

**Contemplative Agitator:
Tracing the Contours of Pauli Murray's Black Contemplative Homiletic¹**

Donyelle C. McCray
Associate Professor of Homiletics
Yale Divinity School

Abstract: *This article explores the preaching of Pauli Murray (1910–1985), an American poet, activist, attorney, professor, and Episcopal priest. Though aptly described as a renaissance person, Murray's fundamental vocation was that of bridge builder and preaching was instrumental to this work. Preaching became a means of reframing the tensions and exigencies of the empirical world, allowing them to be examined through a numinous lens. After describing the appeal of contemplative preaching and charting key aspects of Murray's preacherly formation, I discuss three important hallmarks of Murray's homiletic. These include: (1) maintaining a posture of wonder and irresolution when exploring human identity, (2) weaving intercessions for the listeners into sermons, and (3) invoking the wisdom of saints and Ancestors.*

A Note on Pronouns

This paper focuses on Pauli Murray, a freedom fighter, attorney, poet, Episcopal priest, and a person for whom self-definition was very costly. The barriers were many and varied and one concerns language itself. Today most scholars describe Murray as gender nonconforming, but Murray had less agency around gender expression than many do today and lived during a time when binary pronouns were commonly used by people of all genders. In conversation, I typically use she/they pronouns for Murray, but this paper includes many more she/her pronouns. I use them for a couple reasons: First, I use she/her pronouns to maintain consistency with sources and direct quotations in which Murray uses she series pronouns. Murray's gender identity was only shared with a tiny inner circle that excluded most close friends and relatives, and Murray usually moved through public spaces as a woman. Secondly, I use she/her pronouns to reflect Murray's very intentional usage of she/her pronouns in ministry contexts around the dawning of women's ordination to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church, USA. As just one example, in a ministry license dated July 13, 1980, and signed by Bishop John T. Walker, Murray has stricken through the "he" and "his" pronouns and replaced them with "she" and "her."

A study of Murray's life story and archive reveals that terms that might grate Murray early in life are readily embraced at other points. In every case, I try to honor the fullness of Murray's identity and the need for the visibility of historical figures who were transgender or nonbinary. And I respect the fact that we are working with historical fragments and don't know which pronouns Murray would choose today. Writing about people from earlier historical contexts whose gender transitions were gradual or whose gender identities were not publicly known during their lifetime requires attention to the uniqueness of each case, and openness to ambiguity.²

¹ Portions of this article, particularly concerning Pauli Murray's homiletical emphasis on intercession and identity as a child of God, are also included in a forthcoming German publication, Donyelle McCray, "Consolations of a Pixie Priest" in *Queer im Pfarrhaus*, eds. Katrin Burja and Traugott Roser (LIT Verlag, 2024).

² Jen Manion, "Transgender Representations, Identities, and Communities" in *The Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History*, ed. Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor and Lisa G. Materson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 313.

Pauli Murray was a path-breaking poet, activist, attorney, professor, and Episcopal priest whose legacy of human rights work continues to reverberate. Murray once said, “If anyone should ask a Negro woman what is her greatest achievement, her honest answer would be, ‘I survived.’”³ That survival was fueled by a healthy tension between prayerful contemplation and activism. For Murray, contemplation represented the lush inner world of imagination as well as the realm of cosmic wholeness beyond the sphere of time—a realm of mysterious divine action that exceeds human comprehension. Activism was rooted in the visible world of action and results—of brokenness demanding urgent, concrete human response.

Sometimes, holding this tension could be wearying. Murray makes this clear in a poem entitled “Conflict,” which depicts the intense wrestling between the poet and the warrior within.⁴ The poem suggests that peace between the contemplative and the activist is no easy feat. But in lived experience, more often this tension was enlivening and productive. The twentieth-century Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton argued that the prophet’s periods of quiet contemplation were not wholly focused on preparation for apostolic ministry or replenishment when public activities ceased, rather that prophets were most themselves during their quiet moments.⁵ The contemplative and the public witness were inseparable. This idea is borne out in Pauli Murray’s life and ministry.

