

Standing in the Breach:
A Relational Homiletic for Conflicted Times

By

Aimee C. Moiso

Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Religion

January 31, 2020

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

John S. McClure, Ph.D.

C. Melissa Snarr, Ph.D.

Stephanie Budwey, Th.D.

Vanessa Beasley, Ph.D.

Copyright © 2020 by Aimee C. Moiso
All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgments

In the midst of challenging times for theological education and related doctoral programs, I am sincerely grateful to the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University, and the fellowship I received from the Theology and Practice Program, for continuing to invest in a new generation of thinkers and scholars in theological fields. The financial support I received made it possible for me to pursue this degree, as well as to participate in the Academy of Homiletics and the Association of Practical Theology. It was also a pleasure to be part of a diverse cohort of Vanderbilt student colleagues, especially in the T&P program and in the Homiletics and Liturgics area, and to share ideas, doubts, solidarity, and encouragement together.

I entered this program in 2013 at the invitation of Dale Andrews and John McClure, but then we lost Dale to cancer in 2017. Though John was my primary advisor and conversation partner, I carried Dale's ethos, pathos, and logos through the dissertation. His deep wisdom and rumbling chuckle are imbedded in my pages. Even more, the collaborative and mutually-critically-correlative relationship John and Dale shared was what convinced me to come to Vanderbilt, and is the kind of collegiality I hope to emulate. I will always be thankful to have been among their doctoral students.

A hundred other people had a hand in getting me to this point. Thank you to Jana Childers for suggesting I look at Vanderbilt and for writing recommendation letters that made admission possible; to colleagues at Santa Clara University who cheered me on as I was accepted and who sent me off to Nashville with their best wishes; to my dad, Jim, who helped me drive across the country, buy a house, and paint and upgrade it, and who is an all-around great dad; to my aunt Jean and uncle Ray in Murfreesboro, who got me out of the house and served as local tour guides, and who bequeathed me their extra bookshelves; to my husband, Nolan, who moved to Nashville

for a job but got a wife in the bargain, and who arrived in my life just in time to shepherd me through comprehensive exams and still wanted to marry me afterwards; to my friend Maggie who sent me the single most effective tool for completion of the dissertation—a paper calendar and stickers to mark off the days I wrote something; to my committee members for their thoughtful and candid questions and feedback at my defense; and to countless friends and family members who didn't really understand what I was doing or what was involved in this degree or why it was taking so long but who stuck by me with unfailing love and support anyway.

It is a strange experience to write a dissertation that felt increasingly relevant as the days passed. That I was writing about conflict and polarization during and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election may have been coincidental or providential, but regardless I felt fortunate to be able to pay attention to immediate, critical realities while engaging in complex reflection about what they mean. While this dissertation marks a completion point for the degree, I consider it a small contribution to the ongoing conversation about what it means to be—and stay—in conflict, and in relationship.

Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgments	iii
Chapter	
1. Introduction	1
I. The “Prophetic Preaching” Paradigm.....	4
A. The Prophetic Challenge.....	6
B. Prophetic How-Tos	8
C. The Message Reigns Supreme.....	10
D. Competing Goods	15
II. Beyond the Prophetic/Pastoral Bind.....	20
A. Differences in Tension	23
III. A Relational Homiletic.....	25
2. Conflict and its Transformation	29
I. Drawing Battle Lines.....	30
A. Fighting Words	35
II. Forces of Nature	38
A. Just as Well.....	43
III. It’s All Relative.....	47
A. Think Positive.....	49
1. Shifts Happen.....	52
2. Practice Makes Purpose.....	55
B. Can You Imagine	56
2.5. Theological Approaches to Conflict Transformation	64
I. Speaking from Experience	65
A. By Nature	66
B. The Bible Tells Me So	71
C. Center of Attention.....	74
3. A Theology for Conflict, Part One	77

