

Her Preaching Body: Embodiment and the Female Preaching Body

Amy P. McCullough

PhD in Homiletics, Vanderbilt University

Grace United Methodist Church, Baltimore, MD

ABSTRACT

This article reflects upon one ethnographic study of contemporary female preachers and the decisions they made about their bodies. The study itself focused upon the meaning preachers created from their embodied choices and the ways in which they struggled and learned to live bodily. Attempting research that stayed close to materiality revealed the complexities, contradictions and wisdom to be found in the flesh. As the researcher, I learned that every bodily decision was laden with meaning, even when the diverse decisions of a variety of preachers could not be easily summarized together. In the end, a conceptual shift from studying bodies to exploring embodiment enabled the project to be framed around participants' varying experiences of having a body or living as a body.

In 2009, I set out to study the bodily decisions of contemporary female preachers.¹ The project, a qualitative study of fourteen women who currently preach on a regular basis, was born at the intersection of my interest in the body and my lived experiences of preaching. Theorists,

especially those working in feminist and related fields, position the body as a unique site of knowledge. Inquiries about “what the body knows” have led to assertions about how culture is inscribed on the body, how gender is formed through bodily performances and how what happens to our bodies—an injury or illness—is what happens in our lives.² These claims primed my curiosity to explore preaching, my own profession, through the lens of the preacher’s embodied practices. Homiletics names the body as central to proclamation. Before a preacher opens the mouth, his or her appearance, posture and facial expressions have already begun the sermon. I narrowed the study to female preachers, namely because I was one. I experienced the scrutiny women are apt to encounter surrounding their preaching bodies. Seminary trained me to think about the projection of my voice, the placement of my body and the deployment of gestures. Seminary did not prepare me for the onslaught of attention that would be paid to my clothes, hairstyle, shoes or voice. While a congregant’s comments might stem from curiosity, criticism or a desire to affirm, the consistent probing and the resultant sense of being watched pointed towards an enduring contentiousness accompanying the female preaching body. While troubling, the contentiousness also paved an accessible path for further exploration. Out of contention came a line of inquiry: What does it mean to be a body thrown into the world, a body that is a female and whose project is preaching?

Although small in number, the women who participated in interviews and direct observations of their preaching offered rich and varied narratives about their preaching bodies. The Reverend Rebecca Harris recalled wearing the wrong shoes to a *Tenebrae* service, in which the focal moments of silence were repeatedly interrupted by the “clop, clop, clop” of her chunky heels. The Reverend Emily Thompson characterized her “funky” hairstyle as a deliberate ploy to carve out a space as the first female preacher of a historic congregation. The Reverend Laura Martin initially resisted questions about her body, insisting her body was far from her mind when she entered the pulpit. But when explaining her transition to preaching without a manuscript, she recounted the Sunday she inadvertently left her sermon at home and was transformed by the power of looking her listeners fully in the eye. The Reverend Jane Lee approached sermon days with trepidation, anxious about the physical demands of proclamation exacerbating her post-polio symptoms. Mounting the steps to the pulpit, standing for fifteen minutes and attempting hand gestures while maintaining a tight hold on the lectern heightened her sense of bodily limitation. Several preachers recounted the dilemmas presented by a pregnancy, in which the body “weighed in” to a sermon through diminished lung capacity, limited stamina and more lumbering movements. Taken all together, the detailed, diverse stories illuminated how the body might be experienced as a powerful tool, a source of steady rhythms, a persistent hurdle to be overcome or a repeated reminder of lack. Most preachers oscillated between multiple, and at times competing, perspectives.

Listening to their words and observing their preaching, I was particularly interested in how women made decisions and the subsequent meaning they derived from their choices. Here I was aided by the lived body approach to studying the body. Seeking to grasp “the body-as-it-is-lived-by-me,” the lived body theory claims that embodied life is an ever-evolving interaction between

an individual's innate physicality, cultural situatedness and moments for agency.³ In choosing what shoes to wear or what hairstyle to adopt, a woman navigates her materiality—the given facts of her height, body shape and hair texture—and her cultural context, which forms and informs her understanding of such social codes as proper professional heels and the messages imbued in hair. She takes up her materiality and culture in her own way, exercising agency through a particular choice. Through their choices, women preachers make meaning. Rev. Harris consciously wore “feminine” shoes, in order to balance the androgynous character of her liturgical robe. Rev. Thompson referred to ministry as akin to a “freak show,” subsequently turning freak into funk through her hair. Every bodily decision was purposeful. A deliberation about the right shoes for the pulpit, a preference for a shorter hairstyle and a debate between brightly painted fingernails or neutral-looking ones were situations in which women contemplated their innate preferences, their hoped for personas, their relationships with their listeners and their identity as preachers.