Though aptly described as a renaissance person, Murray’s fundamental vocation was that of bridge builder and her preaching is instrumental to this work. Preaching reframed the tensions and exigencies of the empirical world, allowing them to be examined through a numinous lens. By situating herself firmly in the contemplative spiritual tradition, Murray challenges some long-held assumptions about its primary voices and aims. After noting the significant facets of her preacherly formation and aspects of contemplative preaching that would appeal to Murray, I will discuss three key hallmarks of her approach to preaching. These include foregrounding listeners’ identity as children of God, weaving intercessions into sermons, and invoking the wisdom of the Ancestors. Overall, I hope to present Pauli Murray as a figure who illumines critical dimensions of Black contemplative preaching and who troubles tidy assumptions about Black preaching more broadly. Murray’s example points to the range of models, aims, histories, and spiritualities that fit beneath the canopy of the term “Black preaching”—a range as broad as Black religious experience itself. Further, studying the preaching of figures like Pauli Murray is crucial to the flourishing of Black preaching. At its best, African American sacred rhetoric resists reduction and makes space within itself for minority and even contrarian perspectives.⁶ A growing understanding of divinely inspired speech requires attention to normative approaches as well as those of apparent outliers.

More than Resistance

Too often, the public expression of resistance is treated as the defining feature of Black culture and the primary frame for its study. The heavy emphasis on outwardness and publicness

³ Rosalind Rosenberg, *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.

⁴ Pauli Murray, *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (Norwalk, CT: Silvermine, 1971), 70.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 260.

⁶ Toni Morrison touches on the dynamic I am trying to articulate when she says, “Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you. Spirituals agitate you, no matter what they are saying about how it is all going to be. There is something underneath them that is incomplete.” Toni Morrison, “An Interview with Toni Morrison,” interview by Nellie McKay, *Contemporary Literature* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 429. I think of the canon of African American sacred rhetoric as similarly “incomplete,” continuously open, agitating, and evolving.

results in insufficient attention to Black interiority. As a consequence, Kevin Quashie argues that the multiplicity within Blackness is flattened—reduced to a public response to whiteness.⁷ While Murray treated activism as a moral imperative, she found it equally important to stay in touch with that part of herself that was “unfettered by race” because this link offered an internal buoy and vital source of perspective in a racialized society.⁸ This interior aspect of religious experience, which precedes and exceeds responses to racism and other dehumanizing influences, is essential to understanding Murray’s religious formation.

Murray’s early experiences in Black Episcopal congregations proved to be helpful in this regard. The Rev. Absalom Jones, compatriot of Bishop Richard Allen, and the Rev. Alexander Crummell were instrumental in linking some of the best aspects of Anglican theology—its quietude, optimism, high view of human experience, appreciation of history as a source of divine revelation, and intellectual curiosity—with aesthetics and cultural traditions from the African diaspora.

Just shy of eight months old, Murray was baptized by the Rev. George Freeman Bragg, a priest and journalist who advocated for racial equality in Baltimore while instilling in his parishioners a sense of belovedness and capaciousness that defied their daily experiences. Murray’s parents died during her youth, and she was raised in Durham, North Carolina by a maternal aunt, Pauline Dame, and maternal grandparents, Robert and Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald. In Durham, she attended St. Titus Episcopal Church, a small predominantly African American congregation that met in a “tiny frame chapel.”⁹ Over the course of multiple summers, Murray was nurtured by three other small African American Episcopal congregations in southern Maryland (though all part of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington): St. Simon’s, St. Mary’s, and St. Philip’s Aquasco.¹⁰ Affection drives Murray’s memories of growing up in these congregations. For example, she remembers the loving dispositions of people like Bishop Henry B. Delaney, and cherishes the time when, upon his deathbed, he blessed Murray and called her a “child of destiny.”¹¹ Delaney’s blessing was representative of a broader pattern among clergy of helping parishioners embrace their full personhood. The Christian contemplative tradition offered vital resources for this process.

Appealing Aspects of Contemplative Preaching

A review of Murray’s journals, letters, and theological scholarship suggests an affinity for certain preaching strategies that can be tied to contemplative spirituality. Chief among these strategies is the accent on divine adoration. Argument falters in this endeavor and a more non-agonistic tone follows. The gospel, as Amos Wilder argues in *Early Christian Rhetoric*, breaks the rules of rhetoric and manifests as a revelation or a “new utterance.”¹²

What the contemplative preacher proclaims is wonder—a wonder so all-absorbing that it recalibrates and unmoors the sermon’s nerve center.¹³ Preferred subgenres are wisdom and

⁷ Kevin E. Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 11.

