

More than Truth: The Hope of Preaching and Its Languages in Context

Lisa L. Thompson
Vanderbilt University

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Abstract

This essay is adapted from a keynote address offered at Societas Homiletica in Budapest, Hungary (August 2022). It frames preaching in shifting social contexts as a practice of theologically ethical meaning-making—supported by accountability to lived experiences, practical wisdom and decision making, and imaginations grounded in boldness and humility. The essay argues that pedagogical strategies in support of these practices prioritize the possibilities that emerge in the constraints of learning contexts. Teaching within the mass crisis of a global pandemic is offered as a case study in the connected outcomes afforded in reassessing one’s presuppositions in both pedagogy and preaching.

Keywords: ethics; preaching; epistemologies; meaning-making; practice; wisdom; lived experiences; social contexts; culture; embodiment; religious practice; pedagogy; teaching and learning; hermeneutics

As we trace the historical turn to culture in our wider disciplinary conversations, these conversations are often indebted, in part, to philosophical hermeneutics.¹ Interestingly enough, the conventions of philosophical hermeneutics presume determinations of *truth*, within human capacity, are grounded in the vibrancy of histories and lived experiences. Truth is phenomenological. Our encounters shape our understandings of what is most lastingly meaningful. These determinations are formed in connection with something or someone beyond us; their origins are not abstract nor privatized. What we claim to understand as most true is communally shaped.

We have made significant progress in interrogating epistemologies alongside the practice of religion. Our conversations have been repositioned alongside lived experiences to consider matters of embodiment, such as gender, sexuality, racial-ethical constructions, ableism, trauma, socio-economic class, and more. Those of us who pursue cultural studies alongside lived religions, epistemology, and meaning making are clear that “lone truths” are deadly. If truth is communally shaped, it also requires intercommunal and intracommunal vetting.

Determinations of truth have an *ongoingness* in quality, as their ethical responsibility is tethered to both theological literacy and cultural competence in evolving social contexts. Such

¹ My reference here to philosophical hermeneutics is continuous with theories of interpretation and meaning making offered by Hans-George Gadamer in his volume *Truth and Method*; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

starting points create fissures in seemingly rigid understandings of what preaching is, how it is performed, who carries it out, and its valid interpretative outcomes—theological meaning-making. The certainty of preaching is tempered in our evolving contexts. Preaching demands practical wisdom and decision making that seek collective accountability.

I made promises for our time together three years ago.

I. Our evolving Contexts and Truths

In 2019, I submitted kernels of ideas for a full address in 2020.

*Truth, in its partial or full disclosure, is an experience. Our ways of thinking, being, and doing are shaped by such experiences. To preach toward such an experience is **not about the encounter alone, but also about outcomes**. The veracity of Christian preaching is tested by its capacity to spur public witness towards the most generative outcomes and futures in the present times. Language that sustains these encounters narrows the gap between the mundane and sacred, **is grounded in theological boldness and humility, and replaces abstract ideas with accountability to the vibrancy of lived experiences**. In attending to this work, preaching and its languages must be clear about their hope and ethic.*

Preaching toward truth, means preaching toward more theologically ethical meaning-making. These practices and their underlying commitments create an opening for a community to discern what their public witness of faith entails. To these ends, the story of faith is retold for the possibility of its contemporary encounters and implications.

Much has transpired and changed in our world since I wrote those words. This includes the contexts to which I am most connected in the southeastern United States, and to be sure, in your contexts as well.

We have lived the tense shifts of political campaigns and elections; rumors of war and ongoing war; policy changes; refugee crises; the loss of loved ones, colleagues, and sheer strangers—all in the middle of a global pandemic and ongoing endemics. Amidst all the reminders of fragility, we also have witnessed our greater capacity in our creativity, tenacity, and collective agency to find a means to intervene where intervention is most needed, to problem solve, to encourage, to find reasons to live amidst ongoing grief, and to make laughter where it seemed most impossible.

The truths we knew are not necessarily the truths we know.

Change did not await our approval nor permission— but, in many ways, simply demanded our attentiveness. Often in this attentiveness, we were not afforded an opportunity to ponder nor theorize our way to a response; but instead, we took the raw materials before us and interacted with them, while hoping we had enough in our reserves to attend to what could not

and would not wait. We were challenged to offer concrete responses with greater clarity, less abstractness, and, at times, palpable uncertainty.

