

Article

Proclamation and Power: Toward a Phenomenology of Preaching and Its Affects

Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby

Department of Bible, Missions, and Ministry, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, TX 79601, USA;
acm12a@acu.edu

Abstract: Preachers have long perceived that the power of proclamation can only partially be traced to sermonic language. Something is always stirring beneath the surface of our words—a sublinguistic property of preaching tugs at the attention and responses of our hearers. Many homiletics affirm that preaching is empowered by the Spirit. God gives preaching its efficacy, sometimes despite our language. We frequently describe effective preaching as anointed, evoking the distinctly divine quality of preaching. But preaching—like scripture, the sacraments, and the incarnation—is a mysterious union of the divine and the human, the Creator and the created. This essay focuses on a creaturely aspect of preaching, namely, the way it awakens, conjures, transmits, and configures emotion. The divine cannot be parsed from the experiencing body; however, affect theory offers insight into creaturely emotional interplay that elucidates what happens in preaching and how. This essay follows the lead of affect theorists who contend that activities such as preaching are always inherently affective, and that affects contribute to the structuring of social power. Attention to the emotional experiences of bodies in preaching offers a mode by which a phenomenology of social power in preaching may emerge.

Keywords: homiletics; affect theory; embodiment; emotions; phenomenology



Citation: McLaughlin-Sheasby, Amy. 2024. Proclamation and Power: Toward a Phenomenology of Preaching and Its Affects. *Religions* 15: 392. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040392>

Academic Editor: Carolyn J. Sharp

Received: 24 February 2024

Revised: 18 March 2024

Accepted: 19 March 2024

Published: 24 March 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

What does preaching do? Where does its power reside? What effect does it have on hearers? As a homiletics professor, I have come to recognize that not every sermon will stir or induce noticeable or intense affective responses (though affects are always present and operative).¹ Not every sermon will leave hearers with a sense of purpose or conviction to act. And yet, I have also come to anticipate the ever-present possibility for something powerful to unexpectedly manifest in proclamation. This essay explores the richly textured affective experiences of preaching: the extralinguistic, corporeal aspects of preaching that deal in experiential sensations that are enacted within landscapes of social power. Through the lens of affect theory, I will contend that the power of preaching is best understood through close readings of affects, or the way preaching *feels*. Consider the following case, a sermonic event with its accompanying affects.

The preacher—a young woman, short in stature and dressed in simple attire—gathered her notes and approached the podium. Her hearers congregated in a huddled cluster in the first several pews of the university chapel to hear her preach from John 8:1–11, the story of the woman accused of adultery.² As she ascended the steps of the platform, a winter afternoon’s lowering sun emitted rays through the soaring, west-facing stained glass, saturating the chapel with a warm kaleidoscope of color. As soon as the preacher laid her notes upon the podium, she took a deep breath, planted her feet, and looked up to meet the eyes of her hearers. In this moment, her hearers would later recount, she seemed to transform. Her body appeared to be lit up from within by some ineffable force. Confidence and authority radiated from the pulpit, and her voice cut through the room, swift and deliberate like a surgeon’s scalpel, as she began to proclaim: “Hear the word of the Lord.”

My eyes widened with surprise and goosebumps prickled across my skin as she delivered a dynamic reading of her selected text, bringing her hearers to attentive postures. The preacher paused at the conclusion of the biblical text to mark the initiation of her own creative account. One hearer quickly shuffled around for paper and a pen, only to remain too transfixed to take notes.

She began with an admonition against the scribes and the Pharisees. “Their power is loud!” she boomed. “Their voices project the authority they feel. They are in the Temple, the place where holy people, like themselves, belong.” This was said with a mocking tone—a subversive judgment against the accusers of the woman. My brow furrowed as the preacher rallied my agreement. Indignation began to creep up from my chest, suspending my breath. “No questioning whether they can interrupt the teacher and his morning Torah study; no pondering whether they should. *They* are the teachers, and they have a lesson of their own that will be heard and felt.” She punctuated the final “t” of the last syllable before a moment of silence densely filled the room. One hearer’s cheeks flushed with frustration; another hearer leaned forward, resting elbows on his knees. The preacher continued, “In her vulnerability, she is silent. They drag her before a crowd that will witness her shame. Underdressed, disheveled, sticky with sweat, the scent of the act still follows her.” A listener lowered his gaze with an expression of embarrassment, shaking his head with a deep sigh. She continued to describe the scene, filling in the gaps of the text with creative liberty, choreographing narrative bodies into a portrait of political and religious power disparity. The tension in the chapel grew, becoming palpable until suddenly, the preacher drew us toward relief: “But Jesus is quiet in his power. He does not have to match their noise and aggression. He will not be pushed into urgency or panic.” Her hearers released a shared exhale and began to nod in agreement. The sermon continued to cycle through emotional highs and lows, piercing hearers with sadness, rousing anger, soothing distress, inspiring hope. The message culminated in a mighty charge to honor the agency and dignity of the vulnerable, the accused, and the exploited. Hearers nodded with resolve, intent to renew their commitment to justice. The sermon closed with the dialogue from the story, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir.” A hearer’s tear-filled eyes gently closed, and her lips parted slightly as she whispered the final words in chorus with the preacher: “Neither do I condemn you.”³

