



Teresa L. Fry Brown is an Associate Professor of Homiletics, Director of the Black Church Studies Program at Candler School of Theology at Emory University and a member of the Persons, Community and Religious Life course of Study in the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory University in Atlanta, GA.

In this material she presents a Womanist model for preaching.

A Womanist Model for Proclamation of the Good News

The central focus of preaching is seeking to mine the mysteries of God--the who, what, when, where, how and why of God-in relationship to God's creation. It is an oral-aural-psychological-spiritual-theological-social-physical-emotional-ethical endeavor that seeks to engage both the preacher and the listener. This sacred rhetoric connects the community in a divine/human encounter that celebrates God's presence, power, promise and plan for humanity. The marriage of God's word and human creative language can be a symphony of hope and healing or a dirge of defeat and depression depending on the skill and intent of the orator. The duty of the preacher is to address the relevant needs of the listeners, grounded in the biblical text and transforming message of Jesus while affirming the humanity of all persons.

The origins of Black preaching stem from the charismatic custodians of ancient Africans who facilitated worship thorough dynamics, direction and development. Enslaved and free men and women were the vessels of the word of God. In "The Politics of Silence" Womanist scholar preacher, Dr. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, stated:

Although the black male preacher was the leader recognized by whites and their religious institutions, black women emerged as worship leaders, preachers, catechizers, exhorters, prayer warriors, singers, teachers and storytellers—all authoritative agents of the black religious tradition¹

The role of the Black preacher is to assist the listeners in the identification spiritual, social, cultural, psychological, and economical issues that impact daily life. The preacher presents the realities of Black life through a hermeneutics of suspicion, examination of the status quo. Preaching is the acknowledgment of our need to change. It is consciousness raising. It is a process of seeking justice, reconciliation then transformation.

I did not speak much till I had reached my forty-second year, when it was revealed to me that the message that has been given to me I had not yet delivered and the time had come. As I can read but little, I question within myself how it would be possible for me to deliver the message, why I did not understand the Scriptures... Whilst I thus struggled, there seemed a light from heaven to fall upon

me which banished all my desponding fears, and I was enabled to form a new resolution....

Elizabeth, first recorded African American Preacher²

Over the past two centuries thousands of Black women like Elizabeth, named and unnamed, Zanami, Aunt Janes, priestesses, church mothers, missionaries, spiritual centers, prayer warriors, evangelists and preachers have struggled with internal and external questions on answering the call to proclaim God's word. Teetering between life affirming oration and death dealing silence Black women have faced the charges, challenges, critiques, chastisement and confirmation of carrying the word of life to those who have ears with selective hearing.

In traditional Black denominations the first to affirm women's call were National Baptist Convention in 1895 and Pentecostal Holiness in 1895. They were followed by the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) in 1898, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) with deacons in 1948 and elders in 1960, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME) in 1966.³

The Church of God in Christ (COGIC) did not ordain women as elders, pastors, or bishops. Men were to preach and women were to teach, although public speaking of prominent women in the denomination is indistinguishable from exemplary preaching. The most powerful 19th century women's department was located in the Church of God in Christ. When denied pastoral positions the women became evangelists. They led churches in the absence or death of the pastor and developed individual congregations. COGIC women who began churches were included in the church history. The assumed leadership in education, prayer, Bible study and sustained the churches economically.⁴

As Black women began to add their voice to a preaching ministry the church officials began to close ranks and just say no! The cognitive dissonance of hearing some preachers call for freedom for all while continuing to enslave others is a curious event. How does one dissect the reality of listening to the promise of freedom in Christ from the continued argument that this does not apply to anyone who is different from the person preaching? The answers are not easy or even available in some cases. There are of course those who affirm women preaching because of their belief that God is the one who chooses and calls persons to preach. Still others have swept out pulpits, refused admission to women, banned women preachers from churches, and charged them with being rebellious un-Christian, trying to be men, home wreckers, subversive speakers. And those are the nice terms! Called unnatural women because they did not conform to true womanhood, these daring, blues "bad" black women preachers challenged the hegemonic systems of race and gender of their day. They were under the threat of death and physical punishment from black and white society for "stepping out of their place." The major features of their collective rhetorical experience were:

- a. collective experience
- b. recounting communal tribal ritual
- c. collective story telling
- d. remembering

- e. communality of spirit
- f. black solidarity
- g. sexism, though not explicitly stated
- h. racism⁵