Our context has demanded practical wisdom and decision-making in light of collective accountability. In many ways, this was the same challenge I had hoped to propose to us three years ago regarding preaching. Preaching towards truth, means participating in preaching as an ethical practice of theological meaning-making with the raw materials before us, over and over again. Preaching towards truth considers if preaching is as *salvaging* of our collective life as we claim. Namely, does it subvert or spur the most generative outcomes and futures, when one considers the contexts at hand?

We can be certain there will come a time when preaching languages of past and present collide. The present may require something different of us. In other words, our present experiences may demand an audit of what we have held to be most meaningful and significant in directing our lives and actions.

2. Contextualizing Our Methods and Theories

I propose the viability of our futures exists at these intersections of present and past. What we name and do today impacts our capacity for naming and doing tomorrow. This viability relies on our willingness to participate in humility and boldness, simultaneously. We confess what we do not know; confess where our past claims now fail; and we grasp firmly to what we believe will hold us accountable until the next audit, of sorts. These are practices of theological boldness and humility.

The shape, language, form, and content of such decision making inevitably will change across and within contexts. Therefore the “technical” alone – shape, style, content, or form of such decision making is not the most productive pursuit of our inquiries— be that through methods, theories, or teaching. But instead, attending to the *why*, *what*, and *how* of the containers that sustain such nimbleness of responsiveness will help our methods, theories, and teaching support the wider work that both preaching and our world most demands.

Theories of preaching that claim to be concerned with concrete and contextualized possibilities cannot afford to remain in the hypothetical and abstract. The practitioner makes determinations about how to embody them for their most vibrant possibilities. As teachers about and researchers of preaching, our hope is to help foster this posture, or *habitus*,² for those who preach. What we do in our research, writing, and teaching about preaching has the capacity to further obscure or clarify the pulse of preaching itself.

We have more capacity at present date, than we have ever had, to interrogate what ethical contours of theological meaning-making entail within homiletic practice. The “turn to culture” has happened and continues. The gap we have yet to mediate is the one between the resources we know are available, the spaces where people gain access to these resources (our classrooms), and greater integrity in religious practices on the ground.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 16. Cambridge: University Press, 1977.

The time that has elapsed between 2019 and now reminds me more vividly of the parallels between the work before us and those who preach. The truths we once knew are not the truths we now know. Possibilities emerge for sponsoring more contextually accountable religious practices on the ground, when we attend to more contextually accountable pedagogical practices as those who teach *about* preaching.

3. Teaching and Learning as Constrained Freedoms

U.S. Black-American writer, activist, and lesser-known teenage preacher, James Baldwin, made poignant commentary on the work of teaching. In a one-on-one conversation with poet and literary genius Nikki Giovanni in 1971, Baldwin states,

*“A teacher who is not free to teach is not a teacher... To teach is a revolutionary act...the actant is not free to do what he (sic) wants to do; he (sic) is free to do what he (sic) has to do.”*³

Baldwin captures what *I understand* of teaching and learning as ethically constrained freedoms for all participants involved. Contexts shape the work before us and require a responsiveness to the demands they make upon us. These are the contexts of our formalized classrooms and of the classrooms of life. These spaces of learning converge without invitation. While our endeavor is constrained by external demands, our responsiveness to those demands relies on a nimbleness to do what must be done—to attend to what cannot wait. It is a matter of being loosed or freed to attend to what matters out of the responsibility to do so. These are matters of accountability.

The last three years in sum are reflective of many instances that have made teaching and learning as constrained freedoms more salient for me. These years have involved shared crises. Crises we could not ignore even as we experienced them in distinct ways. During the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic and well into its unfolding, we were confronted differently with the questions, *“what matters most in teaching and learning?”* or *“what must be done?”* These are simply different means of asking, *“Are we attending to what cannot wait in our learning spaces and processes in the context before us?”*

To say, “The pandemic affected teaching and learning contexts.” is an understatement. The pandemic also was *a context unto itself*. It affected context, and it was a context. An entire matrix of events was unfolding around us. We all were living under different emotional, mental, and physical demands outside the learning space. And those demands were not lifted when we entered the learning space—similar to sanctuaries. The already existent fissures and inequities in society were amplified in our new normal. As educators, we had to consider what could be salvaged and what was most manageable amidst enduring upheaval. I had to reconsider, once again, my priorities in *processes of learning*.

³ Nikki Giovanni and James Baldwin in *Conversation on “SOUL!” (Part 2)*, 1971, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pg2t5bom2d4>.

3.1 Recovering the Human

More importantly than attending to transitioning an in-person course to a virtual one, we needed to attend to the “humanness” of it all. The humanness we often try to keep neatly tucked away and out of the learning space. I had been guilty of this, even with my best intentions.