A homiletical turn to the affects opens the possibility of seeing the efficacy of this sermon not only in the preacher’s intelligibility and eloquence, but also in the array of affectual interplay between the preacher and her hearers. Affects, broadly defined in the literature of affect theory, include sensations and emotions that inhabit and compel bodies moment by moment. They “can be understood as the propulsive elements of experience, thought, sensation, feeling, and action that are not necessarily captured or capturable by language or self-sovereign ‘consciousness’” (Schaefer 2015, p. 23). However affect does not refer exclusively to some hidden hand of unconscious compulsion. “Affect is not the place where something immediate and automatic and resistant takes place outside of language. The turning to affect in the humanities does not obliterate the problem of form and representation. Affect is not where reading is no longer needed” (Brinkema 2014, p. xiv). Rather, affect theory helps us to probe beneath, behind, around, and beyond language to assess how bodies feel, and thus perceive and experience various situations. Affects move upon the formation of identity and relations, and are thus necessarily bound to the production and movement of power. To ask what preaching *does* is to ponder its power and efficacy. It is to ask how a sermon can stir a heart toward justice, or bring a person to tears. It is to wonder how, when the sermon is finished and weeks or months have passed, the words might have faded from memory but the feelings often remain. Exploring the potent affects of preaching helps homileticians discern the nature of Christian formation. Preaching is not merely a linguistic deposit received and integrated into the lives of hearers; rather, it is an invitation to rehearse the ways of Christ, to be affectually aligned to the character of God. Preaching, in this way, participates in the construction of Christian identity and behavior.

Seasoned preachers and homileticians know all too well that the power of preaching cannot be fully accounted for in the symbolic grid of language. Something else happens in proclamation. That *something else* may be described as numinosity, anointing, or charisma—a spiritual force at work in the substance of human bodies and linguistic symbols. A sacramental theology of preaching, for example, affirms that preaching is a mysterious meeting of the divine and human; through the mundane elements of preacher and language, God’s presence and grace materialize in the midst of a gathered community. In *Sacramental Presence: An Embodied Theology of Preaching*, Ruthanna Hooke writes,

Grounding the speaking voice in the speaker’s bodily presence is linked to doctrines of the incarnation, in which the second person of the Trinity becomes flesh in taking on human being and flesh. The becoming-flesh of the Word takes place through the action of the Holy Spirit, and, analogously, human speaking takes place as the breath enters and leaves the body. In the meeting of the Spirit and the human body and self, the Word once again becomes flesh in preaching. (Hooke 2023, p. 7)

It seems that something of this incarnational presence registers in the affects. Our experience of it, negotiated in a sea of innumerable other stimuli, associations, memories, and dispositions, generates power and action. Fundamentally, this article will claim that the power of preaching can largely be traced in the way preaching feels—the way we experience it in our sensing bodies. Without denying the certain power of language to shape perception, this essay aligns with the work of affect theorists who argue that too much power has been attributed to language. A proper assessment of social power—the way it emerges, flows, bends, configures, and is ultimately harnessed—must consider the non-linguistic properties of social relations. To follow the inquiry of one scholar, “How can a face, a body, an image, a place, or an object conduct power?” (Schaefer 2019, p. 1). For homiletical theory, one might ask how the materiality of preaching factors into its reception and efficacy.

