

Preaching on the Edge: Presence, Concealment, and the Tension of Truth

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Abstract: *Preaching is often imagined as fearless proclamation—unmasking truth in the full light of day. Yet for many preachers, especially those navigating identity-based vulnerability, full self-revelation is neither safe nor possible. This article challenges the familiar dichotomy between pastor and prophet, arguing instead for a homiletic that honors both presence and concealment as interwoven expressions of faithful proclamation. Drawing from incarnational theology, kenotic Christology, performance theory, and queer and coming-out discourse, this study reframes strategic withholding not as a failure of authenticity but as a theological practice of love and wisdom. Through close readings of Scripture and historical exemplars—including Oscar Romero, Pauli Murray, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—it explores how truth may be proclaimed through subtext, timing, gesture, and silence. In doing so, it proposes a model of preaching rooted in pastoral discernment and prophetic courage, where embodiment becomes proclamation, and discretion emerges as a Spirit-led mode of truth-telling.*

The Paradox of Presence in the Pulpit

Preaching is often imagined as holy exposure—a bold ascent into the pulpit with heart bared and voice steady, proclaiming the gospel in the full light of day. The preacher stands as a living witness, embodying the Word with breath and body and unflinching truth. But what if presence is not always safe? What if it is not only a virtue to be summoned but a risk to be weighed?

For many preachers, stepping into the pulpit is not an act of uncalculated courage but of careful negotiation. LGBTQ+ clergy, women in patriarchal spaces, racial minorities in predominantly white congregations, pastors in politically divided communities—each carries the weight of what can be spoken and what must be held in silence. For them, presence is not just proclamation; it is survival.

This is not a new dilemma. The gospel itself is steeped in paradox. Jesus revealed himself in moments and withheld himself in others, speaking in parables, retreating to quiet places, and telling his disciples, “My time has not yet come” (John 7:6).¹ Even in his final hours, he stood before Pilate in the tension between testimony and silence. If the Incarnate One navigated revelation with such care, then perhaps the call to preach is not merely to proclaim but to discern *when* and *how* truth is made known.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this tension well. He knew the delicate art of saying enough without saying too much, the power of timing, the necessity of subtext. In “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” delivered the night before his assassination, King did not explicitly name his impending death, yet every word trembles under the weight of it. “I may not get there with you,” he repeated; the absence in his sentence spoke as loudly as the words themselves.²

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1986), 279-86, at 285.

This is the kind of presence that does not simply declare truth but discerns how truth must be told.³

As a queer pastor who navigates this tension regularly, this author recognizes that he is not alone. Many preachers stand at this same threshold, carrying truths that must be stewarded with care—torn between the call to authenticity and the demand for pastoral discretion. While homiletical scholarship has long emphasized the preacher's voice—from Fred Craddock's inductive method to Luke Powery's work on embodiment—less attention has been given to the homiletics of restraint: from withholding, to waiting, to speaking *slant*.⁴

This article explores that tension—the space between revelation and reticence. It argues for a broader homiletic imagination that invites preachers—and homileticians—to reconsider what it means to tell the truth and when it is wisest not to tell it all at once.

Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary method to examine the tension between presence and concealment in preaching. Drawing on historical theology, performance theory, homiletics, and rhetorical studies, it explores how preachers—especially those in marginalized or high-risk contexts—navigate disclosure and discretion through embodied rhetoric.

This study engages scriptural texts in which Jesus practices subtextual or delayed revelation (e.g., the Messianic Secret, parables, silence before Pilate), theological models such as kenosis and incarnation, and case studies of preachers who have used gesture, timing, and coded speech to proclaim the gospel in contexts of constraint. These include figures like Oscar Romero, Pauli Murray, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and James Baldwin. By synthesizing theological reflection with rhetorical and performance theory, this article seeks to reframe *discretion* not as a failure of proclamation but as a faithful and theologically grounded homiletic practice.

Embodied Proclamation and the Limits of Visibility

Preaching has never been a disembodied act. The preacher does not merely speak the Word; they enfold it, standing as both messenger and message, vessel and voice. A sermon is not just received through the ear but through the presence of the one who proclaims it—through gesture and pause, silence and sigh. The body preaches as surely as the tongue.

This is no accident. The biblical tradition is rich with prophets whose very bodies bore the weight of revelation. Hosea's marriage, Jeremiah's yoke, Ezekiel's street theatre prophecies—each one a sermon without a pulpit, an embodiment of the Word spoken before a single syllable was uttered.⁵ Then, in the fullness of time, came the Incarnate One: the Word who did not *send* a message but *became* one. Jesus's ministry was, at its heart, a homiletic of presence. His body healed, His hands broke bread, and His voice called forth life from the tomb. His very being was a proclamation.

The Sacramental Nature of Presence

As Ruthanna Hooke articulates in *Sacramental Presence*, preaching is not merely a verbal event but a sacramental one—an encounter in which the preacher becomes a living

³ James Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 236–38. Cone reflects on King's final sermon and the prophetic discernment in his later witness.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 108; Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 87–91.

⁵ Timothy Beal and Tod Linafelt, *Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 189–92.

conduit for grace.⁶ She writes that “the body is not incidental to preaching; it is the vehicle through which the Word becomes present to the congregation.”⁷ Presence, then, is not a neutral fact but a theological reality: the preacher’s very being mediates divine encounter through voice, posture, breath, and even intentional silence. In light of Hooke’s theology of sacramental presence, concealment is not just personal discretion but has theological weight. When presence is modulated for survival, what is withheld is not mere absence but a sacrament carried with care.

Liturgical theologian Don E. Saliers echoes this understanding, emphasizing that liturgical action does not simply point toward the divine but becomes the very means through which God’s presence is enacted and received.⁸ Similarly, Thomas Long affirms that preaching is not the transmission of religious information but an act of embodied witness, in which the preacher stands not apart from the gospel but *within* it.⁹ For preachers in precarious spaces, this sacramental understanding deepens the stakes: what is offered is not just content but communion. Concealment in such contexts is not a diminishment of proclamation but the sacrament of truth carried reverently and carefully.

