

Jennifer L. Ackerman. *Preaching the Gospel of Justice: Good News in Community*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024. 160 pages. \$19.99.

Definitions of justice vary. Jennifer L. Ackerman approaches justice not through legislation and policy but through Scripture, grace, and practice. She asserts, “The task of every preacher and of every sermon is to preach the gospel of justice” (2). Ackerman’s dynamic background as a professor, pastor, and director of a preaching institute equips her to offer practical wisdom for leaders concerned with justice. She peppers her work with personal stories, non-judgmental musings, and significant questions which invite the reader to consider her ideas while reflecting on their own. She divides her work into three chapters, each ending with a sermon illustrative of the key themes within the chapter.

In chapter one, “A Call to Community,” Ackerman provides a compelling examination into the preaching life. She views preaching as personal and communal, while acknowledging the “precarious,” politically divisive, and polarizing nature of preaching. She empathizes with preachers: “Outside of a seminary classroom, preachers often find themselves feeling isolated, harried by the relentless pace of Sunday coming every week, and struggling to meet all the demands on their time...” (20). Time for sermon feedback is limited, though it is critical. As such, preachers need a prophetic community (such as peer-to-peer Micah Groups, with which Ackerman has extensive experience through her leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary) to hold them accountable, provide solidarity, and assist with discernment. Preachers also need a learning community to mentor them and assist with the feedback process.

In chapter two, “A Covenant of Justice,” Ackerman delves deeper into definitions and her theological position. For Ackerman, justice preaching is Good News, it is scriptural, and it is necessary for preachers themselves to experience. However, she acknowledges a potential conflict for readers: “Many preachers will surely disagree with this compulsory link between gospel and justice.” (39). Ackerman’s acknowledgement proves effective due to her inviting tone. She prepares readers for her lengthier and more pressing point:

All too often, though, I found myself listening to so-called ‘justice sermons’ that seem to leave out the Good News altogether. I’ve heard stirring calls to action around racial reconciliation, creation care, immigration advocacy, LGBTQ+ rights, and so much more. Often, I am in complete agreement with the message, and perhaps I can readily imagine a biblical theology to support it, but the preacher has not actually proclaimed one (41).

Ever careful and clear, she offers a more palatable but equally effective explanation. Rather than being therapeutic talks or political speeches, “sermons must point first to what God is already doing in the world, and second to how we are able to join that work” (41). She encourages preachers to use an exegetical journal to study scripture and reflect on their preaching.

Ackerman opens the third chapter, “A Prophetic Witness,” by reflecting on her journey as a singer and musician turned preacher and explores the burden and privilege of preaching. Then she examines the preacher as a prophet (one speaking truth among other messages) who uniquely embodies prophetic witness (community-specific preaching) and uses prophetic imagination through the 3Cs (curious, creative, and courageous engagement). “The call to preach bears the responsibility of being a faithful witness, seeking the truth that may disrupt what we thought we knew” (75). Ackerman’s artistic background and invitation to creative preaching shine in this chapter.

Ackerman concludes her work with a focus on worship, thus coming full circle to emphasize community. The manuscripts of four sermons by preachers from diverse cultures and perspectives are gems within the book. Additionally, each sermon (one in Spanish and translated into English) can be accessed through podcast or YouTube, so that readers can experience the sermon beyond the written text. Ackerman cements her message by providing an exegetical journal template to provide a space for capturing reflections from engaging with and meditating on the biblical text.

Professors, preachers, lay leaders, students, and justice-seekers will benefit from Ackerman's work. Her appeal for community and self-reflection will be especially beneficial for preachers who want feedback but feel apprehensive in seeking it, as well as those who feel removed from the weekly preaching experience or sense that their sermons are missing something. Those following the *Working Preacher* book series will be pleased with Ackerman's contribution which challenges preachers to be creative while strengthening their spiritual life. It will also stretch readers to consider theological, cultural, and social perspectives different from their own.

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