2. Affect Theory for Homiletics

In the introduction to his seminal work, *Religious Affects*, Donovan O. Schaefer recounts a time when, in 1864, British member of Parliament Benjamin Disraeli delivered a speech at Oxford in “the early aftermath of the shock of the Darwinian revolution” (Schaefer 2015, p. 2). He includes the following excerpt from this speech, tracking in parentheses overt affective expressions from the audience:

What is the highest nature? Man is the highest nature. But I must say that when I compare the interpretation of the highest nature by the most advanced, the most fashionable and modish [?] school of modern science, with some other teachings with which we are familiar, I am not prepared to say that the lecture-room is more scientific than the Church (cheers). What is the question now placed before society with a glib assurance the most astounding? The question is this—Is man an ape or an angel? (loud laughter.) My lord, I am on the side of the angels (laughter and cheering). (Schaefer 2015, p. 1)

Disraeli garnered the approval and applause of a crowd, not by providing a logical counterargument to Darwinian science, but rather by some other means. Schaefer’s project is concerned with developing a theory of religion that locates the power of religion in corporeal experience, a deviation from theories of religion that emerged in the linguistic turn of the twentieth century, which theorized religion largely by its language and symbols (Schaefer 2015, pp. 4–10). He writes,

What if religion is not only about language, books, or belief? In what ways is religion—for humans and other animals—about the way things feel, the things we want, the way our bodies are guided through thickly textured, magnetized worlds? Or the way our bodies flow into relationships—loving or hostile—with other bodies? How is religion made up of clustered material forms, aspects of our

embodied life, such as other bodies, food, community, labor, movement, music, sex, natural landscapes, architecture, and objects? How is religion defined by the depths of our bodies—our individual and species histories that we know only by their long shadows but that shape the contours of our everyday experience? (Schaefer 2015, p. 3)

In the example of Disraeli's speech, Schaefer observes that language alone cannot account for the expressions of collective fervor that are harnessed for political mobility. Though a linguistic-symbolic theory of religion may elucidate the manner in which Disraeli's speech participates in a religious-linguistic framework, it fails to explain the parenthetical affective expressions. It cannot address "why those men laughed and cheered when Disraeli spoke their beliefs back to them or how those affective reactions activated a configuration of power that consolidated and transformed the landscape out of which it emerged" (Schaefer 2015, p. 10).

The example of Disraeli's speech provides an occasion to reflect on the affective charge of public rhetoric, carrying over direct implications for all public religious speech—and particularly, sermonic performance. Karen Bray and Stephen D. Moore have identified four primary contributions of affect theory for religious studies, which will be examined below for their homiletical relevance. First, affect theory "enables us to resist what Schaefer calls 'the linguistic fallacy': the mistaken notion 'that language is the only medium of power,' and consequently that religion is a primarily cognitive [...] pursuit" (Bray and Moore 2020, p. 6). Some schools and traditions of preaching have bought into the linguistic fallacy more than others. Bodies that hold social power or privilege often perform a kind of immunity to emotion in an effort to align themselves with the perceived authority of rationality.⁴ Long-winded, cerebral sermons exhibit confidence in the capacity for words to function as the vehicle of religious experience, sometimes to the neglect of affects.⁵ Similarly, theologies of preaching that emphasize the notion of a condescending, unmediated Word of God, while minimizing or eliminating the significance of the body in the pulpit, also participate in the linguistic fallacy.⁶ The linguistic fallacy contributes to an erasure of embodied particularity in the pulpit, reifying the dominance of white male theological discourse. If the proclamation of gospel is merely doctrinal logic expressed through curated linguistic symbols, then the body in the pulpit is incidental.⁷ To be clear, affect theory does not deny the power of language. Rather, it reveals how language is inseparable from flesh or material. As Mayra Rivera observes in her book *Poetics of the Flesh*, "Words [...] become flesh. Words mark, wound, elevate, or shatter bodies. Social discourses divide the world and mark bodies differently" (Rivera 2015, p. 2). Words emerge from flesh and co-constitute flesh; words never wield power apart from bodies.