I. Can't Get No Satisfaction	78
A. Trial and Error.....	82
II. From Bad to Worse	87
A. Suffering Leads to the Dark Side.....	87
B. Face Value.....	89
C. Call and Response	92
III. Present Company Excluded.....	95
A. Mistaken Identity	96
B. Space Invaders.....	98
C. See No Evil.....	102
IV. Turning Points	107
4. A Theology for Conflict, Part Two	111
I. Free to Be You and Me.....	111
A. Saving Face	113
B. Mutual Admiration Society.....	116
II. The Company We Keep	118
A. Same Difference	119
B. Out of Body Experiences.....	122
C. On Forgiving and Forgetting.....	125
III. For the Love of God	127
A. Eros: Much to Be Desired.....	128
B. Compassion: A Care in the World	134
C. Out of Context.....	138
D. Out of Practice.....	139
IV. Relatively Speaking.....	142
4.5. Other-wise Homiletics and Beyond	146
I. Mixed Messages.....	146
II. Conversation Pieces.....	148
III. Table Talk.....	152
IV. Significant Other.....	155
V. Frames of Mind	160
5. A Relational Homiletic	165

I. Relationality, Front and Center	165
II. Relational Homiletics, in Theory	167
III. Relational Homiletics, in Practice.....	172
A. Courage of Convictions.....	174
Conviction 1	174
Conviction 2	176
Conviction 3	178
Conviction 4	181
B. Transforming Practices	182
1. Learning to be Other-Wise.....	182
2. Imagining Things.....	185
3. Empowering Humility.....	186
4. Listening Well	188
C. Discerning Implications	191
1. Aligning Means and Ends.....	191
Conflict Dynamic 1: Conflict Culture	193
Conflict Dynamic 2: Recognition and Empowerment.....	195
Conflict Dynamic 3: Broad Participation	198
2. Lead Us not into Temptation.....	202
a. The Desire for Clarity.....	203
b. The Desire for Authority.....	204
c. The Desire for Control.....	206
d. The Desire for Unity	208
e. The Desire for Peace.....	210
IV. Concluding Thoughts.....	212
Bibliography.....	213

Chapter 1

Introduction

Just before Christmas in 2016, the president of Princeton Seminary, M. Craig Barnes, penned a column for *The Christian Century* titled “Why I worry about the pastors of politically divided churches.” In light of the political and social schisms laid bare by the 2016 election, Barnes wrote, “The pastor stands in the pulpit struggling to say something that’s both unifying and prophetic. It’s easy to gloss over the divisive issues of a congregation with a declaration about spiritual unity, and it’s easy to make a congregation afraid of the ‘them’ who are to blame for our problems. But it’s very difficult to preach to a divided ‘us.’”¹

Barnes’ column was one of many pieces on the challenges of preaching that were published following the election of Donald Trump. An Episcopal priest in Greensboro, NC, wrote a column for *Slate* about the tribulations of writing his first sermon after the election.² Methodist minister Adam Hamilton was profiled in *The Atlantic* as someone who “takes on controversial social issues from the pulpit, challenging his politically divided congregation to find common ground.”³ In his piece in the *Journal for Preachers*, “Renounce, Resist, Rejoice: Easter Preaching in the Age of Trump,” Michael Coffey began, “The task of preaching, at least in my lifetime, has

¹ M. Craig Barnes, “Why I Worry about the Pastors of Politically Divided Churches,” *The Christian Century*, December 20, 2016, accessed February 3, 2017, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/why-i-worry-about-pastors-politically-divided-churches>.

² Bernard J. Owens, “Light of the World: Writing My First Sermon for the Age of Trump,” *Slate*, February 1, 2017, accessed February 3, 2017, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/faithbased/2017/02/an_episcopal_priest_on_writing_his_first_sermon_of_the_trump_presidency.html.