As Roberto Goizueta affirms, the incarnation is not simply an event to be proclaimed but an aesthetic reality to be *embodied*—a way of being that mediates grace through the ordinary and the fleshly.¹⁰ For Goizueta, presence is not abstraction but accompaniment: “God is not simply revealed through doctrinal statements or ecclesial structures but through our companionship with one another in history.”¹¹ In this light, the preacher’s body becomes a site of solidarity as well as proclamation—a companioning presence that mediates the divine in fragile human form.

Throughout Christian history, the preacher’s embodied presence has been celebrated as a source of power. Luke Powery notes that in the Black preaching tradition, the preacher’s body is not incidental but essential—an instrument of meaning-making, a site where theology is *enfleshed* in breath and rhythm.¹² Similarly, Kenyatta Gilbert’s tri-vocal preaching model underscores how voice, presence, and embodiment work in concert to create a holistic act of proclamation.¹³

But such discussions often assume that the preacher is free to be fully seen and to embody the Word without fear. In many situations, that freedom is not guaranteed. Contemporary preachers find themselves in an era that demands transparency yet offers no guarantee of safety. Preachers must therefore learn to inhabit their presence with wisdom: to know when to speak, withhold, proclaim outright, and trust the weight of their silence. Whether through stillness or movement, a carefully chosen phrase or an image that lingers, the preacher’s body remains a site of proclamation. Even when speech must be guarded, the presence of the preacher still speaks—and sometimes, that is enough.

⁶ Ruthanna B. Hooke, *Sacramental Presence: A Theology of the Body in Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 61.

⁷ Hooke, *Sacramental Presence*, 61.

⁸ Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 39-41.

⁹ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 33-35.

¹⁰ Roberto S. Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 11

¹¹ Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion*, 5.

¹² Powery, *Spirit Speech*, 87-91.

¹³ Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 58-63.

Concealment as Strategy: The Cost and Ethics of Withholding

A persistent myth haunts the pulpit. It whispers through homiletics classrooms and ordination councils, shaping the expectations of those who dare to stand before God's people. The myth says that to preach well is to be fully transparent: to declare everything without hesitation, to stand without shield, to offer one's whole self on the altar of proclamation. But for some, full self-disclosure is a cost too great to bear.

The assumption that good preaching demands full self-disclosure is neither biblical nor sustainable. For many preachers—especially those navigating the fragile space between personal identity and communal expectation—the pulpit is not only a place of proclamation but a place of negotiation. It is where truth must be weighed against consequence, where words must be measured against their cost, where presence itself carries risk. Here, concealment may not be cowardice but strategy.

These dynamics are illuminated by queer theory's interrogation of visibility and identity, particularly in the discourse around *coming out*. Far from a singular act, coming out is increasingly understood as a form of strategic disclosure—a calibrated, continual discernment of visibility, vulnerability, and safety. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in *Epistemology of the Closet*, the binary of “closeted or out” flattens the complex and lived realities of selfhood, obscuring the fluid and relational dimensions of identity.¹⁴ Such binary logic, she suggests, not only oversimplifies identity but reinforces coercive power structures by positioning public disclosure as the only legitimate form of authenticity.¹⁵

Annamarie Jagose furthers this critique by exposing the *normative* force often hidden within the so-called liberatory act of disclosure. The pressure to be “out” at all times, in all places, can itself become a form of regulation, rendering invisibility suspect and imposing a moral weight on visibility.¹⁶ In this light, contextual visibility becomes a more honest and pastorally sensitive framework—one that recognizes how identity, safety, and power intersect in ways that demand nuance.

Judith Butler contours the discussion with an ethically rich reframing of vulnerability and performativity. She reminds readers that the self is never fully transparent or wholly knowable and that any act of self-disclosure is inherently partial, filtered through relationship, language, and power.¹⁷ This offers a crucial insight for preaching: prudential concealment is not deception but an ethic of contextual discernment. The preacher who withholds is not necessarily evading truth but honoring its timing.

These theories remind us that disclosure is not an all-or-nothing act but a negotiated act of vulnerability and agency that mirrors the preacher's own precarious discernment within the community. To preach from a place of *discerned withholding* is not to dilute the gospel but to embody it more truthfully, with pastoral wisdom and ethical care. Like the wise steward in Luke 12, the preacher must give “food at the proper time,” attending not only to what is true but to when and how truth can be spoken (Luke 12:42). In such moments, discretion is not faithlessness; it is a form of love.

¹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 67-73.

¹⁵ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 71.

¹⁶ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 76-79.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Giving and Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 22-26.

Some preachers hide not because they wish to deceive but because they have no other choice. An LGBTQ+ pastor in a theologically conservative church, whose survival in ministry depends on a careful silence about certain convictions; a woman minister serving under patriarchal scrutiny, who must temper how and when she asserts authority; a clergy person with private doubts or evolving theology in a community not ready to receive them—full disclosure is not a luxury they can safely afford.

To hide is not always to deceive. Sometimes, it is to protect. The biblical narrative is full of those who withheld themselves until the time was right, who carried truth with careful hands, waiting for the moment when revelation would serve life rather than destroy it. Esther did not deny her Jewish identity in the Persian court but she did not declare it either. She watched. She waited. She discerned the moment when unveiling the truth would matter most (Esth 2:10).¹⁸ Joseph, too, concealed himself when his brothers stood before him in Egypt, letting the weight of his hidden identity press into the moment before revealing himself (Gen 42:7-8). Faithfulness in specific contexts requires delicate discernment: how to speak truth in ways that do not invite immediate destruction yet do not abandon the truth altogether.