Second, "affect theory impels us to re-attend to material encounters in the religious sphere" (Bray and Moore 2020, p. 7). Attempting to map our affects in relation to preaching draws our attention back to the infinite but concrete ways in which our bodies experience religious activities. No two bodies experience religious activities in precisely the same way. No individual comes to a religious service as a tabula rasa, awaiting emotional inscription. People gather from innumerable backgrounds and experiences that precondition the individual to experience the world in certain ways. Though the horizon of human affect is invariably shaped by the structures of our human bodies—what it *feels* like to exist in the world as a human being, and not, for example, as a dog or a fish—the combinations and variations of possible experiences and sensations can hardly be anticipated or taxonomized. The limit of our experience is the human body, which proliferates into infinite variations of diverse, embodied experience in relation to the world around us. Thus, any given sermon will engage affective experiences that are particular to each individual. And yet, the sermon also opens a portal through which a community may express or rehearse certain affective expressions together, facilitating in the development of something like an interpersonal affect. The sharing of public affects in preaching is long attested in many Black preaching traditions. Henry H. Mitchell was particularly devoted to the power of emotion in preaching, and even challenged white preachers for "the failure to develop

a definitive response to emotion” (Mitchell 1977, p. 13; Bond 2003, p. 103). Susan Bond describes how “Mitchell claimed that the white homiletic tradition was captive to Western notions of rationalism that had committed a gnostic mind/body split. Such an approach overemphasized the intellectual dimension of human experience and failed to address whole persons” (Bond 2003, p. 103). Thus, some preaching traditions have rightfully acknowledged the profundity of embodied experience for the purposes of preaching, while other traditions have suppressed it.⁸

Yet, human bodies account for only a portion of the operative material of religious experience. Some contemporary currents in affect theory employ a New Materialist lens—that is, “a lens that looks to the manifold ways we are also affected by *nonhuman* bodies, both organic and inorganic” (Bray and Moore 2020, p. 7). In the story provided at the beginning of this essay, I was careful to note other material aspects of the sermonic event that undoubtedly shaped our affective response: a podium, pews, stained glass, the chapel itself, and its university location. The sun pouring through the stained glass figured prominently in our experience; how could it not? Perhaps humans have always known—in ways that are difficult to quantify—that beauty contributes to our experience of the numinous. Of course, the *absence* of beauty does not create a vacuum of affect, simply a different affective experience. The church pews also contributed to our experience of the sermon. For some, church pews may conjure feelings of austerity, humility, fear, or anxiety; for others they might conjure feelings of safety, hospitality, openness, or confidence. It is likely that even something as mundane as a church pew touches down on our emotionally tangled bodies in ways that we cannot fully bring to consciousness.

Third, affect theory can help us to see the connections between religious experience and broader cultural and political movements. For example, Bray and Moore argue that one could read the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement as prophetic liturgy, “recognizing within them religious sensibilities in certain affectual modes, such as a religious sense of supplication or lament” (Bray and Moore 2020, p. 7). Affect theory helps us to see the affectual undercurrent of political moods, and to recognize quickly the flow of those currents through our religious experiences. We can expand this application to discern how certain public or political moods also manifest in congregational discourse. In a sermon titled “A Way Out of No Way,” the United States senator and Baptist minister Raphael Warnock begins his proclamation on Luke 5:17–26 by affirming, “this gospel text is really a story about access and accessibility. It is a story about overcoming barriers, and blockers, and bigotry, and bureaucracy in order to get to the help and the healing that all of us need” (Warnock 2022). Words like “access,” “accessibility,” “barriers,” “blockers,” “bigotry,” and “bureaucracy” are affectively charged with public moods connected to racial injustice, and rapidly elicit verbal and physical responses from the congregation. The words alone do not carry the freight; “access” could refer to something as innocuous as opening a digital document or reaching for an item on a shelf. But the word is tied to bodies that *feel* “access” in particular ways, and recognize its intense emotional connotations within the shared experiences of Black communities in the United States.

Affects assist in initiating and developing communities.⁹ Collectives of people bound together in shared affective experiences constitute political power; religious spaces are not immune to such political power, but rather they share in it. That power may be represented in an impassioned cry for justice, or it may be represented in a fierce condemnation of social/political others. The affects may propel movements toward healing, or they may propel harm toward others. Though words rallied for political force do possess some power, the greater source of power resides in the capacity for words to conjure, configure, or harness affects (or, rather, for words and affects mutually to conjure, configure, and harness each other). Thus, preaching develops social collectives that are necessarily politically potent; preaching is never power-neutral. The question for homileticians is, how does our preaching participate in the broader social and political landscape of our communities? Preaching *does something* in the midst of these swirling affects; so, what does it do?

