COGIC church. And lastly, Flunder's professional experience as a gospel singer resounds in her use of lyrics from a popular gospel song from the 1960s: she just couldn't keep the Holy Spirit-inspired message to herself.

3.The Comparison of Text: Old Testament, New Testament, and Lived Text

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 134.

³⁰ Flunder, Yvette A. "2_25_16 Yvette Flunder." Cannon Chapel Sermons, February 26, 2016. Podcast, Owltail, 31:56.

³¹ Pearson Mitchell and Bridgeman Davis, op.cit., 134.

³² Flunder, Yvette A. "Yvette Flunder's Sermon 3_7_13." Cannon Chapel Sermons, March 7, 2013. Podcast, Owltail, 36:08.

³³ "Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody" was sung by the Abyssinian Baptist Gospel Choir on the album *Shakin' the Rafters*. The song was recorded live under the direction of Alex Bradford in April 1960. *Shakin' the Rafters* is one of the all-time greatest gospel albums.

Flunder compares the disciples' endowment of the Holy Spirit in Acts with the Israelite elders Eldad and Medad's endowment of the Spirit in Numbers 11. Flunder characterizes the text by identifying Eldad and Medad as "non-A listers" who interrupted established protocol by becoming filled with the Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit became evident through the gift of prophesy. Both Eldad and Medad prophesized publicly God's plan for Israel. Joshua rebuked the men for being out of order based upon religious protocol. Moses responded by saying, "Would that all of God's people were prophets!"

Flunder does not include several details within the Numbers scripture, specifically the delineation of the protocol that was disregarded in Eldad and Medad's actions. To set the story in its context, the explanation of the protocol is as follows: Joshua, Moses's successor, was upset that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp with the people of Israel. The protocol was for the priest to gather at the Tent of Meeting, isolated from the people. At the Tent of Meeting, the priests would receive the power of the Spirit. Then the priest would come down from the Tent of Meeting and prophesy to the Israelites at the camp. Joshua wanted to stop the elders from prophesying whereas Moses, the leader, wanted more people to prophesy.

According to Flunder, she was raised in a Joshua church whereby they were "taught to confine the Spirit blessing to those who came into the tent."³⁴ The tent represented those who were part of her denomination and church. The people in the tent must obey all the rules. When the tent folks went out into the world, they were supposed to be separate, above reproach, and pious. For Flunder, the Joshua church is not the church of Pentecost. The sentiment of Moses captures the essence of Pentecost. Moses was correct in his desire for all of God's people to prophesy.

Flunder uses the Old Testament scripture to bridge the sermon text and lived experiences. In her use of intertextuality, she compares Joshua's rebuke in Numbers 11 to the religiosity of her childhood church. This comparison leads to her greater idea of religion's attempts to confine the Holy Spirit. Both Joshua and the religious teachings of Flunder's childhood sought to confine the Holy Spirit to certain people. For Flunder, the message of Pentecost is the free movement of the Holy Spirit to any and everyone, even those least likely, based on religious protocol, cultural traditions, or societal norms.

Flunder connects the Numbers text, the sermon text, and the lived text of her experience in her childhood church with the Pentecostal message of the Holy Spirit freely moving among God's people for the purposes of God's plan. Rhetorically, Flunder drives this point home with an anaphora of "The Holy Ghost slipped... The Holy Ghost slipped out of the tabernacle... The Spirit slipped out of them from behind the veil..., slipped out of the upper room, slipped out of the Azusa Street revival,...slipped out of every desperate effort to confine the Spirit to a culture, a denomination, or a doctrine..."³⁵ Flunder continues to drive the message home with another anaphora about the unforeseen places the spirit showed up. "Some said the Spirit could not show up in Macedonia...Some say the Spirit is not supposed to show up in the hip-hop culture...Some would say the Spirit is not supposed to move among Asian folks..."³⁶

In the comparison of thematic texts, Flunder's use of the lived text, her early religious experiences in the COGIC church, is not an application model to substantiate a move. Her personal experience is not a subtext. Flunder's lived text is equally substantive as both the sermon text of Acts 2 and the intertextual scripture of Numbers 11. For womanist preachers,

³⁴ Pearson Mitchell and Bridgeman Davis, *op.cit.*, 134.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

the lived experiences of Black women become the lens through which one interprets scripture and the point of departure in sermon development. Similar to womanist preaching emphasizing the lives of Black women, an attribute of queer womanist preaching is the equal importance of lived experiences of queer, Black women to that of scripture. The lived experiences interpret the biblical text and vice versa.