In the Black church one hears that a preacher is “under the anointing.” This further substantiates the priestly and prophetic abilities of the preacher. The anointing is a credential that is not given in seminary or by church officials. It is a gift from God and one’s ministry is blessed and will prosper if and when the anointing is present. The Holy Spirit is nondiscriminatory so men and women may be “under the anointing.” Homiletics Professor James Earl Massey depicts the relation between call and anointing. He designates call as a conviction that God has a claim on one's life. This leads to a focused identity, a sense of purpose, action, energy and creativity. Anointing, on the other hand, is a sense of being identified with God's will in relation to some need. There is assertiveness to action. A basic instinct about what needs to be done. Massey gives three types of authority: authority derived from God, authority shared with the community, and experiential authority from the Holy Spirit.⁶ Those called to preach function under God’s authority. One does nothing by himself or herself. All empowerment, all words, all actions, and all spiritual manifestations come from God. The preacher, the proclaimer is merely an instrument, a vessel that God chooses to share information with the community of faith.

While there are certainly women who encountered resistance to preaching or proclaiming thousands have affirmed the presence of God’s Spirit in their lives and enunciated the Word of God even with their last breath. Many have fallen by the wayside, left ordained and non-ordained ministry, became disaffected with the faith and left the church, or decided that the detractors were right all along and women have no business in ministry. Many, however, like the foremothers affirm the “anyhowness” of God. It is the power of God to make space for life when all around us seems dead. It is the purpose of God to take the most unlikely person and help her sing praises in the middle of a prison. It is the presence of God to protect vessels of praise even when family and friends desert them. It is this “anyhowness” of God that enables Black women to utter a word, annunciate who God is, declare saving works, and evidence that they are called by God and God alone.

The spiritual autobiographies of nineteenth century women repeatedly used Joel 2:28-29 and I Corinthians 14:34-35 as supports for their calls, to combat opposition and seek spiritual egalitarianism. There was a strong relationship with biblical texts despite the Bible’s oppressive use by many.⁷ These texts about God’s Spirit being poured on all humanity were perceived as a mandate from God to articulate and spread God’s Word. Some left societal spaces-homes, families, children, and husbands-to preach. Black women’s spiritual autobiographies and rhetoric show:

- a. Preoccupation with themes of socioeconomic resentment
- b. Use of socially leveling lists of hierarchies and catalogues
- c. Justification of symbolic transgression, especially in the context of lay preaching, as prophetic behavior

- d. Imagery of self-fortification against persecution and martyrdom
- e. Preoccupation with themes of praise and gratitude, often based in the Psalmist tradition⁸

Then as now, women who responded to their calls to leadership, ministry, teaching were charged with being part of the “feminization of the church,” in which the lack of male participation in churches or religious communities was attributed to—and often blamed upon—women’s presence and personalities. In the twenty-first century these very same beliefs and charges are typical. There are special conferences, programs, and ministries to “attract” men to the church—women purportedly having driven them away. Women are being denied ordination or their ministerial orders are being rescinded. In some denominations women are removed from lay leadership positions to make room for more men—a phenomenon I talk about as senior pastors “birthing baby boys and killing all the baby girls.”

The late pastor, preacher, professor, and civil rights leader Rev. Dr. Prathia Hall preached “*Faith is not faith until it is tested in the crucible of struggle and the fiery trials of life*”.⁹ She often said that to refuse to preach (do ministry) or be refused the right to preach (do ministry) is like being “*perpetually pregnant*.” Asked about her call Hall said “*I stood in the total authenticity of my being--Black, preacher, Baptist, woman. For the same God who made me a preacher, made me a woman. And, I am convinced that God was not confused on either count.*”¹⁰

When faced with seemingly insurmountable barriers that deflect their call to do God’s ministry Black women have devised ways to give birth to leadership no matter what. However, the reality is that while there have certainly been some gains in the past thirty five years with election of female bishops or a handful of millionaire women preachers, there are still denominations (especially Black denominations) that deny, rescind, or ghettoize women’s ordination!

I am amazed constantly that in 2009 almost 2010 there are still so many women in labor, perpetually pregnant. The birthing room is filled with women waiting to deliver the proclamation to which they are called. The pains of postponed birth lead to toxic lives at times filled with self loathing, mistrust of others, alienation from family, disdain for the institutional church and a sense that they are the butt of some cruel cosmic joke. They seek to birth their ministry before the Word is aborted.

Another group chooses to align themselves with the hegemonic forces that admit only a select few women as long as they act and dress the part of a head nodding—dressed to the nines—head covered, lap clothed, appendage to a man’s ministry. They refuse to work to admit other women because being the “first and only” is a privilege and they need no competition. Some pick up the habits of their handlers refusing to acknowledge that it is God not humans who call preachers. They proclaim the word of God according to the latest messiah’s gospel as they cautiously walk the party line.