The fourth contribution of affect theory for religious studies is that it “may be said to return us to the fourth source of theology, after scripture, tradition, and reason: that of experience” (Bray and Moore 2020, p. 7). Bray and Moore are referring to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral—a schema derived from the writings of John Wesley for conceptualizing the formation of theological belief. Scripture, tradition, and reason are all externally verifiable. Experience takes root in the individual subject and can be articulated only in a poetics of testimony: giving an account of what one has seen, heard, and come to believe (Florence 2007, pp. 64–65). In an essay on the significance of testimony for theology, Rebecca Chopp argues that historically, in the courtroom of reason, theory (or arguably, scripture, tradition, or reason) has occupied the judge’s seat where experience is put on trial. The validity of experience has typically been determined by the degree to which it affirms the sanctioned outposts of authority. However, when experience deviates from what has been collectively accepted as true or right, it is deemed false or impermissible (Chopp 2001). Affect theory helps us to see that subjective experience actually undergirds the whole operation. Affects are “sticky,” as Sara Ahmed has famously observed (Ahmed 2015, p. 11; cf. pp. 89–94). They accompany every assertion of reason, every interpretation of scripture, and every negotiation with tradition. Experience grounds all theological reasoning. This is not to undermine the critical importance of broad communal discernment, nor is it to suggest that truth is subjective. Further, it does not negate notions of divine self-revelation. However, our perceptions and articulations of truth are always accompanied by our affects. The degree to which we accept, reject, endorse, or repudiate certain theological notions can be traced back to our creaturely affects—the ways in which our sensing bodies experience the world around us.

The implications of this claim for preaching are far-reaching and potentially daunting. To affirm the pervasive and perpetual tug of affects on our religious perception is to admit that our proclamations in the pulpit emerge from creaturely existence. Our sensing bodies detect the divine, and we do our best to articulate it in the vast, sprawling amalgam of bodily experiences that constitute our congregations. Preaching in this sense does seem to be as Karl Barth observed, “an impossible possibility.” Yet, where Barth would be inclined to minimize human mediation in the proclamation of God’s Word, affect theory sends us back to the humanity of proclamation, deeper into the flesh of gospel. The sermon from the beginning of this essay impacted me precisely because something of the preacher’s affects relating to powerful men in an unjust society connected with my own. We encountered gospel together when, in John 8, we heard Jesus halt the runaway righteous indignation of the woman’s accusers while affirming the woman’s dignity. Because we are affective creatures, the gospel moves like a live electric current through our bodies, memories, politics, and speech—prompting us to respond.

3. Thematizing Bodies in Homiletical Literature

Though some of the theoretical lenses we acquire through affect theory are new additions to homiletics, the field does not lack thoroughgoing reflections on the significance of embodied, experiential, emotional, or otherwise holistic approaches for homiletical practice. As mentioned above, some Black preaching traditions have long attended to the emotional–political experiences of their hearers. Additionally, womanist homileticians have given voice to intersectional emotional–political realities, while emphasizing embodied hermeneutics—ways of reading that affirm Black women’s lived experiences (e.g., Brown 2003; Thompson 2018). Feminist homileticians have argued for the authority of experience and testimony, and have explored the intrinsically political dimensions of preaching (e.g., Smith 1992; Chopp [1991] 2002; Florence 2007). Generally, scholars who reflect on their social locations, whether focalizing their nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or some other aspect of their identity formation, work from the deep wisdom that their richly textured lives, led from particular epistemic locations, have produced critical insights for the proclamation of gospel. This, too, is an affirmation of the way bodies feel their way through the world.

Proponents of the so-called “New Homiletic” recognized that something beyond propositional speech was fomenting at the edges of their sermons; thus, they adapted homiletical practice toward narrative forms to engage the listeners in the sanctuary more effectively. An essay on preaching and its affects would not be complete without mention of Eugene Lowry’s narrative-based “Lowry Loop.” In his book *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, Lowry maps the affective form of the sermon through five stages: “(1) upsetting the equilibrium, (2) analyzing the discrepancy, (3) disclosing the clue to resolution, (4) experiencing the gospel, and (5) anticipating the consequences” (Lowry 2001, p. 26). Lowry suggests simplifying the steps to convey the following emotional journey for hearers: (1) Oops! (2) Ugh! (3) Aha! (4) Whee! (5) Yeah!¹⁰ Lowry envisions the possibility of a sermon leading hearers on a shared emotional journey. Though collective affects make something like a shared journey possible, we also know that no two people will have identical emotional experiences of the sermon.