Black queer preaching emphasizes the use of lived experiences for biblical interpretation as a means of reclaiming scripture. For centuries, the Bible has been used as a tool of oppression to demonize Black queer persons. Therefore, many queer people find ways to reclaim scripture as liberating and loving. One such way is to honor the authority of the lived text just as significantly as the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The lived text can be used to interpret or re-interpret the biblical text for queer preachers.

4. The Sermonic Close – A Celebratory Charge

In the book, *Teaching Preaching: Isaac Rufus Clark and Black Sacred Rhetoric*, Katie Geneva Cannon discusses the sermonic close in African American preaching based on the pedagogy of her preaching professor, Isaac Rufus Clark. According to Clark, the close depends upon the rhetor's sought response from the audience.³⁷ Several audience responses include repentance, edification, regeneration, spiritual curiosity, and a concrete action. In the sermon "Silent No More," Flunder wants the audience to spread the inclusive gospel of Christ, which represents a concrete action. Therefore, Flunder closes the sermon with a charge to the audience, "We cannot be silent no more!"

Additionally, based on the perspective of Henry Mitchell and Frank A. Thomas, Flunder closes with a celebration. Mitchell characterizes the celebration as the ecstatic reinforcement of the main point.³⁸ Thomas describes the celebration as the joyful, ecstatic reinforcement of the Good News already taught in the sermon.³⁹ In the sermon "Silent No More," Flunder celebrates the good news, which is the gospel's inclusivity to all through the endowment of the Holy Spirit. She reinforces the good news with the celebratory charge to the audience by telling them to go out and spread the gospel to everyone and be silent no more!

The transition to the close begins with Flunder's direct articulation of the Pentecostal message being a "come out" message.⁴⁰ According to Flunder, the message of Pentecost is to come out of the rooms, the four walls of the church and out into the streets to share the good news in creative methods using various languages. "Coming out" is one of Flunder's major preaching motifs. "Coming out" is a distinctive motif of queer womanist rhetoric.

The framing of the day of Pentecost as a "coming out" message is rooted in the boundary dissolving element of queer theology. In *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, Patrick Cheng suggests that Christian theology is a fundamentally queer enterprise because of its basis in a divine, boundary-dissolving radical love.⁴¹ Cheng defines radical love "as a love so extreme that it dissolves existing boundaries."⁴² With respect to the Trinity, the Holy Spirit reflects a boundary-dissolving radical love whereby God dissolves the boundary of divinity and

³⁷ Katie G. Cannon, *Teaching Preaching: Isaac Rufus Clark and Black Sacred Rhetoric* (London, England: Continuum, 2007), 163.

³⁸ Mitchell, op.cit., 35.

³⁹ Frank A. Thomas, *They like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 85.

⁴⁰ Pearson Mitchell and Bridgeman Davis, op.cit., 135.

⁴¹ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2011) x.

⁴² Ibid., 44.

humanity.⁴³ Similarly, as Flunder implicitly notes, the day of Pentecost is the “coming out” story of the disciples who experienced the radical love of God through the divine revelation of the Holy Spirit endowing the disciples, then dissolving the exclusionary boundaries of humankind, i.e., language, culture, gender etc., to spread the inclusive gospel of Christ.

Flunder’s “coming out” motif is directly related to her personal experience of “coming out” as a same-gender loving woman. However, her use of the motif is deeper and more inclusive than her personal experience. In this sermon, “coming out” is representative of the model for offering the inclusive gospel message to everyone. In other sermons, Flunder uses the “coming out” motif in reference to authenticity in ministry. The “coming out” motif is layered with many meanings depending upon the context of the sermon.

Flunder’s “coming out” motif represents a component of her theology of preaching. For Flunder, preaching liberates people to live authentic lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. To be liberated is to “come out” of religious traditions and cultural norms that are oppressive and exclusionary. As a justice warrior for all people, liberation does not only include individuals. The individual must go back to the community to liberate others.⁴⁴ Justice is a theo-ethical hermeneutic in which Flunder reads scripture as exemplified in the sermon.

In the celebratory charge to the audience, Flunder mentions Peter speaking at Pentecost in Acts 2:14-16, wherein he references the prophet Joel whose prophecy is recorded in Joel 2:28-32. In Acts, Peter declares that Joel’s prophesy is being fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. Joel 2:28-32 reads as follows:

²⁸ And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.

²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. ³⁰ I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. ³¹ The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. ³² And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, even among the survivors whom the LORD calls.