⁸ Quashie, *Sovereignty*, 14, 21.

⁹ Pauli Murray, *Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹¹ Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 355.

¹² Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 21.

¹³ Bernard of Clairvaux provides an example of this effusiveness in a sermon on Cant 1:3. Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 66.

didache, but whatever the chosen form, wonder at God, Creation, and the miracle of human life come to the forefront. The contemplative preacher is less inclined to *explain* Christ's Passion and more likely to respond with awe. Unraveled by the experience of God's love, the preacher can only stand before the listeners with great humility and marvel at what God might be up to next. Whatever the surface level theme, the core message is summed up by Saint Francis, "My God and all! What art Thou? And what am I?"¹⁴ The notion that the empirical world could be upended by stupefying divine action intrigued Murray.

Murray would also be drawn by the slow and deliberate consideration of the most elemental existential questions: Who is God? How is God known? What does it mean to be human and what are the ends of human life? Historically, Christian contemplatives have often bracketed urgent questions regarding contemporary life and examined them indirectly within larger existential questions. Henri Nouwen, whose work Murray read and quoted, understood contemplation as a practice of looking closely at life's nerve center. Drawing on Merton, Nouwen describes the contemplative as a seer whose outlook on the cosmos is unveiled and whose illusions about human life are stripped.¹⁵ With this consciousness, contemplative perception zooms in on the material world, finding in small, seemingly insignificant matter—the ridges of a peach pit, a swallow's feather—portals to the divine.

A third understanding of contemplative preaching is one that emphasizes the overlay between the seen and unseen worlds. This, too, would appeal to Murray. One of the more helpful narrators of this overlay is the English writer and spiritual director, Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941). Underhill authored *Abba*, a book Murray described as "one of the greatest books I have ever experienced."¹⁶ In other books and in formal retreat meditations that functioned much like sermons, Underhill attuned her audiences to the hidden influence of the eternal realm. She portrays Christians as "amphibious" creatures who crawl around in the realm of the visible and swim in the realm of the invisible.¹⁷ Yet the amphibiousness of which Underhill speaks does not allow for treating encounters with the invisible world as escapes from the pressures of daily life in a human order where justice is rare and fleeting; Underhill says Christians are called to "contemplative action."¹⁸ Sermons are the manna that feed such action by emboldening holy living. The vibrant spirituality that Underhill seeks (and is manifest in Murray's life) involves an intellectual humility about what can be seen and known through the empirical world but still requires acting on one's ethical convictions. So, there are roles for active and restive postures, or what might loosely be called outwardness and inwardness.¹⁹

¹⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, ed. Grace Adolphsen Brame (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 179.

¹⁵ Henri Nouwen Papers, University of Toronto, St. Michael's College, Box 37, folder 159-1-19, bound volume 1 Ch. 17.

¹⁶ Pauli Murray, *Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 15; Evelyn Underhill, *Abba: Meditations on the Lord's Prayer* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1940).

¹⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *The Golden Sequence: A Fourfold Study of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Dutton, 1933), 45. Underhill builds on this sensitivity to the infinite in her many retreat meditations, especially "Inner Grace and Outward Sign." Underhill, *Ways*, 145–191.

¹⁸ John Francis, "Evelyn Underhill's Developing Spiritual Theology: A Discovery of Authentic Spiritual Life and the Place of Contemplation," Evelyn Underhill Association, <http://evelynunderhill.org/evelyn-underhills-developing-spiritual-theology-a-discovery-of-authentic-spiritual-life-and-the-place-of-contemplation-by-john-r-francis/>.

¹⁹ Though it has a long history in Christian spirituality, I am struggling with the inward-outward frame due to its woodenness and binary flavor. In addition to the active-restive postures described above, another set of helpful paradigms might be drawn from John McClure's discussion of the centripetal-centrifugal impulses in biblical interpretation and identity formation. John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 17–18, 26–29, 57.

Given Murray's fascination with autobiography and memoir, she would also be drawn to the biographical sermons that are so well deployed in contemplative spirituality. One of the early church fathers, John Chrysostom (c. 349–407) preached biographical sermons on the Apostle Paul that serve as illustrative examples of this tradition. Enamored with Paul, Chrysostom preached many homilies on him, sometimes focusing an entire message on a body part such as Paul's hands or feet.²⁰ In due course, listeners receive portraits of discipleship and are encouraged to develop the virtues that ground Paul's piety.