Best Intentions: I have always built language into my syllabi that reminds us we engage “people” in learning and do our best to honor each other in the space we share—especially in view of structural biases and discriminatory practices that attempt to diminish one’s humanity. Even my “no late assignments will be accepted” policy, which attempts to help professionals determine how to manage time and which deadlines can and cannot be adjusted, has its own backdoor “I recognize life events happen” loophole. Every course I offer emphasizes embodiment in the learning space— from trying to recover more integrative approaches between the rational and sensing aspects of intelligence to foregrounding empathy with the human condition to interrogating which “bodies” are most at risk in decisions of interpretation and religious practice.

And yet, those provisions still missed the more visible dimensions that emerge when crisis converges with the learning space in mass.

Even if it was not my personal scenario, I watched students consolidate their households and move across state and country borders because they and those in their support circle had lost jobs and loved ones. “No late assignments” was not an option. I received the panicked emails and pre and post class meeting requests as folks lingered on the screen. The boundaries of the learning space and our personal lives were not as neat. The anxiety, loneliness, and overwhelming realities of what it meant to be human and pursue studies, let alone in times of crisis, were all over faces in those square boxes. But the faces still appeared week after week. The certainty of a class session and structure provided a type of most needed rhythm and routine amid uncertainty. Our learning space had an opportunity to be an additional stressor or a lifeline.

Ignoring the humanity at the core of the work we do, precludes it from being a lifeline. The humanness of it all is a convergence of our lived experiences across the private-personal and social-collective domains. The systemic interworkings of our lives together place demands upon our shared existence and personal existence. For us today, I move forward with the question, with or without crisis, “*What would be possible if our learning spaces could be more of a lifeline for those inside of and beyond the classroom?*”

This is the question that looms before preaching: “What would it mean, with or without mass crisis, if preaching was a lifeline, at all times?” As a lifeline, how could preaching consider the messy and neat, the beautifully grotesque realities of our world on any given day? Attending to the continuum of our lived experiences as a non-optional, reveals a different responsibility in the endeavor of theological-meaning-making.

3.2 Recovering Life, Recovering Faith

Locating what is most sacred in the mundanely personal and communal of everyday life affords the greatest opportunity to shrink the gaps between the truths we once knew and those we now know. And it shrinks these gaps through greater accountability to what is before us.

An incarnational faith tradition, such as Christianity that posits the possibility of life abundant, does not leave room to ignore realities that are carnal at their core—suffering or otherwise. Instead, it reclaims what happens in our fleshy experiences, as being connected to our vitality and flourishing. It bears witness to those experiences in real, not abstract, ways. And it bears witness to them in the interpretation of texts, the story of faith, and our world. The folks of the scriptural text are encountered as living, breathing, and moving flesh, and their lives become just as real as the lives around us. In the same way, today's social world—be they headlines, conversations, or ideas are not abstract but connected to actual flesh- and-blood neighbors.

I have heard us try to conjure forth hope, over the last few days. The presence of grace and hope in our midst may be most in our service of perpetuating ongoing life—especially as dehumanization and erasure loom near. Drawing upon Womanist and Black Feminist perspectives, Keri Day writes about hope not in a teleological sense, but in a present sense in terms of it being social praxis—something enacted.⁴ Preaching has the opportunity to participate in such praxis, as it attends to what cannot wait. Namely, recovering the human, from its insignificance and invisibility—be that at the corporate or personal levels. This means preaching goes fourth and fifth-dimensional along the continuum of lived experiences right before us in an increasingly global age.

We are challenged to recover the human, embodied experience, in our teaching about this art; because recovering the human is the challenge posed to preaching on the ground in communities of faith. Part of such recovery involves letting go of content coverage in sponsorship of something more.

3.3 Practical Wisdom and Decision-Making

The challenge I have faced in teaching over the last three years is determining how learning can be a lifeline with a group of people largely skewed towards overachievement and high performance. This professor included. The end of a course is not the finite destination for learning, just as the sermon does not end with its conclusion. Often, instead of viewing teaching and learning as constrained freedoms, we have viewed them as a type of bondage to content.

Beginning with the reminder that we would never cover all the content in the context before us helped me refocus in two ways. First, our time together was to support ongoing pursuits of practical wisdom for decision-making. Second, supporting these pursuits entails attending to postures, habits, and skills that can themselves be contextual—be that to a

⁴ Day, Keri. *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

profession, to a community, to our lives, or to a broader circumstance in the world. Part of supporting practical wisdom and decision making is coming to terms with our needing different things for our vocational futures, even when working alongside the same content. However, without opportunities, we will not be able explore what those things may be nor how to pursue them.