Some women leave one denomination that refuses ordination and affiliates with one that does. At times political pressure within denominations that historically ordain women lead to denial of ordination. Some women are ordained for a particular purpose other than pastoring. Many women operate without institutional ordination yet lead congregations. Some see no reason for ordination because of the restrictions that may overshadow their purpose, what God called them to do.

There is another group that preaches “by any means necessary.” These women creatively find ways to live out their ministries with or without anyone’s spoken or written approval. They negotiate the pain of giving birth at times without prenatal care or midwives. They affirm that all ground is holy. They are not limited to proclaiming God’s word in traditional settings or traditional ways. They dare to deliver the word regardless of the size of the congregation, number of engagements, place of ministry, approval rating, human imposed barriers, ostracism by their sisters or brothers, or a financial report.

A Womanist Homiletic

Womanist: (1985, Black women scholars of religion in America adopted Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose definition of the cultural realities of Black women’s lives, which include the intersectionality of racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism) Portions of the definition:

1. Referring to outrageous audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one.
2. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. traditionally Universalist
3. Womanist is to feminist as Purple is to Lavender.

In *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society (2007)*, Womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas writes “Womanists are concerned with the mental, physical, and social dimension of Black women’s real-lived epistemology because knowledge construction that seeks to inform Black women’s culture, survival and liberation must be embodied and multi-sensory and are foundational to construction of a Womanist proclamation model.”¹¹

The basic principles of Womanism or Womanist discourse are outlined in the seminal work of Katie Geneva Cannon and expanded by Stacey Floyd-Thomas.

Four major tenets of Womanism:

- a. **radical subjectivity**—even in the face of great odds, ability to speak the truth in love, raise consciousness in the face of resistance
- b. **traditional communalism**—individual and collective quest for liberation—sources of support and nurture
- c. **redemptive self love**—**course of knowledge, self-love, self affirmation,** love of God, others and self, determination of one’s own course of life, and self discipline, and

- d. **critical engagement**—development of “cutting edge” resources of addressing cross disciplinary, varied social contexts, affiliate engagement i.e., feminist, liberationist, locally and globally marginalized groups.

We have a choice of the content of sermonic material. The task of the preacher is to unearth what is being said about Black women and Black men particularly in relation to the sexist–racist contradictions of the text. Preachers have an obligation to instruct the listeners in defining, interpreting, and solving contemporary issues of life that overwhelm the people. And, *whenever possible our homiletical language should be nonviolent.*

Ask, Who is linguistically living in the homiletical “othering” room?

Othering--is a way of defining and securing one’s own positive identity through the stigmatization of an "other." In life and in the preaching moment there are times when we intentionally or unintentionally erect partitions, walls, separate spaces for the listening congregation. Who is marginalized, insulted, demeaned by the sermon content?

Do all persons have sacred worth in our preaching? Does the work consider the context [age, culture, gender, denomination, geography, economics, faith development, etc.] of the entire congregation by its choice of language?

Katie Cannon, "Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church", (*Katie's Canon*, 326-337) reminds us that in African American preaching the Word of God focuses on the Word made flesh that dwells with us as the living God rather than the words of canonized Scripture. Black preaching is to "make it plain" that the stories of the faith are passed on through generations by oral tradition. Clergy women are to seek a balance of the spoken word and political aims of the sermon content.

- Womanists refute gender stereotypes which are dehumanizing, debilitating or prejudicial to Black women.
- Womanist hermeneutics seek to contemporize Scripture in an emancipatory process that speaks to the entire faith community.
- The womanist preacher must "slough off" subversive memories while proclaiming the religious inheritance of "ancestral mothers and fathers that enhance narrative variation for audiences responses in similar but new situations."

Cannon also says --Womanism identifies the racist-sexist interpretation of biblical texts.

- Conventional stereotypes of women—sin-bringing Eve, henpecking Jezebel, prostituting Mary Magdalene, conspiring Sapphira
- Androcentric language
- Unearths what Black preachers are saying about women and what they are saying about men
- Names the historical contributions of African American women to development of Black church tradition
- The Black preacher is an arbiter of intellectual/moral life of the community
- Black preaching has a continual self-inventiveness—stories, accounts of deeds, sayings, and language accessibility

- Oral proclivities of culture are vital¹²

At times sermonic material purposely attacks, demeans, ridicules or negatively critiques an entire group of people. Within black congregations, bad preaching is the unforgivable sin.¹³ Preaching abounding with negativity is bad preaching and must be replaced with life affirming content. Black feminist, bell hooks [sic], wrote

Through the cultivation of awareness, through the decolonization of our minds, we have the tools to break with the dominator model of human social engagement and the will to imagine new and different ways that people might come together.