Paul understood this. “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). His words have often been read as adaptability, but they were something deeper: a theology of strategic presence.¹⁹ He was not inauthentic—he was aware. Aware of how truth must be shepherded carefully into the light, how revelation must be timed with precision. There is a difference between a seed that is buried and a seed that is planted. One is hidden for the sake of disappearance. The other is hidden for the sake of growth. The preacher must discern the difference. This is not imagined in theory alone. Its weight and witnessed power have been demonstrated in the lives of those who bore such truth ahead of its time.

Historical Models of Strategic Presence

Pauli Murray—priest, poet, legal scholar, and civil rights activist—carried truths few were ready to receive. Black, queer, and female, Murray lived at the margins of the very institutions she sought to transform, tasked with speaking boldly while remaining heard. She understood that prophetic witness does not always arrive through open declaration. Sometimes, it must come cloaked in metaphor, exile, and homecoming. She preached through scriptural narratives of wilderness and redemption, crafting sermons that rang clear to the marginalized yet passed safely through gatekeepers of power. To some, her words seemed like harmless theology. To others, they were a lifeline. This was not deception; it was strategic presence—truth encoded for survival and hope.²⁰

For preachers today who cannot afford full disclosure, Murray’s model is instructive. When direct speech is dangerous, parable, allusion, and indirection offer ways to proclaim. Her witness reminds us that holy discretion can be life-giving: the sermon that hints at truth may plant seeds more deeply than one who declares it outright.

Archbishop Óscar Romero, preaching under the Salvadoran dictatorship, also learned to speak in layered tones. To name injustice too directly was to risk assassination, yet silence was

¹⁸ Adele Berlin, *Esther: The Jewish Publication Society Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 22–24.

¹⁹ David Schnasa Jacobsen, *Preaching in the New Creation*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 78–81.

²⁰ Donyelle C. McCray, “Pauli Murray: In & Out of the Pulpit,” *International Journal of Homiletics*, Supplementum (2019): 19–37.

another form of betrayal. So, Romero crafted sermons that operated in two registers. He frequently referenced Pharaoh and the suffering Israelites—a veiled critique of his nation’s violent regime. Those with ears to hear recognized his warning; others dismissed it as Scripture-as-usual. His homiletic was not avoidance but wisdom—a double-voiced discourse that shielded the preacher while exposing the powers.²¹ Romero trusted that Scripture itself could carry confrontation, freeing him to speak subversively under the guise of orthodoxy. His method offers a path for preachers navigating similarly precarious terrain: to preach prophetically while preserving one’s capacity to preach another day.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer confronted similar constraints under Nazi rule. Direct opposition to fascism could cost one’s life—but silence was complicity. Bonhoeffer opted for subtext. His underground sermons and theological writings, including *The Cost of Discipleship*, concealed resistance within orthodox reflection. On the surface, his work expounded grace and obedience; read closely, it dismantled the idolatry of state-aligned religion. Bonhoeffer’s homiletic strategy trusted that those formed in faith would discern his meaning—that layered speech could resist evil without triggering censorship or execution.²² His example endures as a roadmap for preaching truth with nuance when blunt force would be fatal.

Howard Thurman, too, practiced a strategic presence that defied convention. As biographer Paul Harvey recounts, Thurman’s approach was one of spiritual subversion—embodying a preaching ministry that offered no easy answers but carried a depth of moral resonance through silence, stillness, and contemplative clarity.²³

To withhold is not always to retreat. Sometimes, it is to wait, discern, and endure long enough to bear witness when the moment is right. Murray, Romero, Bonhoeffer, and Thurman remind us that concealment, wielded with wisdom, can be an act of pastoral care. The question is not whether to speak or stay silent—but how and when the truth may serve life rather than hasten its end.

Christological Grounding: Discernment and Delay

Jesus’s ministry models a homiletic of discernment. Repeatedly, He instructs silence—whether with healed individuals (Mark 1:44), demons who name Him prematurely (Mark 1:34), or disciples who glimpse too much too soon (Mark 8:30). Jesus repeatedly enjoins those He heals to “say nothing to anyone” (Mark 1:44), a pattern so striking that German scholar William Wrede famously labeled it the “Messianic Secret,” theorizing that Mark portrayed Jesus deliberately concealing his messianic identity until the culmination of his mission.²⁴ Even modern historians of Jesus, like N. T. Wright, note Jesus’s keen sense of timing in self-

²¹ James R. Brockman, *Oscar Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 117-139.

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1959), esp. chs. 1-4; See also Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Vintage, 2015), 301-325.

²³ Paul Harvey, *Howard Thurman and the Disinherited: A Religious Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

²⁴ William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Greig (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1971). Wrede famously argued that Mark’s Gospel portrays Jesus concealing His identity as Messiah, commanding demons and disciples alike to silence, as a theological motif to explain why Jesus was not widely recognized as Messiah during his ministry.

revelation, refusing to satisfy premature demands for clarity.²⁵ As Jesus told his disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12).

This “Messianic Secret” does not represent avoidance but is a matter of timing. “I still have many things to say to you,” He tells them, “but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). Truth withheld is not abandoned—it is loved into readiness. Philippians 2:6–7 deepens this: Christ, “though in the form of God... emptied himself.” Kenosis is not denial but divine hospitality—presence made receivable. Sarah Coakley names it an “opening”: a humility that makes space for relationship. In this light, restraint is not absence but reverence.²⁶ Jesus knew the power of a well-timed silence. When interrogated by Pilate, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus did not launch into a defense or declaration; “he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge” (Matt. 27:11, 14).²⁷ And when a furious crowd dragged a woman caught in adultery before him, clamoring for a verdict, Jesus did not respond with words—instead, he “bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground” (John 8:6).²⁸

The Incarnate One shows that divine truth often comes to hearers on a *schedule not their own*, sometimes swathed in mystery. If He chose subtext and silence at times, these surely provide holy precedents for the preacher’s own discretion.