“Less is more.” The work before us needed to be deeper and specific—not wider. Some of the work changed, and some of it did not. However, I was most amazed by what occurred in my fundamentals of preaching course, when I took grading off the table and gave greater choice in resource selection. Something different occurred when my structures of assessment in the course better matched my long admonishment that “getting it right” was not the priority. Risk-taking in the pursuit of what was most meaningful then became the priority.

Students foregrounded the processes of learning differently than times past. They took more risks with the potential of welcomed “failure.” Attending to the process was more significant than the outcome; the process was the success. And though “the process was the success,” the outcomes of their processes were better— involving greater integration and synthesis of the materials they engaged. Their sermons were *sermons*, not exegesis papers; they took risks on interpretative moves that mattered for their contemporary contexts; and they were more critical in the best ways of their work and the work of their peers.

They were making connections in the pursuit of practical wisdom and decision making for what they deemed mattered most amidst the social and personal upheaval around us. These are the postures of lifelong personal and professional development for religious leadership. Pragmatic wisdom and decision-making helps preaching move from a practice that uncritically mimics and models to one that evolves and matures over time, while remaining accountable to community and context.

The cultivation of practical wisdom and decision making begins with getting curious and being willing to pursue questions instead of answers.⁵ The preacher seeks to ask better questions. Better questions involve those that are more precise, those that help clarify, and/or those that render the most generative responses after we have asked them. These are not responses that close off possibilities and result in one answer or that show you exactly how or what you must preach and say. Generative responses create possibilities, reveal different vantage points, and hold the potential to evolve as life on the ground changes. These responses push us continually into the process of envisaging a more just earth alongside the story of faith in real and relevant ways.

However, to ask better questions, the preacher and community must give themselves room to not know, to get curious, and to wonder.

⁵ Lisa L. Thompson, *Preaching the Headlines: Possibilities and Pitfalls* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2021), 18.

3.4 Slow-Learning

Different models of learning and assessment helped the processes of the fundamentals course work more effectively. They are processes concerned with the roles of wonder, discovery, attentiveness, curiosity, and imagination in meaning-making. They are pedagogical approaches that help us more saliently imagine porous connections between religion and society. More importantly, these approaches help us better express those connections and contribute to a more just world.

The need to “get it right” interferes with knowing as something that unfolds and evolves, as opposed to being dispensed and fixed. I have long tinkered, in success and failure, with how to push the need to get it right to the side burner in exchange for something else in the classroom. Namely, how do we cultivate greater confidence in the muscles of wisdom and decision making amid not knowing? Slow learning or slow-thinking⁶ is one route to this work.

Slow learning does not lead with penalties, but instead with possibilities; it often privileges inductive processes. Slow learning requires a cyclical participation in one’s own ways of thinking, being, and doing *alongside others*, which can produce anxieties. It requires a new type of vulnerability that honors the possibility of getting it all wrong on the way to getting a little closer to that which “needs to emerge.” “Trust the process” is my internal and external mantra in teaching and learning.

Many of us in fields that involve aspects of the practice of ministry and religion intuitively understand students learn best when they are allowed to engage in creative experimentation, observation, embodied practice and reflection along the way. Teaching during the pandemic has made me recognize how much more we need artists as partners in the work we do. Artists have access to languages beyond what is written and spoken that help us understand, capture, and conjure in ways the written and spoken cannot on their own.

When reflection on times of crisis, Toni Morrison, reflected:

*“This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.”*⁷

I came to rely on local artists as collaborative partners in my course “Voice Imagination and Sacred Utterances” in Fall 2021; they helped students and I experience the learning space in ways we could not have on our own. Art was the conduit of learning as we explored memoir, justice, violence, meaning-making, religion, proclamation, and ritual. It was a different sort of lifeline to watershed moments of integration and critically empathetic imaginations across various creative expressions as we interrogated epistemologies.

⁶ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.; Tishman, Shari. *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation*. 1st edition. New York, NY ; Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017.

⁷ Toni Morrison, “No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear,” *The Nation*, March 23, 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/no-place-self-pity-no-room-fear/>.

In order for preaching and its languages to be more accountable to contexts, and bridge the gap between the mundane and sacred, the theological imagination has to find its grounding in the vibrancy of lived experiences. Such grounding allows us to interrogate what we know and how we know it.