In order to continue the legacy of leadership in spite of, Black women and men must actively attend to partnering to remove all voices and barriers that resist equality of all persons, identify their own complicity in construction of denominational boundaries and dig deeper in the biblical text to gain knowledge of the equality of God for all persons.¹⁴ The preacher is to prepare the world for the world that is to come, the already in the not yet, using sermonic language that critiques even our own complicity in exclusivity.

TRADITIONAL COMMUNALISM-Heal inside then out

We have the ability to consciously resist oppression. The preacher must proactively address the particularities of “webs of oppressions”, systemic oppression¹⁵

1. **exploitation**-systemic transfer of benefits from one person to the advantage of another
2. **marginalization**-unwillingness or inability of economic systems to use capabilities of a person or group of persons
3. **powerlessness**-recipient of directions of others but unable to give orders or exercise control over one’s situation
4. **imperialism**-universalization of one culture to the exclusion of others
5. **violence**-dimension of institutionalization or social permissible violence against persons or groups.¹⁶

Using the gift of love framed by a persistence to heal an entire community, give loving connections, relational bonds,

ability to create,
nurture,
liberate by acts of inclusivity,
mutuality,
reciprocity, and
self care.

1. The Black preacher is to deconstruct life as it exists, undergird the sermon with how God wants life to be and reconstruct community so that it is able to move to where God wants it to be.
2. Regardless of the texts selected the focus of the sermon is to be on personal and communal obedience to God. One does not demand perfection nor preach easy or cheap grace.
3. Since “naming” is a depiction of one’s essence or being, preachers should be and

develop a “**justice thesaurus**” that includes alternative words that are less offensive and more comprehensive of the fullness of God’s creation.

3. The preacher through the sermon seeks to preserve the oral tradition, reminds the people of cultural values, instills compassion for all persons and keeps hope for change burning in the hearts and minds of the community.

4. Lead the community in celebration of what God has done, is doing and will do in their lives.

REDEMPTIVE SELF LOVE-celebration and affirmation of self care, love of humanity. Anna Julia Cooper said in 1892:

*Nay, 'tis woman's strongest vindicate for speaking that the world needs to hear her voice. It would be subversive of every human interest that the cry of one half the human family be stifled.*¹⁷

Though not self defined as a Womanist, Cooper encouraged Black women to speak up for themselves and to encourage others to move past traditional views of women in church and society. Womanist preachers can benefit from the substance of Cooper’s writings and develop sermonic material that attends to:

1. Self love, self discipline, self determination
2. Avoids form and formulaic depictions of women in sermons, (i.e., great women or exceptional women)—look for God’s extraordinary acts among ordinary women. Don’t be caught in the extraordinary woman syndrome similar to the that good Negro of the 1950s and 1960s in the White male Protestant sermons.
3. Avoids women being classed only as virtuous (Proverb 31) mothers and wives
4. Number so named individuals in Hebrew Bible and New Testament 2900 men and 170 women—70 % of those are in the Hebrew Bible--use stories or examples of biblical or contemporary women who were leaders, prophets, or disciples. What about the unnamed, background women in the texts?
5. Understand that the Womanist preacher must slough off subversive memories while proclaiming the religious inheritance of ancestral mothers and fathers that enhances narrative variation for audience responses in similar but new situations
6. Use the cultural classic texts to seek to demonstrate God’s just nature for all persons, not just Black women; and
7. Have Black women engage through Bible studies, sermons, songs, liturgies, prayers and daily experience the biblical texts and determine for themselves the interpretation that affirms their humanity.

CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT—witnessing and testifying

Although the Bible often has been used to marginalize Black women they continue to use it by "widening the margins" of the text. Dr. Katie Cannon says that African American women must open the Bible wide enough to see themselves within the text. Then seek egalitarian, inclusive readings of the texts watching for what is submerged inside and outside the traditional expression of White male hegemony.

In the Black community biblical literalism has been used to deny women rights within the church such as ordination. The Womanist hermeneutic is that any denial of dignity or

equality particularly based on biblical usage is a sin against creation. Immature spirituality controls humans while mature spirituality is Holy Spirit controlled.