At their best, Chrysostom's sermons, and those preached by others in this vein, present the saint as a prism for examining God's action on the individual and in the world. The uniqueness of the person's story is affirmed as is adherence to a pattern of being found and wooed by God, and then risking, falling short, trying again, and despite obvious limitations, radiating some aspect of virtue. In other words, there are periods of delay and apparent failure before the saint's efforts bear fruit, disabusing Christians of their demands for immediate results. The saint's participation in God's revelation becomes a warrant for the community. These saintly snapshots take listeners beyond abstract, systematic theology to a theology that is lived.²¹ The biographical sermon suggests that, along with stories of Jesus, faith communities need stories of people who share their weaknesses, ambivalence, and failures.

Despite all that would appeal to Murray in the Christian contemplative tradition, some obvious critiques emerge. For one, the tradition has been largely approached as the study of a handful of exemplars instead of the ordinary Christians who had such a profound influence on her faith.²² The tradition's association with European saints, spaces, and references, have also overdetermined its paradigms, emphasizing themes like the threefold way (purgation, illumination, and union) and foregrounding virtues like meekness and servanthood which have more complex layers of meaning when read through the lenses of race, gender, disability, or other dimensions of cultural particularity.

Early Preacherly Formation

Decades before entering the pulpit, Murray's early formation as a preacher began with writing poetry. Inasmuch as creative writing sharpened her appreciation for the powers of language—particularly the power of metaphor and imagery—it served as an elemental introduction to sermon composition. But the substance of many of her poems suggest they were also instances of praying aloud and denouncing injustice. In the spring of 1959, for example, Murray read that Mack Charles Parker, a twenty-three-year-old African American man, was abducted from his jail cell prior to his trial and lynched near Poplarville, Mississippi. Drawing on petitions in the Book of Common Prayer, Murray wrote "Collect for Poplarville" to narrate the particulars of racialized terror—dogs, firearms, burning crosses—and the Christian duty to pray for one's enemies.²³

"Collect for Poplarville" has notable hybridity. It is at once a prayer and an exhortation. In keeping with Katie Geneva Cannon's guidance on preaching, the poem distills "biblical

²⁰ Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 113–115.

²¹ Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky, *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²² Philip Sheldrake comments on this issue when noting, "western spirituality has been dominated by certain spiritual, cultural and social elites" and "our historical method has tended to highlight these." Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method*, 2d ed (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 7.

²³ Murray, *Dark Testament*, 38.

conflicts of dominance and submission, assertion and deference, the righted and the outlawed, the propertied and dispossessed.”²⁴ In this poem and others such as “For Mack C. Parker,” “Ruth,” “Psalm of Deliverance,” “The Newer Cry,” and “Nazarene,” Murray the poet is also Murray the seer and prophet, or, to draw on a term she uses, the “poet-prophet.”²⁵

As much as Murray cherished writing poetry, she was more inclined to label herself as a “‘prose-oet,’ a transitional writer whose work is a bridge between lyric poetry and a highly sensitive prose.”²⁶ Under the umbrella of prose-oet, Murray also had the freedom to claim a voice with more multiplicity—perhaps better accommodating the contemplative and the agitator within. The prose-oet also had the potential of bridging different audiences and as a result forming new communities of listeners.

Murray understood poets and prophets as artists who worked in overlapping territory.²⁷ One of her first poetic mentors was Langston Hughes, whom she considered a “prophet.”²⁸ Shortly after hearing him at a reading, the two struck up a friendship through playful correspondence and on occasion, the two poets even wrote on parallel themes such as the Harlem Riot and the Roosevelt administration’s treatment of African Americans.²⁹ Both writers also have an affinity for centering poems on prayers that are offered to God in moments of desperation.