Thus, we can see that the field has produced an abundance of literature on bodies in relation to preaching. Perhaps what we have not considered sufficiently is that our homiletical practice, so very dependent on words, is carried only in part by language. We struggle still to emerge from the linguistic turn to see that the words of our sermons may not be doing what we thought they were doing. The power of preaching does not reside solely in our language but also (perhaps even more) in the bodies receiving and responding to the language. Meaning-making in the sermonic event is made possible because of the ways in which language participates in the overlapping, densely configured affective fields of the listening community.

4. Affective-Religious Economies

If we consider religion as a mode of meaning-making in a divinely saturated world, and affects as the means by which we detect and experience that world prior to and in tandem with language, it is worth considering the dynamics of feelings in a congregational collective. What feelings drive our congregational shape and expression? What feelings receive or resist a proclaimed word? What feelings, when amplified through preaching, produce the most powerful responses? Many theorists have considered shame and dignity to be two of the primary affects that give shape to our communities, congregations, and broader societies. Schaefer picks up the concept of “affective economies” from Sara Ahmed—that is, “the way that the plurality of experienced emotions is configured in political formations” (Ahmed 2004a, p. 128)—and argues for the existence of “economies of dignity.” Dignity functions as a powerful, gravitational incentive to bodies resisting shame. Schaefer explains, “what we can call an *economy of dignity* is a situation in which bodies make decisions on the basis of the felt need to assert dignity or to repudiate shame—rather than through the liberal tropes of free choice, economic benefit, or political power” (Schaefer 2019, p. 55). People deploy any number of strategies to avoid or negate shame. The fear of shame can be so powerful that it can even override other basic human drives. Schaefer argues, “dignity can be such an electrifying affect that it overthrows fear of death. The compulsory force of an economy of dignity can drive bodies to move at oblique angles to flourishing, fitness, or financial benefit” (Schaefer 2019, p. 55).

These observations about shame and dignity lead Schaefer to conclude that religion often functions as a means by which dignity is sought and established. “Bodies will fight to build affective economies that nurture and sustain dignity and expel shame. Religion seems to be especially well-suited to play this part” (Schaefer 2019, p. 61). On the one hand, we might theologically affirm the human desire for dignity and the church’s important role in ascribing that dignity. On the other hand, we can observe how the desire for dignity and the fear of shame can lead Christ followers away from Christlike behavior. If dignity is linked to “flourishing, fitness, and financial benefit,” and shame linked to diminishing, illness, disability, and poverty, then the pursuit of dignity and the fear of shame might actually drive a person toward selfish ambition and negligence of the vulnerable. It could even lead to the active dehumanization and oppression of those whose bodies are wrongly

deemed “shameful.” Churches are then easily enlisted as politically formidable collectives, harnessed to enact societal harm or to promote societal wellbeing.

In her book *Grave Attending: A Political Theology for the Unredeemed*, Karen Bray engages affect theory to “interrogate neoliberal narratives of redemption under which to be productive, efficient, and happy is to be free” (Bray 2020, p. 11). She argues that our theologies of redemption have been co-opted by neoliberal capitalist values, wherein our primary associations with redemption have become happiness, success, and productivity. Conversely, we have come to categorize bodies that exhibit the absence of happiness, success, or productivity as unredeemed. As a corrective, Bray advocates for “grave attending”—which she describes as

a caring for the gravity, the pulling down to the material world, the listening and feeling for what all its myriad emotions have to tell us and where they have to lead us. It is also a witnessing to those identities, collectivities, and possibilities assumed to be buried over and gone, the ghosts that haunt us and so gift us a sense of what might have been and an imagination of what we might become. (Bray 2020, p. 27)

She goes on to add that “acts of grave attention refuse to efface the material mattering of others on the way to our own redemption” (Bray 2020, p. 27). Grave attending requires a retraining of affective intelligence, a willingness to recalibrate our concept of redemption around different affects and variations of embodiment. Only through this rerouting of affects can we begin to open ourselves to “what we might become”—a truly redemptive possibility that is contingent upon our ability to bear witness to “what might have been” (Bray 2020, p. 27).