This grounding reimagines the story of faith away from its most dangerous possibilities. The task is to tell of other possibilities in a way that resonates just as profoundly as the story a community already knows. We find our way to other possibilities by posing the “what if” questions, *What if there is a different way to tell the story of faith?*

These questions make way for a process of imaginative brainstorming towards concrete possibilities. By “imaginative brainstorming,” I do not mean a process that lacks substance or significance. Instead, the process relies on a disposition of openness while harnessing all one knows in order to perceive other possibilities. Such exercises of the imagination have moral dimensions and possess clarity about what is at stake in the world at hand; for we acknowledge the ways in which the imagination can be used for destructive and constructive purposes.⁸

To support preachers and their imaginative processes, we must pose “what if” questions to our own pedagogical and research practices. As I consider the work of our colleague, Sunggu Yang, in his work on aesthetics and art and preaching, he offers possibilities for supporting this imaginative work for preaching.⁹ Similarly, Donyelle McCray in her attention to alternative homiletic artifacts in the quilting traditions of Black women in the U.S. opens pathways to our imagining the “languages” of preaching differently, as it is deployed in lived religion and meaning-making on the ground; however, such imaginings only happen when we interrogate our epistemological points of departure and contexts.¹⁰

4. Revisiting Our Priorities

Those of us in homiletics, practical theology, theology and religion more broadly are situated within the humanities. We engage what it means to be human, even in our attempts to consider the holy other. The opportunity before us in our teaching and research is to contribute to our collective malformation or more holistic formation. Our processes of thinking, being, and doing are symbiotic, incidentally or intentionally. This means intersections of how we inhabit space, that which influences our patterns of meaning-making, and the practices we carry forth at these intersections are always up for interrogation.

These intersections are especially of concern when our collective capacity to flourish is inhibited by injustices, systems of oppression, and a failing democratically just world. Our colleague Richard Voelz, in *Preaching to Teach: Inspire People to Think and Act*, challenges us

⁸ Emilie M. Townes explores the role of what she calls the “fantastic hegemonic imagination” in culture; cf. Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

⁹ Sunggu Yang, *Arts and Preaching: An Aesthetic Homiletic for the Twenty-First Century*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021.

¹⁰ Donyelle McCray, “Quilting the Sermon: Homiletical Insights from Harriet Powers.” In: *Religions* 9, no. 2 (February 2018): 46. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9020046>.

to think about preaching out of a paradigm of critical pedagogies, precisely as an exercise towards freedom and engaged participation in the world.¹¹

I've come to terms with teaching and learning as constrained freedoms being dangerous and uncomfortable endeavors; they confront us, transgress the unquestioned, and unearth what would rather remain hidden, for student and teacher. The potential for teaching *and* preaching to foster our more intentional capacity for being, thinking, and doing, even as an uncomfortable and risky endeavor, begins with the environments we foster. Assessing the borders of risk-taking and harm requires discerning with others as co-creators. We do not hold the final say in the classroom, just as the preacher does not hold the final say in the pulpit. Teaching and preaching are constrained freedoms.

Neither our preaching nor our teaching will take us into our most viable futures without an audit of our priorities; our languages will not sustain us.

5. Conclusions—until the next audit, of sorts

I create a playlist of music for each course. By the end of every course, folx want the playlist. Admittedly, it is a demand I cannot always meet. Because I have pulled and sampled across multiple courses by that time in the term; and to be sure, students have added their “special requests” for our weekly intros, intermissions, and outros. But there is something about music and those interactions that is and is not about the music.

Through music and its vibrations, we encounter some of the deepest and most meaningful *truths*—from the way it resonates in our bodies and hearts to the way it disarms us even in its confrontation and spurring of our imaginings. Curating a playlist for every course is just as much about levity and collaboration as it is about an openness to being confronted in wonder and vulnerability.

What would it entail if preaching was more akin to curating playlists and less like the dispensation of *truth*?

Homiletics has the capacity to sponsor the general human imagination towards more ethical meaning-making at the intersections of religion and society. Our most ethical and *holistic* approaches in this work of research and teaching can foster collective agency to participate in more responsibly pragmatic ways in the world at hand regardless of the corners we occupy. Preaching, in its most ethical and faithful work, does the same. Such commitments will guide us, until *the truths we knew* are no longer *the truths we know*.

Dr. Lisa L. Thompson is the Cornelius Vanderbilt Associate Professor of Black Homiletics and Liturgics at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, United States.

¹¹ Richard Voelz, *Preaching to Teach: Inspire People to Think and Act*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019.