On the whole, Murray’s poetry reflects a more orthodox view of God, humans, and Creation, while Hughes’s approach is more complex. Though the specifics of his religious beliefs were closely guarded, faith served as an important theme in his poetry, and one way he addressed it was through his exploration of doubt and disillusionment.³⁰ For example, cynicism is inescapable in his poem, “God to Hungry Child,” a monologue in which a deity who made the world for wealthy people scolds a famished child for failing to own stock.³¹ In “Christ in Alabama” and “Goodbye Christ,” some of Hughes’s most memorable reflections on lynching, he contemplates the divine abandonment of African Americans.³²

In other instances, Hughes marvels at the miracle of African American faith amid desperate circumstances. Hughes’s poem, “Hope for Harlem,” considers the texture of faith in an urban context by highlighting the prayers of a person living in slum housing.³³ The petitioner seems to have more concern for neighbors facing a similar plight than the landlord. What is perhaps most beautiful in the poem is the disinherited petitioner’s childlike faith. Such faith comes to the forefront in Hughes’s poem “Feet o’ Jesus” as well when the reader overhears the prayer of a petitioner, who, despite facing immense sorrow, is still able to stand and seems to

²⁴ Katie Geneva Cannon, “Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church” in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 60.

²⁵ Murray, *Dark Testament*, 39–47, 54–55, 68; Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, n.p.

²⁷ Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 207.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 166. Murray describes Hughes as a prophet in a sermon dated December 12, 1982, and entitled, “The Prophetic Impulse.” This sermon opens with Hughes’s poem, “Harlem.”

²⁹ I discuss Hughes’s influence on Murray in Donyelle C. McCray, “Pauli Murray In & Out of the Pulpit,” *Preaching the Fear of God in a Fear-Filled World: Proceedings from the 13th Conference of Societas Homiletica*, Durham, 2018. *Studia Homiletica* vol 12 (*Homiletische Perspektiven/ Homiletic Pers*) (LIT Verlag, 2021): 50–51.

³⁰ Wallace D. Best, *Langston’s Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 67–107.

³¹ Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, eds. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Knopf, 1995), 48.

³² *Ibid.*, 143, 166.

³³ *Ibid.*, 436.

overshadow a “little” Jesus.³⁴ In contrast to reflections on how small humans are in relation to God, Hughes depicts an everyday person who is a spiritual giant, one who seems to loom over an infant Jesus, unaware of her own power. By refusing a saccharine spirituality, Hughes urges Murray and other mentees to reckon with the beauty and complexity of Black life.

Hughes was not the only person who helped Murray link poetry and preaching. For several years she attended St. Mark’s in the Bowery Church in New York, a congregation that over the course of its history included illustrious poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay, Khalil Gibran, and W.H. Auden. These figures and others in the congregation treated poetry as part of the church’s prophecy, essentially expanding the church’s pulpit in communal poetry readings. The practice of reading and listening to poetry enabled writers (and other artists for that matter) to share more directly in the proclamation of the gospel. Whether listening to the poetry of fellow parishioners or writing her own, Murray’s poetic practices enhanced her observational skills, linguistic precision, and appreciation for ambiguity. It may have also sharpened her imagination. All these attributes strengthened her preaching.

As gifted as Murray was with turning phrases and adding bits of humor, her poetry also flowed into the delivery of her sermons. Murray’s sermons took a staid form, progressing in argument with less of a parallel progression in the energy of the delivery. Yet it should be stressed that Murray was recognized as the first African American woman who was ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church, USA. There were very few women priests during the time when she was preaching, making her entry into the pulpit a moment of drama. When congregants saw her occupy the sacred desk, they often saw a woman or an African American woman preaching for the first time. The “poetry,” then, was in the performance, in the practice of showing up and reinterpreting the gendered space of the pulpit. In this respect, Murray’s simple, Quaker-like delivery style is at once contemplative and consistent with the rhetorical approaches seen in the preaching of more expressive Black denominational traditions where the truth of the message is not merely spoken but poetically performed in rhythmic phrases, rhyme, and gesture.³⁵

Hallmarks of Pauli Murray’s Black Contemplative Homiletic

Murray had a vibrant preaching ministry that involved a considerable amount of guest preaching. The settings for sermons consisted primarily of Episcopal and mainline congregations on the east coast of the U.S. She preached in both predominantly Black congregations and predominantly white congregations. In both cases, Murray repeatedly focused on Christian identity, integrated periods of prayerful reflection, and highlighted Christian exemplars.

Identity exploration

A study of Murray’s sermon manuscripts and messages recorded on cassette tapes reveals repeated emphasis on the listener’s identity as a child of God. This identity precedes and subverts all other aspects of human identity and reveals them as partial. Murray explains:

To think of oneself as a child of God is a liberating experience; it is to free oneself from all feelings of inferiority, whether of race, or color, or sex, or age, or economic status, or position in life. When I say that I am a child of God—made in his image

³⁴ Ibid., 78.