Neither preachers nor our congregants are immune to the push and pull of affects on our theologies. In Christianity, believers gather together for worship to learn, remember, and rehearse the way of Christ. According to the biblical gospel accounts, Christ subjected himself to shame and rejection, sacrificing dignity for the causes of healing and justice. Followers are summoned to do likewise—a call that requires disciples to reconsider, and even violate, their affective dispositions. Where disciples may be inclined to avoid bodies or situations associated with shame, Jesus challenges the disciples to overcome their inclinations for the sake of others. Surprisingly, many disciples accept the challenge. This is certainly one of the most remarkable aspects of the Christian story: sometimes in the course of following the way of Jesus, disciples undergo an affective transformation and can then be found tending to the sick, feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, and transgressing social and political boundaries.

So we return to the question, what does preaching do? It can, apparently, usher people into alternative affective curriculums by which they are initiated into alternative affective-religious economies. In Acts 2:37, following Peter’s Pentecost sermon, the gathered crowd is reportedly “cut to the heart” and asks, “What shall we do?” We are told that these people who had been cut to the heart proceeded to devote themselves to learning, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). What contributed to the affective stirring that precipitated their newfound devotion? Perhaps it was a brush with the divine Spirit as it poured out on the believers (Acts 2:1–4), or perhaps the experience of hearing the believers speak in many tongues, or hearing their own history and beliefs preached back to them—and likely innumerable, untraceable other feelings and textures that contributed to the moment. But, one thing is clear in the telling of this story: preaching can induce change.

5. Conclusions

A phenomenology of preaching and its affects is a mode by which we can account for the way preaching *feels*, and in turn, how its intensities are enacted in and through bodies. It is a crucial exploration for this particular cultural moment. This article will be published during a presidential election year in the United States. Not only does affect theory render baffling political maneuvers somewhat intelligible (answering, for instance, how a linguistically nonsensical political performance can harness an alarming amount of

political power), but it also helps us locate our own bodies and responses in the societal tug-of-war. Preachers will again find themselves in the precarious position of proclaiming gospel in spaces characterized by heightened angst, fear, and insecurity. Some preachers will seize upon the moment to advance political power in their favored direction. Some preachers will do everything they can to avoid contentious topics. Some preachers will find that simply by proclaiming the healing, liberating, merciful, and just ministry of Jesus, they land in politically fraught territory. No sooner can political implications be purged from preaching than affects be purged from human experience. As Schaefer observes, citing Kathleen Stewart, “Power is a thing of the senses.” Thus, “the phenomenological is political” (Schaefer 2015, p. 8). Preaching cannot be untangled from the bodies of proclaimers and hearers, and is thus implicated in the volatile swirl of extant individual, social, and political affects.

And yet, this very entangling is what makes gospel proclamation so potent. In the preaching of the gospel, hearers encounter deep in their bones the presence of the divine. Mundane words become flesh in our midst, inhabiting us, stirring us, configuring us toward new ways of being in the world. Preaching at its best can cut us to the heart, delivering us to the irresistible question, “What shall we do?” An unmistakable compulsion, an urge to change course, a palpable presence of the Spirit, a realignment of desires: these are affective consistencies of the Word of God preached in our midst. Not every sermon will register with affective intensity for each listener. But, every sermon can provide an occasion for our whole selves—affects and all—to be drawn into a collective rehearsal of the way of Christ.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This research did not require institutional review.

Informed Consent Statement: This research did not require informed consent.

Data Availability Statement: There is no additional data available for this research.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ As Donovan O. Schaefer notes in *The Evolution of Affect Theory* while summarizing the stance of Sianne Ngai, “Affect is not on/off; it’s always present, always humming through the immanent field of power relations. The first rule of this stance is: nothing is without affective charge. The second is: nothing we consume offers a single ‘affect’” (Schaefer 2019, p. 64).
- ² This sermon was preached in Chapel on the Hill at Abilene Christian University on 11 January 2024, by Karen Cooke, a Doctor of Ministry student in the Graduate School of Theology.
- ³ Close affective readings of situations or stories have become a common convention in affect theory literature. Typically, theorists analyze film, literature, or public rhetoric.
- ⁴ See Schaefer’s critique of this colonizing mindset, which treats affect as animalistic and reason as superior or angelic (Schaefer 2015, pp. 10–11).
- ⁵ Though this style of preaching may appear affectless, it remains affectively engaged. For example, if rational discourse deprived of emotional expression is perceived to hold greater authority, then hearers may encounter the sermon as a portal through which they may share in that authority, power, or dignity. The sermon may invoke feelings of confidence, belonging, or superiority.
- ⁶ “Affect theory points to a flaw at the heart of traditional ideology critique, which takes as given that language is a sort of computer program, an intrinsically compelling system of information/force—because God said so. The linguistic fallacy presupposes that language is an apparatus of command that effortlessly articulates with bodies. It has no sense of how discourses attach to bodies and get them to move, and is baffled when bodies sincerely ‘believe’ one thing and do another” (Schaefer 2015, p. 35).
- ⁷ This particular homiletical fallacy in our context has depended upon white male superiority, wherein whiteness and maleness are treated as normative metrics by which all other bodies are measured. The white male body is hidden under the cloak of authority, with the claim that it is only God’s Word that fills the pulpit. The body’s erasure functions to bolster its power. In the first chapter of *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Willie James Jennings relates a story about his academic department interviewing two candidates for an open position. One candidate was a white man, and the other was a black woman. The white man, who was eventually offered the job, performed a kind of familiar whiteness to the predominately white interviewing faculty, while the black woman introduced her work through the lens of herself—her social location and life experiences as a black woman in the academy. Jennings explains that both candidates were wholly qualified for the position, but the whiteness and maleness of the first candidate matched the norms and aspirations of the department. Though the narrative on record affirmed that he received