³ Yoni Appelbaum, “How One Pastor Is Bridging the Partisan Divide,” *The Atlantic*, last modified June 27, 2017, accessed August 6, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/06/how-one-pastor-is-bridging-the-partisan-divide/531822/>.

never felt more challenging, profound, and necessary as it does now in the age of Trump.”⁴ At least three related books have also been published: O. Wesley Allen, Jr.’s *Preaching in the Era of Trump*, Frank A. Thomas’ *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, and Leah Schade’s *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red/Blue Divide*.⁵

The volatile political and social polarization in the United States has not made things easy for pastors and preachers, especially those ministering to divided communities or who feel at odds with their congregations. Many preachers feel pressed to respond to racism, sexism, or xenophobia that have been brought forward by the campaign and presidency of Donald Trump.

Simultaneously, preachers are aware of heightened partisan divisions in their congregations as more issues become hot-buttons, all of which results in more reactionary and polarized responses.⁶ Much of the post-2016 homiletic literature, including Barnes’ column quoted above, emphasizes these twin challenges of *urgency* and *division*. As Allen puts it:

I write for preachers who feel called to speak prophetically over against the kinds of mean-spirited rhetoric and potentially oppressive policies we have seen in the election and expect to see during [Trump’s] time in office. I write not only to address how to preach “about” issues raised by Trump, but how to preach to a divided America that exists in and around a divided church.⁷

A broad swath of the field of homiletics has been devoted to the *prophetic* side of this coin. Few if any homiletic resources urge preachers to eschew difficult topics in sermons; there seems to

⁴ Michael Coffey, “Renounce, Resist, Rejoice: Easter Preaching in the Age of Trump,” *Journal for Preachers* 41, no. 3 (2018): 3–9.

⁵ O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *Preaching in the Era of Trump* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2017); Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018); Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018). Allen more specifically addresses social division wrought by the 2016 election, while Thomas takes a broader view of prophetic and moral preaching in light of racism, white supremacy, inequality, and other realities that led in part to Trump’s popularity. Schade is focused on churches that are divided socially and politically, especially over controversial justice issues.

⁶ For more on polarization in the United States, see Pew Research Center, “The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider,” *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, October 5, 2017, accessed August 6, 2018, <http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>.

⁷ Allen, Jr., *Preaching in the Era of Trump*, 9.

be general agreement among homileticians that preachers have a responsibility to address pressing issues of the day in light of the gospel, divisive or not. Such preaching is often identified specifically as *prophetic preaching*, a homiletic category in which the preacher brings a message to the congregation “for the purpose of critiquing a dangerous and unjust situation and providing an alternative vision of God’s future.”⁸ However, much less homiletic energy has been focused on congregational conflict or division. In 2007, Stephen Farris noted that despite a wealth of publications about how to manage church conflict, he was aware of only one “rather general” book on preaching in situations of conflict: William Willimon’s *Preaching About Conflict in the Local Church* from 1987.⁹ As a result, the homiletic field has an embarrassment of riches when it comes to prophetic preaching and addressing that which is *urgent*, but is much less equipped to attend to *division*.

In this chapter I offer an overview of prophetic preaching, its claims and assumptions, and its use as the homiletic approach for dealing with controversial social concerns. I highlight some of the themes and tensions embedded in prophetic preaching, including the need for “courage,” the use of pastoral approaches as tactics for delivering controversial messages, and the way in which prophetic preaching prioritizes transmission of an urgent message. While prophetic preaching offers an approach to dealing with social concerns, I contend that it is not well-positioned to respond to the breadth of fears and needs of preachers in moments of social conflict, nor does it adequately address underlying or resulting conflict and division.

⁸ John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 117.

⁹ Stephen C. Farris, “Preaching for a Church in Conflict,” in *The Folly of Preaching: Models and Methods*, ed. Michael Knowles (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 142. Farris’ chapter lifts up the role of preaching in the cultivation of Christian and ecclesial identity in conflict situations. The book he references is William H. Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987). Willimon focuses on preaching and “substantive” conflict—disagreement about facts, goals, methods or values.