Subtext in Preaching: Silence as Presence, Not Absence

This theological claim on behalf of silence runs deep in Scripture. Elijah encountered God not in wind, earthquake, or fire but in “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kgs 19:11-13). The psalmist counsels the faithful, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). Jesus himself often withdrew into silence, choosing the hush of prayer over public speech (Luke 5:16). God, it appears, often speaks without words. Yet, in the modern pulpit, ministers sometimes speak as if every holy thing must immediately be put into words, as if faithful preaching demands exhaustive explanation and full disclosure. But some truths must ripen in silence before they can be received.

Tradition echoes this wisdom. Augustine of Hippo speaks of silence as the soul’s preparation for the Word.²⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar identifies Christ’s descent into Holy Saturday the ultimate kenosis—a silence even God entered.³⁰ Preaching, then, becomes a participation in this mystery: a space where absence becomes presence and delay becomes an invitation. Homiletician Thomas Long notes the charged hush before a sermon as an “electric silence” that itself proclaims the Word.³¹ Tiffany Dahlman and Lucy Rose identify preaching as a wager of meaning, where truth unfolds through shared discovery.³² Trauma theologians such as

²⁵ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress), 491-495. Wright discusses how Jesus calibrated the revelation of his messianic vocation, often redefining popular expectations by veiling his identity until the climax of his ministry.

²⁶ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3-7.

²⁷ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 518.

²⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 333–34.

²⁹ Augustine, *Sermon 117.5*, quoted in John E. Rotelle, ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine: Sermons III/4* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 176.

³⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986), 215-218.

³¹ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 33-35.

³² Tiffany M. Dahlman, “Kenotic Homiletics and Narrative Preaching,” in *Journal for Preachers* 46, no. 2 (2023): 27-34; Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 22-25.

Shelly Rambo and Peter Capretto urge preachers to honor silence not as a void but as a presence charged with reverence, trust, and care.³³

For many who preach, this insight is not abstract but painfully practical. In every generation, there are preachers who cannot afford full transparency, whose survival in ministry depends on a careful negotiation of what can be said openly. LGBTQ+ clergy, women in patriarchal churches, racial minorities in predominantly white congregations, pastors prophetically challenging their flocks' political idols—these must discern what to reveal and what to withhold. Their call to preach is not less authentic, but it is necessarily strategic. As Sally Ann McKinsey observes, these marginalized preachers often grapple with “the complexities of voice and visibility” in the pulpit, balancing genuine witness with personal risk.³⁴

For such preachers, silence is not a cowardly evasion of truth but a different kind of truth-telling. It is the silence of wisdom and presence. It is a homiletical strategy of *kenosis* or self-emptying that refuses to force revelation on unreceptive ears. Instead of full disclosure, they practice a patient trust that what remains unspoken might, in time, be discerned by those with ears to hear. In these cases, the very restraint becomes a theological act. Discretion keeps the door open for ministry tomorrow while still honoring the truth today in a subtler form.

Crucially, silence in preaching is never mere emptiness. It carries substance and makes space for the hearers to engage. Homileticians like Luke A Powery and Lisa L. Thompson remind us that preaching is not merely about words but about bodies, breath, movement, and space.³⁵ The preacher does not simply *speak* the Word; they *inhabit* it. A well-placed pause, a moment of intentional stillness, can stir the congregation as profoundly as any sentence. In the Black church tradition, such silence is often an invitation: a rhythmic break that draws the listeners in, prompting call-and-response or giving time for the communal “Amen” to rise.³⁶ In contemplative liturgical traditions, silence is woven into the fabric of worship—moments of stillness where the congregation is invited to sit in the presence of mystery rather than grasp at facile answers. In each case, what might seem like an absence of speech is, in fact, a *fullness* of presence. As one classic text on inductive preaching notes, a preacher can lead listeners to discover the message by guiding them through hints and pauses rather than spelling it out—an approach that trusts the active work of the Holy Spirit in the silence between words.³⁷

One need not look far to find historical echoes of strategic silence. As noted earlier, Bonhoeffer chose a subtextual mode of proclamation—embedding anti-Nazi critique in the coded language of theology and discipleship that his congregation could understand, even if the Gestapo could not. His sermons in the clandestine seminary at Finkenwalde and his theological writings (such as *The Cost of Discipleship*) carried a bold message of costly grace and resistance

³³ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 77-104; Peter Capretto, “Empathy and Silence in Pastoral Care,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 54, no. 4 (2015): 1400-1412.

³⁴ Sally Ann McKinsey, “Queering the Pulpit: The Complexities of Voice and Visibility in Homiletics,” *Homiletic* 46, no. 1 (2021): 15-28. McKinsey explores how queer preachers negotiate the pulpit, often modulating what they reveal in order to survive and minister effectively.

³⁵ Lisa L. Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as the Outsider* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 27-28, 32-35.

³⁶ Powery, *Spirit Speech*, 78-80.

³⁷ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 45-53. Craddock advocates an inductive homiletic method wherein the sermon's message emerges through story, hint, and listener insight rather than through an upfront thesis—demonstrating the power of implication and listener participation in preaching.

but under the veil of orthodox Christian teaching.³⁸ Those “with ears to hear” heard it. Here was silence as *shrewdness*: truth smuggled in by implication.

Beyond the pulpit, the writer James Baldwin—though not an ordained minister—embodied a prophetic voice shaped by cadences of the Black church tradition. He could indict the soul of America without naming it outright; through searing storytelling and nuance, he forced attentive listeners to confront truths that were never explicitly articulated but always unmistakably present.³⁹ As Eddie Glaude, Jr. observes, Baldwin’s witness remains urgent for our time: a careful dance of love and critique, truth-telling entwined with restraint.⁴⁰ In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin layers biblical imagery with subversive prophecy, warning, “No more water, the fire next time,” he warns, invoking divine judgment and national reckoning.⁴¹

Baldwin’s genius lay not in volume but *precision*—knowing when silence or metaphor could speak louder than direct confrontation. Homiletician Lisa L. Thompson terms this strategy “homiletical ingenuity”—the art of subversive subtext honed by those at the margins.⁴² Baldwin’s approach echoes Jesus’s counsel to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16), balancing courage with shrewdness. He reminds preachers that truth need not be shouted to be heard—it must be shaped to be received.