the job due to his “wonderful theological sensitivities and sensibilities,” Jennings identifies the hidden reason for his hiring: he embodied the most charming aspects of whiteness and maleness in an environment that privileges these modes of being and doing (Jennings 2020, pp. 23–28).

⁸ It should be noted that some preaching traditions that have taken hold in predominately white spaces have certainly indulged emotional connection with hearers. Consider the fiery preaching of some white preachers during the Great Awakening or the deeply expressive preaching that is common among charismatic and Pentecostal communities. Mitchell’s critique is well taken but also requires some nuance.

⁹ In her essay “Collective Feelings, Or, the Impressions Left by Others,” Sara Ahmed explores the way in which shared affects secure social collectives. Communities who share in certain affects develop something like a “skin”—a sensing border between collectives of sensing bodies. She writes, “How we feel about another—or a group of others—is not simply a matter of individual impressions, or impressions that are created anew in the present. Rather, feelings rehearse associations that are already in place, in the way in which they ‘read’ the proximity of others, at the same time as they establish the ‘truth’ of the reading. The impressions we have of others, and the impressions left by others are shaped by histories that stick, at the same time as they generate the surfaces and boundaries that allow bodies to appear in the present. The impressions left by others should impress us for sure; it is here, on the skin surface, that histories are made” (Ahmed 2004b, pp. 25–42).

¹⁰ Each movement receives a chapter in his book, with the word followed by an exclamation point hovering above the chapter title.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2004a. Affective Economies. *Social Text* 22: 117–39. [CrossRef]
- Ahmed, Sara. 2004b. Collective Feelings, Or, The Impressions Left by Others. *Theory, Culture & Society* 21: 25–42.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2015. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Bond, L. Susan. 2003. *Contemporary African American Preaching: Diversity in Theory and Style*. St. Louis: Chalice Press.
- Bray, Karen. 2020. *Grave Attending: A Political Theology for the Unredeemed*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Bray, Karen, and Stephen D. Moore. 2020. *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies*. Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquia. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Brinkema, Eugenie. 2014. *The Forms of the Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Brown, Teresa Fry. 2003. *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God’s Word*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Chopp, Rebecca. 2001. Theology and the Poetics of Testimony. In *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*. Edited by Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney and Kathryn Tanner. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chopp, Rebecca. 2002. *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers. First published 1991.
- Florence, Anna Carter. 2007. *Preaching as Testimony*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Hooke, Ruthanna B. 2023. *Sacramental Presence: An Embodied Theology of Preaching*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Jennings, Willie James. 2020. *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Lowry, Eugene L. 2001. *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, expanded ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Mitchell, Henry H. 1977. *The Recovery of Preaching*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Rivera, Mayra. 2015. *Poetics of the Flesh*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Schaefer, Donovan O. 2015. *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Schaefer, Donovan O. 2019. *The Evolution of Affect Theory*. Edited by Jan Plamper. Elements in Histories of Emotions and the Senses. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Christine M. 1992. *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Thompson, Lisa. 2018. *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Warnock, Raphael G. 2022. Sermon “A Way Out of No Way,” Preached at Friendship-West Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOAmNmbcFig> (accessed on 27 January 2024).

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.