³⁵ Gardner Taylor takes similar liberties with his take on musicality in preaching, noting that it can manifest in different ways. When asked why he did not sing in his sermons, he pointed to his use of language, saying a preacher’s “words should sing!” Jared E. Alcántara, *Learning from a Legend: What Gardner C. Taylor Can Teach Us About Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 65.

(the theologians like to use the term *imago dei*)—I imply that ‘Black is beautiful,’ that White is beautiful, that Red is beautiful, or Yellow is beautiful. I do not need to make a special pleading for my sex—male or female, or in-between—to bolster self-esteem. When I truly believe that God is my Father and Mother, in short, my Creator, I am bound also to believe that all men, women, and children of whatever race, color, creed, or ethnic origin, are my sisters-and-brothers-in-Christ, whether they are Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Black Muslims, members of the Judaic faith, Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, or atheists.³⁶

As children of God, Murray suggests, our call is to radiate the love that swaddles the world. This singular purpose is achieved in an endless variety of ways. A primary hindrance to it is the failure to recognize our own belovedness. Easily distracted by money, titles, achievements, or racial hierarchies, we fall prey to counterfeit identities and mistake partial dimensions of who we are as the whole. Murray tries to interrupt this pattern by reminding listeners that they are children of the Holy One who is known by many names, that the full meaning of their lives cannot be discerned in the temporal sphere, and that their identities are still unfolding. That is to say, the child of God cannot be reduced to any single facet of identity such as race, sexual orientation, or religion. Murray’s ecumenism is consistent with that of many mystics and contemplatives who see humanity’s kaleidoscopic variety as a divine gift. Rather than seeking mere tolerance or hospitality towards difference, the aim is universal siblinghood.

On a practical level, the emphasis on identity exploration means entering the central psychological and spiritual dilemmas faced by the listener. And how ought one approach such a task given that much of the tension is subconscious? Henry Mitchell and Frank Thomas suggest that preachers first identify and deconstruct the toxic tapes that run in the minds of listeners and offer life-giving substitutes that reframe the listeners’ understandings of identity.³⁷ Perhaps the most challenging task here is excavating the core issue or set of interlocking issues. To be most effective, preaching should address the underlying blueprint of the listeners’ worldview and interrupt the shame that “is all too often the dominant experience of the self.”³⁸ This homiletical approach requires reaching listeners at the subconscious level with affirmations of their true identities as beloved children of God and challenging any inner narratives that distort or inhibit self-recognition.³⁹ When this path to awareness of one’s identity is cleared, preaching functions as a bridge that unites listeners with God, the human family, and Creation.

In a video interview given shortly after her historic ordination, Murray reflects on the significance of offering the consecrated bread to worshippers at the Chapel of the Cross, the church where her grandmother (a preacher in her own right), Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald, was baptized. “For me,” Murray says, “what I was trying to communicate as I administered the bread was a lovingness for each individual who received the bread. And I went very slowly. Very often a priest may move right along the line. I didn’t. I didn’t care how long it took.”⁴⁰ Murray invests sermons with this sacramentality as well by making sermons occasions to envelop listeners in the

³⁶ Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 15.

³⁷ Henry Mitchell, *Celebration & Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 39–40; Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 9; Edward P. Wimberly, *Moving from Shame to Self-Worth: Preaching & Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 17–18.

³⁸ Wimberly, *Moving from Shame*, 124.

³⁹ Merle R. Jordan, *Taking on the Gods: The Task of the Pastoral Counselor* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 34.

⁴⁰ Pauli Murray, “On The Road” (1985), *The Church Awakens: African Americans and the Struggle for Justice*, accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/items/show/57>.

love of Christ. As Ruthanna Hooke explains in *Sacramental Presence: An Embodied Theology of Preaching*, “To preach in the power of the risen Christ is to see the other as Christ sees, which is to see with the eyes of love...[P]reaching is sacramental because it not only reveals but accomplishes love, effects love in the utterance of itself.”⁴¹ By emphasizing listeners’ identity as children of God, Murray seeks to “see the other as Christ sees” or “see with the eyes of love.”⁴²

To this end, Murray regularly makes explicitly affirming statements about racial and gender identities. With regard to gender, she suggests Jesus might return as a woman, stresses that women may have been present at the Lord’s Supper, and during a Father’s Day sermon observes that a Father-Mother or more inclusive approach to the holiday might be more appropriate.⁴³ In a similar vein, she includes affirmative references to queerness when listing the children of God. Having experienced what today might be considered a form of gender dysphoria and suffered multiple mental breakdowns as a result of pressure to conform to social norms, Murray knew these explicit, unqualified affirmations were vital. By making affirming statements about dimensions of personhood that were often maligned, she was honoring human particularity while reflecting on the sacred and still-unknown aspects of what it means to be human.