Contemporary homiletical thinkers have begun to affirm this same paradoxical power of unspoken truth. Fleming Rutledge, an Episcopal priest and theologian known for preaching the uncompromised gospel, insists that sermons must resist the lure of neat resolution. She urges preachers to linger in the discomfort of paradox, suffering, and unanswered questions. In *The Crucifixion*, Rutledge argues that true gospel proclamation does not sanitize the horror of the cross or rush prematurely to Easter morning; the preacher must be willing to dwell in the long, aching silence of Holy Saturday—when God lay silent in the tomb—as an integral part of the story of salvation.⁴³ She warns that our modern appetite for quick, tidy answers can domesticate the gospel and rob it of its power to disrupt. For those preaching from a place of personal risk or marginality, her insight is vital: when full disclosure is not possible, silence itself can become proclamation. A preacher constrained by circumstance can still invite the congregation into deep theological waters, not by shouting every secret from the rooftops but by *refusing to offer easy answers*. Indeed, Rutledge contends that ambiguity in the pulpit is not failure, but often fidelity, for God is frequently encountered in the very absence of clarity.⁴⁴

³⁸ Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2015), 234-36. Marsh details how Bonhoeffer, in the mid-1930s Confessing Church seminaries, adopted a nuanced preaching and teaching style that embedded anti-Nazi critique in biblical and theological exposition to avoid detection while still conveying his message.

³⁹ Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York, NY: Crown, 2020), 107-113. Glaude analyzes Baldwin’s oratory, noting how Baldwin employed a prophetic tone and often lets the implications of his words indict his audience more forcefully than a direct accusation could.

⁴⁰ Glaude Jr., *Begin Again*, 15-18.

⁴¹ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, NY: Dial Press, 1963), 105.

⁴² Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 18-19, 91-96.

⁴³ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 295-302. Rutledge underscores the importance of Holy Saturday—the silence of God between the crucifixion and the resurrection—and warns that bypassing this silence in our preaching domesticates the radical nature of the gospel.

⁴⁴ Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 73-80. Here, Rutledge observes that much of Scripture embraces unanswered longing. For example, many Psalms end without resolution (e.g., Psalm 13), and the original ending of Mark’s Gospel (Mark 16:8) leaves the resurrection account in stunned silence and fear. She argues that this scriptural witness legitimizes ambiguity and silence in preaching.

Even apart from crises, wise preachers have long understood that some truths sink deeper when the listeners arrive at them on their own. Pioneering homiletician Fred B. Craddock built his inductive preaching model on this premise. Rather than directly stating the “big idea” at the outset, Craddock would unfold a narrative or sequence of images, allowing important insights to be inferred by the congregation before being named. In his classic *As One Without Authority*, he demonstrates how holding back immediate conclusions can spur hearers to participate in meaning-making so that when the truth is finally articulated, it has already taken root in their experience.⁴⁵ In other words, a sermon’s power can lie as much in what it invites the listener to ponder as in what it explicitly declares. This homiletical strategy dovetails with what this article has argued: silence and subtext are not antithetical to proclamation but can be instruments of it. They beckon the listener to lean in, discern, and actively engage with the gospel rather than passively receive prepackaged answers.

This homiletical artistry is embodied in the work of the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a contemporary Lutheran pastor known for her radical candor and narrative skills. Bolz-Weber’s sermons are frank and unflinching about sin and grace, yet she, too, employs the discipline of withholding to great effect. In an Easter sermon recounting Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Christ (John 20:11-18), Bolz-Weber doesn’t rush to the triumphant declaration. Instead, she lets the congregation sit with Mary in the predawn garden, weeping at the tomb. She describes Mary’s confusion and grief in vivid detail and then pauses, allowing a tense hush to linger just as Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener—that moment *before* recognition. Only after this prolonged suspense does Jesus speak Mary’s name and the resurrection dawn is unveiled. Bolz-Weber’s deliberate pacing gives space for the weight of absence—the silence of Holy Saturday carried into Easter morning—to be viscerally felt by her listeners.⁴⁶ It is a homiletical move that mirrors Jesus’s own pedagogy of patience and subtext. Rather than immediately explaining the miracle, she invites the congregation to *experience* the emptiness and longing that precede it. In doing so, she reinforces a profound truth: the gospel’s power often lies in the waiting, at the moment when nothing seems to be happening, but everything is about to change.

Her approach illustrates that radical honesty in preaching does not mean saying everything all at once; it means telling the truth the way *the moment requires*. One can be fully truthful without divulging the whole truth prematurely. As Bolz-Weber exemplifies, narrative can act as a kind of shield for the preacher—a way of revealing divine truth indirectly, “allowing the congregation to discover meaning rather than having it handed to them.”⁴⁷ In her sermons, what is unsaid is as crucial as what is said, protecting the sacred story from an impulse to control it and allowing God’s grace to sneak up on listeners in its own timing.

In all of this, the wisdom of silence in preaching is not avoidance; it provides opportunities for discernment. It recognizes that preaching is an incarnational act carried out by fallible, situated preachers among fallible, situated people. Holy wisdom, therefore, sometimes counsels restraint. Faithful proclamation does not always answer every question or expose every

⁴⁵ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 1-8. Craddock’s foundational thesis is that preaching “without authority” (i.e., without assuming a domineering, omniscient stance) engages listeners through narrative and inductive development, which inherently involves strategic silence and delay in stating conclusions.