To explore a woman's choices and the meanings embedded in them entails a close observation of her embodied life. This project grounded itself in ethnography, in that I, as the researcher, aimed to stay close to materiality. I sought to study, as much as I was able to do so, the messiness of the flesh. Theories of the body have been criticized for veering away from actual bodies. Judith Butler's groundbreaking scholarship on performativity, despite attempts to do otherwise, can tend to prefer linguisticity over flesh.⁴ The tendency towards abstraction also appears in homiletical circles, as scholars can speak about embodying the text or developing one's voice without fully accounting for the concrete physicality of the preacher. As I brought current scholarship into conversation with living preachers' narratives, I witnessed the capacity for ethnography to correct these deep-seated tendencies towards abstraction.

Rabbi Monica Levin grew up listening to her grandfather's powerful preaching voice. “My grandfather was a ‘preacher's preacher,’” she remembered. “He delivered a message that was not fire and brimstone, but was forceful and dynamic.” Experiencing a call to the rabbinate as a young adult, Rabbi Levin was acutely aware of how physically different she was from her grandfather. She is a short, petite woman with a soft voice. “I am a good writer,” she continued. “I write my sermons out. I am an editor down to the wire. But the delivery side of things has often been my challenge.” Rabbi Levin conceived of her difficulties as bodily ones. She said, “I am not a loud person. I have never had vocal training. I have had to journey to being comfortable with my voice sounding different than the models I had.” Elements of Rabbi Levin's description of her voice matched the theoretical framework for studying female preachers put forth by Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson in their book *Saved from Silence*.⁵ Turner and Hudson argue that female preachers struggle to “come to voice” in their preaching. Viewing voice as a metaphor for agency, they suggest that larger cultural and religious forces suppress a woman's ability to speak. *Saved from Silence* names what other homiletical scholars have noticed, a particularly intense struggle in female preachers to gain confidence in their preaching. Raised listening to her grandfather's bold preaching, Rabbi Levin did hesitate to fully embrace her own preaching voice.

Yet a closer reading of her experience presents a slightly different interpretation. Turner and Hudson utilize voice partially in symbolic terms, as a sign for developing one's capacity for self-expression. Although Rabbi Levin traversed a similar journey towards preaching confidence, the vocal discomfort she encountered was not related to issues surrounding her identity, sermonic content or call. Rather, she struggled to adjust her expectations about what constitutes a "preacher's voice." She said, "I was never made to think as a woman that I don't have a voice. For me it was always more of a physical issue. I tend to be a soft-spoken person, so the projection of my voice is a harder element. I grew up with a male voice in my head and I don't have a male voice." Her hurdles focus on the physicality of her voice, so different in pitch, tone and volume than familiar preaching models. "Coming to voice" for Rabbi Levin was not about gaining confidence in the content of her speech but rather in the material characteristics of her voice.

A similar recalibration of theory to body occurs when the topic turns to preaching pregnant. A landmark model for analyzing the pregnant body, Iris Marion Young's work, "Pregnant Embodiment,"⁶ challenges models of pregnancy analysis that either focus solely upon the developing child or characterize the pregnant woman as inhibited in her embodied life due to the changes in weight, stamina or movement. Viewing pregnancy as a positive period of reclaiming one's embodiedness, Young asserts, "The pregnant subject ... is decentered, split, or doubled in several ways."⁷ As her bodily self-location becomes "focused on her trunk in addition to her head" and the body's "inner movements belong to another being, even as they are not other," the pregnant woman "experiences her body as herself and not herself."⁸ Young argues that this dual awareness creates a fluid boundary for the pregnant woman in relation to herself and the growing fetus, her body and the world. Young rightly names this duality as an empowering trait fostering embodiment.

Several preachers in this study recounted experiences of preaching while pregnant. While Young's portrayal of the pregnant woman as a potent, productive body resonated in their narratives, these women drew from their increased bodily awareness to establish new boundaries. Rather than fluidity, they displayed strong limitations. The Reverend Erica Williams worried that her congregation would be overly eager to touch her growing belly. On the Sunday morning when she publicly announced her pregnancy, she held up a shirt with a handprint marked through with a big X and a caption underneath that read "Hands off the belly." The Reverend Sarah Lockhart considered herself an open person, possessing a loose line between pastoral relationships and friendships. When faced with a regular stream of inquiries about her growing baby, she found herself offering only brief, "all is well" responses. She reflected, "I am not as public as I think I am. I'm very open but there are limits to that, and I hadn't known them that much until this whole experience." Each pregnant preacher encountered the barriers around creating and delivering sermons with less energy, diminished mental concentration and larger, slower bodies. Within the boundaries of physical body, interpersonal relationships and self-expectations, what was internally fluid became externally firm. In this instance, ethnographic research adjusted the contours of an existing theory. The women did not contradict Young's notions of fluidity—they lived attuned to the ways

their bodies still belonged to them while housing another—as much as they filled it in with more detailed and nuanced descriptions of responding to the fluidity.