I. The “Prophetic Preaching” Paradigm

In *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach*, Lenora Tubbs Tisdale provides a broad overview of prophetic preaching. She summarizes the perspectives of Philip Wogaman, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Walter Brueggemann, Marvin McMickle, John McClure, and Cornel West, among others, to provide a comprehensive examination of significant voices in prophetic preaching, including texts that use other language to describe similar homiletic orientations, such as “social crisis preaching,” “liberation preaching,” and “preaching justice.”¹⁰ Rather than adding her own definition to the discussion, Tisdale distills from these scholars “hallmarks of prophetic preaching”: its roots in the biblical witness, particularly the Hebrew prophets and Jesus of Nazareth; its countercultural challenge to the status quo; its attention to “the evils and shortcomings of the present social order” and a particular concern for corporate and public issues; and both its critique of what is *not* of God and its hope for the new reality of liberation and justice that God will bring to pass.¹¹ A prophetic sermon is rooted in Scripture, and moves from the condemnation of a lived reality contrary to God’s purposes toward the vision and promise of God’s redeeming and transformational action to make things right and just.

African American homiletic traditions demonstrate a deep commitment to prophetic preaching developing from suffering and lamentation to liberation and hope.¹² Kenyatta Gilbert identifies prophetic preaching in the African American tradition as “Exodus preaching,” born from the liberating narrative of the Exodus from Egypt. Gilbert writes that Exodus preaching is “daring speech that offers a vision of divine intent” and “reveals a picture that enables persons and faith communities to interpret their situations in light of God’s justice, and to name as sin activities that

¹⁰ Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 5–6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3–10.

¹² McClure, *Preaching Words*, 117.

frustrate God’s life-giving purposes.”¹³ Though contextually specific, Gilbert’s definition of Exodus preaching aligns with Tisdale’s overview of prophetic preaching. In fact, writes Gilbert, “African American prophetic preaching is not fundamentally different from prophetic preaching in general, except to the extent that it is seen as God-summoned speech clothed in cultural particularity.”¹⁴

Much of what has been written about post-2016 election homiletics fits within the paradigm of prophetic preaching. Frank Thomas’ *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* follows this genre, as he defines a dangerous sermon as “a message of peace and freedom for all” in “a time when white nationalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy are installed—and massively empowered—at the highest levels of American government.”¹⁵ Another volume in the post-election homiletic genre is a sermon anthology entitled *Preaching as Resistance: Voices of Hope, Justice, and Solidarity*. Through a diverse panoply of sermons, *Preaching as Resistance* “confronts the dangerous structures of authoritarianism and oppression and proclaims the transformation, possibility, and hope stirring in the gospel of Christ.”¹⁶

Leah Schade’s research since the 2016 election has focused on how preachers approach controversial issues in their sermons “during this deeply divided time in our nation’s history.”¹⁷ Rather than using the language of prophetic preaching (because, she writes, definitions of “prophetic” can vary), Schade surveyed preacher’s attitudes and approaches toward preaching on

¹³ Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *A Pursued Justice: Black Preaching from the Great Migration to Civil Rights* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), ix–x.

¹⁴ Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *Exodus Preaching: Crafting Sermons about Justice and Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 6.

¹⁵ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xx. Thomas notes that it was the language of “moral imagination,” more than that of prophetic preaching, that “spoke fresh to me and summoned me to write this book” (xxii).

¹⁶ Phil Snider, ed., *Preaching as Resistance: Voices of Hope, Justice, and Solidarity* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2018), back cover.

¹⁷ Leah D. Schade, “Anger, Fear, and Consequences of Prophetic Sermons: First Report from the Research Survey ‘Preaching about Controversial Issues,’” in *Preaching and Culture* (presented at the Academy of Homiletics, Dallas, TX: Unpublished, 2017), 152. Results were published as part of her book, Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*.