⁴⁶ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* (New York, NY: Jericho Books, 2013). While *Pastrix* is a memoir rather than a sermon collection, Bolz-Weber describes her approach to preaching and narrates how she often lets biblical stories speak for themselves. In the episode of Mary Magdalene, she emphasizes creating space for the hearers to inhabit the story’s tension before revealing the resolution, illustrating her commitment to pacing and restraint in proclamation.

⁴⁷ Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix*, 139-144.

personal truth of the preacher, nor does it give everything away at once. Sometimes, the most powerful witness a preacher can offer is a willingness to stand with the congregation in the unanswered moment, bearing testament by presence rather than explanation. The eloquence of a pause, the gentle implication of a phrase, the truth conveyed through a tear or a steadfast silence—these, too, are channels of the living Word.

In the end, there is profound power in what is left unsaid. The silence of the preacher who could say more but chooses not to can itself become a testimony to the gospel, trusting that God's Spirit will fill the quiet space with meaning. Such silence is not a denial of the truth but a delay for the sake of love. It is the silence of Jesus before his accusers, the silence of Holy Saturday before the dawn. It is silence as presence, not absence—and in that silence, the Word still speaks.

Strategies for Sustaining Authenticity in Difficult Contexts

For preachers in vulnerable positions—queer pastors in hostile congregations, women under patriarchal scrutiny, ministers with evolving theologies—authenticity requires more than courage; it requires strategy. In such settings, bold proclamation must often be tempered by careful discernment: not whether to speak truth, but how and when.⁴⁸ This section explores the theological grounding and practical necessity of strategic concealment not as a failure of integrity but as a faithful posture rooted in scriptural precedent and pastoral wisdom. As Walter Brueggemann reminds us, prophetic speech often relies on "imaginative, indirect speech" to sustain witness in hostile terrain.⁴⁹ Augustine, too, saw in Christ's withholding (John 16:12) not avoidance but care, recognizing that timing and capacity matter in the unfolding of truth.⁵⁰ In Augustine's view, truth-telling must consider the listener's readiness; timing is part of truth's economy. Premature clarity can overwhelm rather than transform. Barbara Brown Taylor echoes this pastoral instinct, observing that "restraint in preaching" is not about hiding the Word but honoring its gravity—revering both the message and the hearer.⁵¹ This is not an invitation to avoid a difficult word but to steward it. As Bonhoeffer reminds us, "truth is always relationship"—an utterance must fit the speaker, the hearer, and the time.⁵² Truth is not diluted by discretion—it is shaped by love.

In what follows, this author considers several strategies by which preachers in hostile or high-risk settings might sustain authenticity: by preaching with dual layers of meaning, by cultivating safe spaces for full disclosure, and by building trust through patient, layered proclamation over time.

Preaching With Dual Meanings

One strategy evident in Jesus's own ministry is the use of double-voiced discourse, speaking in multiple layers of meaning at once. The Gospels portray Jesus not only as a bold truth-teller but also as a master of veiled speech. Time and again, his words carried a surface message accessible to anyone "with ears to hear" and a deeper subtext grasped only by those

⁴⁸ McKinsey, "Queering the Pulpit: The Complexities of Voice and Visibility in Homiletics," 15-28.

⁴⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 34-36.

⁵⁰ Augustine of Hippo. "Tractate 97 (John 16:12-13)," in *St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John; Homilies on the First Epistle of John; Soliloquies*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, 374-76, (First Series. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1888).

⁵¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1998), 3-4.

⁵² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "What Is Meant by 'Telling the Truth'?" in *Ethics*, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 365-366.

willing to wrestle with mystery (Mark 4:9-12). He spoke of seeds and harvests, banquets and vineyards, lost coins and hidden treasure. These were more than agrarian anecdotes; they were doorways into deeper realities—truths too weighty to be spoken plainly or too dangerous to declare outright.

As discussed earlier, Jesus's use of parables and his intentional withholding of messianic identity reflect a layered communicative strategy. More recently, N. T. Wright has argued that Jesus's parables and symbolic actions were a conscious prophetic strategy: they revealed the kingdom of God to those with open hearts while concealing his messianic claim from opponents until the appointed time.⁵³

This layered approach can be a lifeline for contemporary preachers in precarious spaces. Not every sermon must say everything all at once; indeed, attempting to do so may backfire if hearers are not ready. Instead, a sermon can be crafted with multiple levels of meaning, allowing the truth to speak to different listeners in different registers. This is not deception but pastoral wisdom. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale insists that prophetic preaching must always be intimately attuned to context and congregation, carried out with pastoral concern even as it challenges listeners.⁵⁴ The preacher who employs nuance and metaphor recognizes, as Jesus did, that some truths are best inferred and internalized rather than loudly proclaimed and summarily dismissed. In homiletical terms, this approach trusts the work of the Holy Spirit in the listener's heart to decode and appropriate the message in time.

The goal is to speak truth in parable, offering just enough to unsettle and inspire while withholding enough to keep dialogue and reflection alive. In the biblical tradition, prophets sometimes performed symbolic actions or told stories to prompt an acknowledgment of truth that a direct accusation might never elicit (such as Nathan's parable when confronting David in 2 Sam 12:1-6). Likewise, today's preachers may, at times, best serve the truth by strategic understatement—speaking in a minor key so that the community can hear the major chords of the gospel for themselves.

Cultivating Safe Spaces

A second strategy for sustaining authenticity under constraint is to recognize that not all truth must be spoken in the pulpit. Some truths require the intimacy of trusted relationships and smaller circles before they can be broadcast more widely. Jesus himself modeled this wisdom. To the crowds, he spoke in parables, but in private, he explained the deeper meaning to his close disciples (Mark 4:33-34). There were insights about his identity and mission that He only revealed to the Twelve behind closed doors (Mark 8:27-30). Similarly, the Gospel of John portrays Jesus confiding in the beloved community of his disciples during the Last Supper, sharing truths that he could not declare to the hostile world at large ("I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you," John 15:15). In short, even the Incarnate Word needed safe space for full disclosure. This pattern legitimates the preacher's need for off-pulpit arenas of honesty.