African American women use *emancipatory knowledge* through their re-reading of the biblical texts to obtain personal empowerment through the justice imperatives located in Scripture.

Old Testament Professor Renita Weems states that African American women continue to regard the Bible as meaningful in spite of its oppressive use. Interpretation depends on the interpretive community of the reader. For Black women this means American/Western, African American, female, and Christian. Each possesses its own hermeneutic. There is a creative tension and the imagination is engaged. Depending on her community at the time of reading, Black women see a world where Weems says “*the oppressed are liberated, the last became first, the humbled are exalted, the despised are preferred, those rejected are welcomed, the long-suffering are rewarded, the dispossessed are repossessed, and the arrogant are prostrated.*”¹⁸

Weems further states that it is the task and responsibility of marginalized readers to restore oppressed voices in the kingdom of God. In order to do so the reader must be able to read and hear texts for themselves, with their own eyes and ears in spite of the voices surrounding them that try to dissuade them.

Spreading the good news - **extending knowledge, skill, faith as standards for true liberation. Locate and standardize true liberation as normative.**

Traditionally preachers have used biblical imperatives, blistering comments about the woman's sexuality, family pressures, dispatching the women to outposts of mission, or just plain ignoring the woman's calls as a way of keeping themselves in the male power laden pulpit. A Womanist homiletic for 21st century proclaimers, means utilization of a liberative discourse with God's people with *metamorphic boldness*, stepping out of the status quo and seeking language and content that shakes dungeons and makes chains fall off:

1. Well researched, statistically correct, exegetically sound factual/fictional topical sermons on justice, love, community, liberation and responsibility, racism, sexism, classism, ageism, homophobia, heterosexism, disease and health, sexuality, prison industrial systems, domestic violence, militarism, materialism, and any power dynamic that affronts biblical justice imperatives.
2. Shape voices of resistance and hope-ethical indignation.
3. Confession-truth telling, honest analysis, cultivate life in the midst of death
4. Resistance-commitment to pursue justice, discern language of survival, struggle, indictment, and hope.

Summary

I have been in sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on

the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows with a harp and a sword in my hands.
--Zora Neale Hurston¹⁹

Houston states that bitterness is a form of weakness. Gloominess is useless. Justice is in the eye of the beholder. African American women have been preaching justice for centuries. They have preached on street corners, in prisons, by sick beds, in schools, in small groups, in Bible studies, in choirs, in prayer meetings, in churches, in homes, and any place they could say a word for the Lord. **The ideology and praxis of freedom and liberation of the Black Church must be reestablished through a Womanist homiletic** that seeks to open up means for all of God's children to stand on equal footing that critiques the inequities in interpersonal relationships, families, communities, churches and in the world and proclaims to all the love of God, others and self.

Notes

¹ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The Politics of Silence", *If It Wasn't for the Women*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 102.

² Bettye Collier –Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1998), 12-43, 226-227.

³ Mark Chavis, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)16-17.

⁴ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. "Together in the Harness: Women's Tradition in the Sanctified Church", in *If It Wasn't For The Women*. 48-54.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ James Earl Massey, *The Burdensome Joy of Preaching*, (Abingdon: Nashville, 1999), 44-45.

⁷ Chanta M. Haywood, "Prophesying Daughters: Nineteenth Century Black Religious Women, the Bible, and Black Literary History" in Vincent Winbush, ed. *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, (New York: Continuum, 2000) 355-361.

⁸ Douglas-Chinn, Richard J. *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues: The Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Evangelists*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001) 11, 164-166, 206.

⁹ Prathia Hall, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 30 Good Minutes, "When Faith Trembles" Program #4318, February 6, 2000

¹⁰ Joy Bennett Kinnon, *Ebony*, November 2002

¹¹ Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), Stacey Floyd Thomas, *Mining the Motherload: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006) chapter 1 and in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, (New York: NYU Press: 2006) 8.

¹² Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, "Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church," (New York: Continuum, 1995) 109-121.

¹³ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "Some Mother's Son and Some Father's Daughter" in *If It Wasn't for the Women*, 129-130.

¹⁴ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, "Talking Race and Racism", (New York: Routledge, 2003) 25-40.

¹⁵ Christine Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil*, (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 13.

¹⁶ Christine Smith, *Risking the Terror-Resurrection in this Life*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001) 20-21.

¹⁷ Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, (Xenia, Ohio: The Aldine Printing House, 1892) 31,48-79, 121.

¹⁸ Renita Weems, “Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible”, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, Cain Hope Felder, ed (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1991) 57-77.

¹⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991) 205-207.