The moments in this project when ethnographic descriptions affirmed, contradicted or expanded an established theory appeared relatively straightforward. When the moment came to compile a diverse set of descriptions into a comprehensive whole, the task became far more perilous. This project began with a question about the relationship between a preacher’s embodied decisions and her preaching. As the research came to a close, colleagues would inquire about my concluding assertions. All too frequently, I fumbled to answer with a concise, memorable thesis. The narratives of these female preachers affirmed that the body is essential to preaching and that every preacher preaches in and through her body. But I stumbled whenever I attempted a more substantive claim. Any attempt to construct a causal relationship between a perception, stance or use of the body and “good” preaching was quickly dismantled by a contrasting scenario. For every preacher who found strength in moving away from the pulpit, there was a preacher who thrived inside it. For every preacher who embraced prescribed liturgical gowns as liberating, there came another whose adherence to contemporary fashion trends fueled a connection to her listeners. The preachers who reported how they “talked with their hands” were countered by the women who blocked out their sermons using theatrical techniques. Furthermore, the definitions of a “good,” “powerful” or “effective” sermon varied from preacher to preacher and listener to listener. Since the study did not investigate the congregations in which the women preached, any evaluation of sermon or preacher came from me as the researcher. While continuing to believe that rich meaning could be gleaned from exploring the body, I remained conflicted about how to advance the descriptions towards any single theological or theoretical model. Such hesitation may be appropriate in qualitative, close to the ground research. A flexible, porous framework was integral to this study from the very beginning, because the history of female preaching imparts to the contemporary preacher a multi-faceted legacy of bodily constraint and risky transgressions, as well as a testimony about the ever-evolving, infinite uses of bodily power.⁹

The way forward finally appeared when I shifted the conceptual lens from bodies to embodiment. What had begun as a study of many different bodies gradually revealed itself to be an exploration of the challenges and potentials of embodiment. Embodiment encircles both the physical body and the living self.¹⁰ Embodiment explores the ways we live *as* bodies, rather than as those who *have* bodies. To study an individual’s embodied experiences involves investigating materiality, consciousness, movements and intentionality. It entails viewing these elements as a constantly changing, diffuse yet bound entity through which a person acquires coherency and competency in the world. Instead of trying to pull out threads of similarities from vastly different preachers, and thereby diminishing the treasure of their intricate individuality, I began to look at the ways women conceived of and related to embodied life. Transitioning from bodies to embodiment, I noted when, how and why a preacher came alive to her living, en fleshed self. Distinctions emerged within every preacher’s embodied narratives between the moments when they preached as a body

and when they preached overtly conscious of having a body.

During her ten years as a rabbi, Rabbi Monica Levin learned how congregants watch her body. They have noticed, she said, “How my body has ebbed and flowed” through two pregnancies, various hairstyles and New Year’s resolutions to join the gym. At the synagogue’s gathering for Purim each year, she and other colleagues come in costumes. One year, she recalled, “I was so cute. I was wearing a Cinderella-type gown. I thought I looked like all the little girls.” The next year she wore a different costume. “Some of the dads were asking me if I was going to wear the Cinderella dress again,” she remembered. “I realized that it was not so much that I was dressed like the little kids but the busty nature of the dress.” Such moments, she said, “are definitely times I’m very aware of my body.” Rabbi Levin also volunteered poignant moments in which she viewed the body as a sacred tool. She once accompanied a congregant to the labor and delivery room, where the baby made a surprise, early appearance. That day, along with countless moments of counseling, marrying and burying members, affirmed her belief that the body could be “an instrument of God’s will in the world.” More specifically, she named her embodied presence as that potential instrument whenever she preached. At the same time, she maintained an acute awareness of preaching as a female body. “There is a certain degree of neuteredness that comes with being a rabbi,” she remarked. “But there are definitely times that they see me in a way that I’m clearly a woman.” Even the complimentary “you look great,” reminded her how her congregation will “notice my haircut when I don’t think they ever comment on a male rabbi’s haircut or their shoes.” Whenever Rabbi Levin is conscious of another’s gaze upon her physicality, a split occurs between body and self. Her body becomes an object to be watched and even a possession belonging to the congregation. Rabbi Levin aims to live as a body and often she achieves her goal. But when her embodiments are interrupted, she recalls how her body still receives a social gaze that judges her solely as “woman.” Rabbi Levin has acquired an embodied coherency, and that coherency includes an analysis of how cultural forces strain the integration of her physical body and her living self.