⁵³ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 91-95. Wright interprets Jesus's parables as veiled announcements of God's kingdom, revealing truth to those "inside" while frustrating those hardened "outside," in line with Isaiah 6:9-10. See also pp. 180-185 for Jesus's strategic use of symbolic actions.

⁵⁴ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010). Tisdale argues that effective prophetic preaching grows out of genuine love for one's people and careful listening to their hopes and fears; only with relational credibility can hard truths be fruitfully spoken.

Many ministers serving in difficult contexts find sanctuary in a private conversation: a late-night discussion with a trusted colleague, a candid confession over coffee with a mentor, or the loving challenge of a spiritual director or therapist. Such spaces are not just emotional refuges; they are theological lifelines. In them, a preacher can voice unfiltered convictions, doubts, or pain without fear of career-ending backlash. The importance of these safety valves is hard to overstate. Homiletician Luke Powery, reflecting on the African American preaching tradition, notes that the Spirit's speech often emerges in the tension between lament and hope—sometimes through sighs and silence as much as through words.⁵⁵ Womanist theologians have especially emphasized the need for community support in the vocation of truth-telling. Emilie Townes reminds us that justice itself “involves the radical act of truth-telling—of reality testing and reality challenging” and this must be rooted in the lived experiences and traditions of one's community.⁵⁶ In other words, courageous speech is seldom a solo endeavor; it draws strength from the networks of solidarity and love surrounding the speaker.

For those who cannot fully reveal themselves in their congregations due to hostile environments, finding or cultivating alternative spaces for truth-telling is not optional. It is essential for survival. This might mean forming a small clergy support group, seeking out a counselor who understands one's context, or nurturing friendships in which one's whole self (including one's questions and convictions) is welcome. These private sanctuaries do more than preserve the preacher's mental health; they inform and enrich preaching itself. Insights tested in late-night conversations with trusted friends may shape a sermon's subtext later. Anger or grief first vented in a personal journal or support group can then be sublimated into pastoral passion in the pulpit without overwhelming the sermon. In this way, strategic concealment in public is paired with full disclosure in private. The two modes sustain each other: prudent silence in one arena is balanced by candid speech in another. Such balance is, ultimately, an act of wisdom. As Leonora Tubbs Tisdale argues, the most effective prophetic preachers are “pastorally grounded;” they speak from within webs of relationship and accountability, not from isolated ivory towers.⁵⁷ Cultivating such spaces honors the incarnational reality that the Word dwells among people: messengers need each other to hear and bear the Word in its fullness.

Building Congregational Trust Over Time

A third crucial practice is patience, building congregational trust over time and allowing truth to unfold gradually rather than all at once. Lasting theological or social transformation in a community is rarely the result of a single incendiary sermon; more often, it emerges from the cumulative effect of consistent, faithful preaching over months and years. The most effective prophetic preachers are those who play the “long game,” leading their people step by step. Here again, one finds a Christological pattern: Jesus did not announce his Messianic identity; rather, His self-revelation was incremental. Through healing encounters, ambiguous titles (Son of Man), probing questions, and the slow tutelage of the disciples, He led His followers into a deeper awareness of His identity. Even among the Twelve, understanding came gradually, not in a single epiphany. “Who do you say I am?” Jesus asks, inviting them to articulate insight in their own time and in their own words (Mark 8:29). Only after a relationship of trust had been

⁵⁵ Powery, *Spirit Speech*, 125–27.

⁵⁶ Emilie M. Townes, “Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie G. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 42–44.

⁵⁷ Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 27–30.

established did Jesus speak plainly about the suffering Messiah (Mark 8:31-32) and even then, full comprehension of this awaited the resurrection. As the Gospel of Mark dramatizes, Jesus's own followers grasped his identity only gradually. The whole truth of the gospel is sometimes best communicated in stages. It was only at the cross that the centurion finally cried, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39). The truth was there all along, but only in retrospect did it become clear.

Translating this insight to pastoral leadership, a congregation will not shift its deeply held beliefs or ingrained attitudes overnight. A single sermon is rarely enough to break through entrenched ways of thinking. But patient, iterative preaching can prepare the ground of the community's heart. Over time, as trust grows, the preacher can lead the flock into challenging territory that would have earlier caused panic. This is slow work, akin to tilling soil and sowing seeds season after season. The Apostle Paul hints at this in his agricultural metaphors: one plants, another waters, and God gives the growth in due time (1 Cor 3:6). The wise preacher chooses when to push and when to wait, discerning the congregation's readiness. In homiletical praxis, this might mean introducing a difficult theological idea in a gentle, exploratory way months ahead of addressing it head-on, or it might mean using a narrative approach one year and only later connecting the dots in a more doctrinal sermon. By spacing out revelations, the preacher is not withholding truth out of fear but stewarding truth in the hope that it will take deep root.

Building trust requires consistency between the preacher's words and life as well. Over time, a congregation comes to know the preacher's heart, whether she or he genuinely loves them, respects the Scripture, and seeks the common good. If that trust capital is stored up, when the day comes that the pastor *must* say a hard word, the people are more likely to receive it, knowing it comes from a place of love. In practical terms, this might involve the preacher sharing their own spiritual journey and struggles in appropriate moments so the congregation senses transparency and vulnerability. It might involve hospital visits, potluck conversations, and funerals tended—ordinary bonds that, slowly but surely, knit pastor and people together. Then, when a crisis of truth arises (say, addressing racism or a theological controversy), the congregation has a reservoir of trust to draw on: *we know our pastor, and we know she cares for us*. This doesn't guarantee agreement, of course, but it can temper the backlash. In any case, the ethics of timing in truth-telling demand that the preacher consider not only *what* to say but *when* and *in what order* to say it. It is a profoundly pastoral discernment. As theologian Eddie Glaude, Jr. notes, revelation does not happen all at once—even God's self-disclosure in history is progressive, at many times and in various ways (Heb 1:1). The preacher, then, might humbly participate in that divine pedagogy, trusting that God's timeline is wiser than our own sense of urgency.⁵⁸