Flunder affirms the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel on the day of Pentecost and the continued fulfillment now through present day believers. According to Flunder, believers are purposed to conduct the Spirit rather than contain the Spirit. To conduct means to allow the Spirit to fill persons and move them toward bringing more marginalized people to the Lord. Flunder’s understanding of pneumatology is that everyone is included in this charge of inclusivity. The movement of the Holy Spirit contributes to Flunder’s homiletical theory and her theology of preaching.

The tone of the sermon shifts in the last three paragraphs of the manuscript. The shift reflects Flunder’s understanding of the urgency and gravity of this call to “come out” onto the streets and spread the inclusive gospel of Christ. The urgency is reflected in Flunder saying, “We are at a defining moment now...The time is right. The stage is set.”⁴⁵ Flunder captures the gravity in her description of being on the brink of a great reformation that “turn(s) the exclusivity

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁴ Yvette A. Flunder, Cannon Chapel Sermons, March 7, 2013. Podcast, Owltail, 36:08.

⁴⁵ Pearson Mitchell and Bridgeman Davis, *op.cit.*, 135.

of religion to the inclusivity of the extravagant grace of God.”⁴⁶ She further describes the gravity as a “Pentecostal evolution revolution.”⁴⁷ The Pentecostal evolution revolution may reflect Flunder’s desired change in the Pentecostal experience of her childhood, whereby those with the Holy Spirit will become inclusive and justice-minded.⁴⁸

In the celebratory charge, Flunder quotes another scripture: “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31) The implication is that God is for the inclusivity of religion evident by the movement of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Finally, Flunder reiterates the title of the sermon, “We cannot be silent anymore!” to close the sermon.

Conclusion – Queer Rhetoric and Black Queer Preaching

This essay attempts to answer two relevant questions regarding Black queer preaching: What is queer rhetoric in Black preaching? And how might queer Black preaching differ from Black preaching? Through the rhetorical analysis of Yvette A. Flunder’s sermon, “Silent No More,” I characterize “coming out” as queer womanist rhetoric in Black preaching. Flunder explains that “coming out” has both religious and communal implications, not just personal ramifications for queer individuals. The characterization of queer womanist rhetoric pushes the conversation toward the margins.

As queer womanist rhetoric, “coming out” represents all four tenets of womanism; radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement. Additionally, the rhetoric in “Silent No More” reflects the womanist rhetoric of critical engagement which “seek(s) to culturally critique society’s oppressive forces by challenging the ways in which we view people’s problems and by forcing us to confront our own internal system of beliefs, so that we can collectively combat external systems of belief.”⁴⁹ “Silent No More” challenges the exclusivity of the gospel by identifying the day of Pentecost as a “coming out” experience that transforms the gospel to a message for any- and everyone.

The rhetorical analysis of “Silent No More” uncovers the similarities of Black queer preaching and Black preaching. The preaching of Bishop Yvette Flunder is deeply wedded to the Black church preaching tradition due to her early religious experiences in the Black Pentecostal COGIC. As evident in “Silent No More,” characteristics unique to both the Black preaching tradition and Flunder are the authority of biblical and lived text, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the celebratory close. The authority of lived realities reflects a womanist way of preaching as well.

Flunder models Henry Mitchell’s tenants of African American preaching as discussed in *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*. For the congregation to have an experiential encounter of the word, the preacher must understand how hearing and other senses relate to belief. According to Mitchell, the hearing experience should include the following: vivid details and images; familiarity, identification, and vicarious experience; and homiletic moves in consciousness.⁵⁰ Flunder’s use of vivid imagery sets the tone for the day of Pentecost as she describes the disciples. Then Flunder assists with the audience’s identification with the disciples as she describes her church experiences as similar experiences to those of the sermon’s biblical text. From the introduction to the close, Flunder structures this sermon with moves that transition

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁸ Yvette A. Flunder, Cannon Chapel Sermons, February 26, 2016. Podcast, Owltail, 31:56.

⁴⁹ Johnson, op.cit, 79.

⁵⁰ Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration and experience in preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 20.

the audience to another layer of the contextualization of the day of Pentecost. Lastly, Flunder uses the rhetorical tools of imagery, multiple scriptures, personal testimony, and metaphor in the sermon. These rhetorical tools are evident in both African American preaching and womanist preaching.

Ultimately, Black queer preaching is Black preaching. The identification of the preacher as queer may alter some of the rhetoric, such as the use of the “coming out” motif. However, as revealed through the lens of Yvette A. Flunder in “Silent No More,” Black queer preaching is preaching that engages a gospel message of inclusivity for all. There remains much to learn about queer preaching in the context of the African American church.