When invited to detail her preaching embodiments, the Reverend Laura Martin narrated an ethos of forgetting her body whenever she preached. Unlike other preachers’ close attention to their physicality, Rev. Martin’s particular embodiment appeared predicated upon an almost absent body. She began by naming worship as a time when she is “fully engaged” in the present moment. She asserted, “Preaching is God using me. It is just not about my body.” Amid professions of forgetfulness, Rev. Martin utilized large, dramatic physical movements when preaching. “People say I preach with my whole body,” she said. “Others will comment that I kick my legs, I use my hands, that my eyes preach. It is hard to hear talk about my facial expressions because I am not aware that I’m doing that. My body is generally the last thing I am thinking about.” Not thinking about her body, she paradoxically employed her body in all manners of movement. One tentative thesis that could be drawn from her narrative is that as the body recedes from conscious awareness, its capacity for action, or freedom of movement, rises.

Yet Rev. Martin is not wholly unaware of the link between her physicality and her living self.

She named her willingness to use her body. “When it comes to God, I’m uninhibited,” she explained. “So God says leap, I leap. Run, run. Stand still, stand still.” She also drew strength from the congregation in a way that linked preacher to listener as embodied selves. She said, “If I can have your eye, I could reach you.” She continued, “For some reason, I need to touch you. I may not know what is going on, but if I can hug you, [then] I can tell how you are doing.” Rev. Martin uses her material being—and the physicality of others—to increase her sense of a moment, her connection to her listeners and her choices while preaching. Her body appears to fade from consciousness, but she clearly relies upon the messages flowing from her embodiment. Staying alert to her body’s capacity for insight and perhaps able to inoculate herself against objectifying forces, she preaches as a body.

Any distinctions between Rabbi Levin and Rev. Martin cannot be found by contrasting gestures, movements or posture. Both women enjoy preaching and receive positive responses to their sermons. The distinction lies closer to their differences in interiority and meaning-making, revealed by investigating how they experienced, reflected upon and conceived of their own, specific enfolded existence. Herein lies the potential of ethnographic research to touch the edges of embodied knowledge. In the end, this study offers nothing more and nothing less than a vast, intricate painting of living bodies making material, meaning-laden decisions. It reveals how complicated and even confusing such decisions can be. But the women themselves always pushed towards comprehension—what knowledge I can grasp through my embodiments—and towards transcendence—how can my fleshly proclamation bring a word from God. Within the limits of their embodied lives, their conclusions can be both provisional and deeply revealing of truth.

As the researcher, I, too, found each preacher’s conclusions to be revelatory and limited. Their reflections heightened my own embodied awareness every time I went into the pulpit. How was I standing? What gestures did I tend to utilize and why? Why did my voice feel loud while some listeners complained that they couldn’t hear? How did I feel preaching with and as a body? These questions are present now as I preach and last long after the sermon. One preacher aptly summarized the courage I came to realize is required to preach bodily. The Reverend Melissa Clark was born with a mild case of cerebral palsy. Her disease left her with less balance, stamina and a mild limp. She loves to preach, calling it “the most important, life-giving thing I do.” When asked how cerebral palsy impacted her preaching, she spoke about standing up to preach. “Having cerebral palsy is why I put so much weight on the moment of rising to your feet,” she said. “There is the silence and the waiting and I feel the congregation waiting. The act of standing is my moment of decision as a preacher.” Amid the “O God, here we go,” feeling, she is conscious “that the instant when your brain sends the impulse to your leg muscle is my moment of faith confession.” She concluded, “Cerebral palsy makes that moment what it is for me, because it is more work for me to stand. I ground my preaching there.” Rev. Clark preaches as a body, alive to her passion, her strength, the internal communication of brain to muscle and her limitations. Her materiality rightly names preaching as a risky moment demanding her entire self. This is the gift and the ever-

continuing work of exploring embodied life.

(Endnotes)

1 Amy P. McCullough, “Her Preaching Body: A Qualitative Study of Agency, Meaning and Proclamation in Contemporary Female Preachers” (PhD. diss., Vanderbilt University, 2012). All of the quotations within this article come from the dissertation. Each preacher is known by a pseudonym, as the names of all interviewees are being held in confidence by mutual agreement.

2 See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1995); Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003).

3 Saba Mahmood, “Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject,” in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 177-221.

4 The term “my-body-as-it-is-lived-by-me” comes from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1945). Other examples of the lived body theory are Iris Marion Young, “Lived Body versus Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

5 Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Judson, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women’s Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999).

6 Iris Marion Young, “Pregnant Embodiment,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 146-161.

7 Ibid., 160.

8 Ibid.

9 Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998) and Beverly M. Kienzie and Pamela J. Walker, eds. *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998).

10 Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 5-6.