None of this patience should be mistaken for passivity. Choosing one's battles and pacing one's words are very different from abdicating one's prophetic duty. In fact, it is often a sign of greater commitment to change in refusing to settle for the fleeting catharsis of one fiery sermon in favor of the painstaking conversion of minds and hearts. An alternative world cannot be imposed by force; it must be evoked and invited. Thus, the patient, imaginative preacher is doing the slow work of culture-making, one sermon at a time. Over months and years, the accumulated effect can be powerful: the congregation finds that its vocabulary, its questions, and even its sympathies have shifted toward the gospel's vision of justice and mercy. In retrospect, it may

⁵⁸ Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York, NY: Crown, 2020), 68–69.

seem a dramatic transformation, but it was accomplished through countless small moves and measured words.

Clarifying Strategic Concealment and Silence

Strategic concealment, rightly understood, is not evasion—it is discernment in service of love. When truth-telling risks immediate rejection or harm, temporary restraint may create space for eventual revelation. As Emilie Townes and other womanist ethicists remind us, truth-telling is always relational and contextual, tethered to justice and survival.⁵⁹ Concealment, in this view, becomes a pastoral strategy: not to silence the truth, but to protect it—and those who bear it—until it can be heard. The preacher, then, does not forfeit integrity by exercising restraint. Rather, they join a long tradition of faithful witnesses who spoke with urgency and timing like the prophets and Christ himself. The ethical measure is not volume but love: love for God’s Word and love for God’s people. In some contexts, that love will call for bold disclosure; in others, for tender withholding. But in every case, the preacher’s task is to discern again and again what faithfulness looks like here and now.

In other words, strategic concealment is a tactic, not the endgame. It’s the seed-planting phase of prophecy, not the harvest. If a preacher uses restraint perpetually and never returns to the hard truth, it ceases to be strategic and simply becomes silence. The homiletical task is to discern what can be spoken now and what must wait and to revisit that discernment continually in light of the Spirit’s prompting.

To clarify, strategic concealment does not mean the preacher becomes a cipher or resorts to bland generalities. It is possible to preach with passionate authenticity while exercising restraint on certain details. The key is integrity: saying fully what can be said given the constraints and not saying what cannot or should not be said yet.

The preacher who stands before the congregation with wisdom and restraint is no less faithful than the one who proclaims with prophetic urgency. Both are necessary. Both bear witness. In withholding, a preacher may very well align with a God who is not desperate to prove Godself in human terms.

In homiletical practice, then, restraint and revelation are dance partners. The preacher’s art is to enter into faithful timing. Preachers in high-risk situations may lean more on restraint, while those in more open settings may press harder at times. Yet even the boldest prophet must discern moments to hold back (lest the pearls be trampled, Matt 7:6), and even the most cautious pastor must eventually speak up (lest the rocks cry out, Luke 19:40). The ethical touchstone is love: love for God’s truth and love for God’s people. If love serves as the guide, one’s speaking or silence will serve redemptive ends. As Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and other womanist thinkers point out, marginalized voices especially have had to negotiate when to speak and when to be quiet for the sake of survival—but that survival was often precisely so that the *community’s* truth could live on and find another day to speak.⁶⁰ The end goal was never to remain silent but to stay alive *to tell the story*. In times of rising polarization and even violence against truth-tellers, that calculus is notably relevant across contexts (from pastors addressing racism to scientists speaking on climate change). Strategic concealment, rightly understood, is part of the biblical

⁵⁹ Townes, “Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have,” 42-44.

⁶⁰ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Wake Up!: Black Women and Respectability* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 85-88. Floyd-Thomas and Kirk-Duggan discuss how Black women’s speech has been policed and silenced and how womanist “crooked room” strategies (navigating distorted expectations) enable speaking truth powerfully in contexts of intersectional oppression.

witness and the communion of saints' practice. It is not antithetical to truth but a testimony to a deep and communal commitment to the *telos* of truth.

Homiletical Implications: Balancing Prophetic Boldness and Pastoral Wisdom

Preaching is often framed as fearless proclamation, but faithfulness in the pulpit is not always loud or immediately impactful. Scripture points to a different kind of courage—one shaped by timing, discernment, and the slow unfolding of truth. As explored earlier in this article, Jesus Himself did not reveal everything at once. His ministry was marked by silence, subtext, and story. These were not evasions but acts of *phronesis*—practical theological wisdom rooted in trust: trust in the Spirit's timing, in the hearer's readiness, and in the power of truth well spoken.

This reframes the homiletical task. Faithful preaching does not require full self-disclosure or constant boldness. It requires attentiveness—to the text, the context, the moment, and the body that speaks. Not every truth must be told at once. Some truths need time. Some need quiet. This is not avoidance but stewardship. Strategic restraint allows truth to be layered over time, like Jesus's own parables. Subtext, silence, and metaphor are not rhetorical flourishes—they are modes of revelation. They create space for discovery rather than demanding agreement.

For educators and preachers alike, this calls for a broader imagination. The binary between prophetic urgency and pastoral care collapses. Integrity and empathy must travel together. The preacher who withholds for love's sake is no less faithful than the one who speaks with fire. Restraint, of course, carries risk. It can become avoidance if untethered from truth. But rightly practiced, it is a form of anticipation—a trust that the Word will take root when the soil is ready and that even what is held back now may yet be revealed in time.

To preach this way is to follow Christ's path of self-emptying (Phil 2:7)—not grasping for control but making room for grace. Where authenticity is dangerous and vulnerability exacts a cost, holy concealment becomes an act of pastoral courage. The key is integrity: saying fully what can be said given the constraints and not saying what cannot or should not be said yet.

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