Ultimately, Murray’s preaching aims to expand the listeners’ spiritual bandwidth and deepen their sense of themselves as children of God. Two dimensions of the term “child of God” were pertinent: the notion of being a “child,” that is, utterly reliant and tenderly held in Love, and the idea of being “of God,” in other words, belonging to the Triune God and being a mysterious bearer of grace. Preaching involved exploring the vastness and wonder of human identity and allowing human multiplicity to spur questions about the aims of life.

An appreciation for the beauty of the world also seems to energize Murray’s perspective on human identity. This connection is most often implicit, as demonstrated in a 1982 sermon exploring the horror of nuclear disarmament:

What of the global effects of a full-scale nuclear holocaust? First, there is the ‘delayed’ or worldwide fallout, encircling the earth with radiation, which could kill animals, birds, fish, insects, plants, and trees as well as people. The contamination of the earth and water would run off to oceans, destroying oceanic life. ... The final threat to human survival would be the partial destruction of the layer of ozone that surrounds the entire earth in the stratosphere and is crucial to life because it acts as a protective shield against the deadly levels of ultraviolet radiation present in sunlight. This projects the possibility of the complete extinction of the human species and other life, leaving a silent and empty planet.

By our science and inaction, do we not participate in this ultimate evil, this vast collective sin of humankind, the final rebellion against God and God’s creation?⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ruthanna B. Hooke, *Sacramental Presence: An Embodied Theology of Preaching* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2023), 180.

⁴² Hooke argues that through preaching “we gain access to the largeness of the self, the glory of which we are capable” and goes on to describe preaching as “an expansion into the fullness of love, which invites others into their fullness as well.” One area for further inquiry concerns the meaning of this expansion for Murray. What were the psychological and spiritual effects of preaching regularly? To what extent, for example, did preaching facilitate personal integration? How did it expose or exacerbate pressure to conform to gender norms? *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴³ Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 15, 49, 120.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

Here and elsewhere, Murray wants her listeners to see themselves as dependent—in need of God, the kindness of human neighbors, and a vibrant planet. At the same time, she wants her listeners to see themselves as powerful moral agents who are called to be conduits of grace. In short, a robust view of the child of God grounds Murray's contemplative homiletic.

Intercession

While Murray treated sermons as occasions for instruction, she also saw them as opportunities to pray with and for her listeners. One homiletical technique that she uses repeatedly is the examen. Originally attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola and commonly used in Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions, the examen is a mode of self-interrogation that attempts to discern the Holy Spirit's action on the soul. An examen consists of a series of questions that one mulls over rather than answering quickly. The aim is to tune into one's heart and discern feelings of consolation or desolation or promptings to take specific actions. Murray had a pattern of weaving short examens into sermons. For instance, in a message on the Suffering Servant (Isa 53:3–6), she offers the following self-reflective questions for listeners:

Am I willing to relinquish my self-interest, my self-centeredness, my dependence upon my own resources or upon others, and surrender my entire will, my entire life to God? Am I willing to trust in God absolutely and without any reservations? Am I prepared to acknowledge that all I am and all I have belong to my Creator, that I am not here for my own purposes, my own glory, but for the purposes and glory of God? Am I ready to confess that the only way to salvation and redemption is my utter surrender to God's will? And if I cannot do this, am I prepared to face God's judgment? What does salvation mean to me, anyhow?⁴⁵

By inviting prayerful reflection on these questions, Murray is interceding on behalf of the listeners. The query functions simultaneously as a petition on their behalf and an effort to enhance their dialogues with God. And though the examen has a long history, the litany of questions may also reflect Murray's legal background. One might construe the questions as an attempt to summon truth from the listener! A similar pattern arises in her diary entries when she is plumbing her own motives, so this practice of raising a battery of contemplative questions reflects Murray's personal prayer practices as well.

One potential inspiration for Murray's method here was Howard Thurman, who served as Dean of Howard University's Rankin Chapel while she was a law student. Murray considered him an invaluable mentor. Given Thurman's impact on Murray, it is likely that she experienced the brief, introspective meditations he incorporated in the worship services in Rankin Chapel. In these meditations, Thurman sought to cultivate a suitable disposition for the sermon—a posture of receptivity and self-awareness.⁴⁶ While later published in volumes like *Meditations of the Heart* and *The Inward Journey*, as distinct parts of the liturgy these meditations provided a helpful bridge between corporate worship and individual devotion time.⁴⁷ This contextual fluidity and deep regard for listeners' devotional lives flows through Murray's sermons, too.

Invoking saints and the Ancestors

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁶ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 172.

⁴⁷ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (1953; reis. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1976); Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (New York: Harper, 1961).

Pauli Murray was included in a recent update of the Episcopal Church's *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints*. Readings from this volume, like its predecessor, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, are sometimes read in small weekday Eucharists in lieu of having a homily. It seems fitting that one who fed on the witness of saints like the Apostle Paul, Julian of Norwich, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman would later be included in the church's book of exemplars.

In the pulpit, Murray had a practice of foregrounding holy lives. These individuals included luminaries like Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as lesser-known figures whose spirituality was recognized by people in their communities. The charisms emphasized included some of the usual ones specified in 1 Cor 12:7-10, 29 along with Murray's take on virtues. In a sermon entitled "Gifts of the Holy Spirit in Women I Have Known," Murray describes her Aunt Sally's laughter as a charism, framing it as the ability to see the absurdities in life situations.⁴⁸ In another sermon, Murray describes imagination as a charism, and this involves more than being clever; it has a mystical quality. The person with imagination is a seer of sorts, able to discern unseen spiritual realities in the temporal sphere. Murray explains:

I identify imagination with *imago dei*, the image of God, and with the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Imagination in the human sense permits us to have a vision: of the life to come after death, of life in our human existence for decades to come, of the possibility of transforming ambiguities, contradictions, anger, hostility, human limitations, into positive and creative acts touched by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹

Murray sometimes uses individual stories of saints as exempla to illumine Scripture or themes from the liturgical season. Often it seems that saints' lives function as the central "texts" the community is charged with interpreting. The saints demonstrate how to en flesh Christian principles in varying social contexts and with different gifts and predispositions. Murray assumes hearing such stories will bolster faithful living.

Yet in the memory of her Aunt Sally in "Gifts of the Holy Spirit in Women I Have Known," I sense that Murray is also taking a further step and drawing on an African American preaching tradition of honoring the Ancestors. Rather than simply symbolizing reposed relatives and luminaries, the Ancestors are understood as having an active presence on their descendants. They encourage, illumine, and have an overall unitive impact. Murray's preaching catalyzes the bond between the living and the dead and demonstrates her reverence for ancestral wisdom.

Henry Mitchell observes how African American sermons regularly include references to what a deceased grandparent or elder might stress in a pericope and that such insights are not incidental; they tend to boost the sermon toward its celebration.⁵⁰ The commitment to foregrounding ancestral wisdom is pivotal. In truth, it is difficult to envision Black contemplative preaching that has no central role for ancestral wisdom.

And though I suspect Mitchell would agree, it is important to note that Murray would include among the Ancestors people of multiple racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds so long as they shared fundamental commitments to love and justice. Such a community would include Irene Barlow, Murray's beloved partner of sixteen years, a white woman to whom Murray dedicated her ministry as a living memorial and beside whom Murray was buried.

Conclusion

⁴⁸ Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 93.

⁴⁹ Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 190.

⁵⁰ Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 57–58.

Black contemplatives offer compelling perspectives that reveal the breadth of contexts, strategies, and priorities that enliven African American preaching. Pauli Murray provides a helpful case in this regard. Her contemplative homiletic recasts dominant frameworks, placing them in a larger landscape. In her hands, the sermon serves as a vehicle for exploring what it means to be a child of God, as a tool of intercession that prompts rigorous self-examination, and as an opportunity to remember the continuing witness of the saints and the Ancestors. These methods foster intimacy with God and continue to inspire contemplative agitators in successive generations. Contemporary preachers and homileticians have much to learn from Murray's example.