“controversial justice issues.”¹⁸ She defines such issues as affecting people on multiple levels (personal, family, institutional, societal, etc.), evoking a wide range of opinions and strong emotional responses, involving “rights” and “responsibilities,” and being debated publicly and/or politically at some level. As such, Schade’s characterizations of controversial justice issues correspond with the larger genre of prophetic preaching. In fact, Schade designed her study to relate to Tisdale’s work, and Schade states that the data she collected “can be used to quantify attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of clergy engaging in prophetic preaching [as Tisdale has framed it].”¹⁹

A. *The Prophetic Challenge*

Both long-standing texts on prophetic preaching and more recent writing on the challenges of preaching since the 2016 election point to similar homiletical concerns: the internal and external pressure preachers feel to address issues of injustice or social inequality, the difficulties of offering a perspective that might be divisive within a congregation, the desire of pastors both to critique and to offer encouragement to congregations caught between alternative realities and visions of life in community, and the sense of call preachers feel to name aloud what they see as God’s message to the church in troubled times, despite possible consequences. “It is the kind of preaching that can ‘get ministers into trouble’ with their congregations,” writes Tisdale, “because it often goes against societal norms, pronouncing not only grace but also God’s judgment on human action or inaction.”²⁰

Social location is a significant factor in how preachers understand the challenges of prophetic preaching. When preachers in situations of privilege tackle burning social concerns in

¹⁸ Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, 18–19.

¹⁹ Schade, “Anger, Fear and Consequences of Prophetic Sermons,” 152–154.

²⁰ Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 3.

their sermons, the result can be disturbing for those who feel indicted as perpetrators of injustice or confronted as bystanders and co-conspirators, especially if such disruption is something they do not often encounter. As Christine Smith writes, “For the more privileged, social location is often a reality that can simply be lived and not thought about or reflected upon.”²¹ But the task of prophetic preaching is complicated for preachers in marginalized communities, as well. Though Exodus preaching “lands on the ear of the despairing and is dedicated to help them interpret their situation in light of God’s justice and the quest for human freedom,”²² this can mean critiquing systems and traditions that have been sources of stability, familiarity, and protection amid experiences of injustice. In addressing injustice, preachers in marginalized or oppressed communities are asked to honestly critique even their own traditions, since those traditions have often participated in the oppression of some of their people, and to imagine new kinds of theological thinking that could transform those traditions.²³

Social location also means that different preachers experience different levels of risk when they speak against principalities and powers. A female preacher in a denomination that has only recently begun to ordain women might have more to lose when critiquing a patriarchal system than a man would in the same denomination because her presence in the pulpit represents the changing status quo. In recent history, persons of color or in the LGBTQ community who have been outspoken preachers about civil rights have lost their livelihoods and even their lives for speaking out. For some preachers, the “principalities and powers” themselves may react to a prophetic message and seek to shut down the preacher’s challenge. As Thomas writes:

It is dangerous in this white-supremacist America to move the sphere of one’s moral concern out of the circumference of one’s group, and include the outcast, stranger, marginalized, and hated. It may or may not get you killed, but it certainly will get you

²¹ Gilbert, *Exodus Preaching*, 1.

²² Christine M. Smith, *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1998), 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

persecuted; fired; harassed; labeled “enemy,” “traitor,” and such, especially if you choose to preach dangerous sermons.²⁴

The necessary courage articulated in many prophetic preaching resources suggests that public risk is among the inherent dangers of taking on the principalities and powers. Because of the potential public consequences, a preacher needs courage simply to speak aloud a prophetic message.

Given these dynamics, much prophetic preaching literature is oriented toward helping preachers find the courage to deliver a vital, prophetic message to the congregation. Tisdale writes that when preachers are able to name their fears before God and others, the Holy Spirit can give the courage needed to confront and act in the midst of fear.²⁵ Thomas professes that his book “is meant to help preachers preach dangerous sermons based upon the clarity of their moral imagination for the good of the individual and community.”²⁶ *Preaching as Resistance* calls pastors to “find courage and your voice” in order to preach in these “challenging times.”²⁷

Charles Campbell describes preaching that resists principalities and powers as “redemptive preaching” that exposes the deadly ways of the powers and envisions God’s new creation.²⁸ Campbell readily acknowledges that this kind of preaching—especially exposing the powers—means that preachers may be met with opposition or create conflict with their sermons, which is why “Such preaching will require imagination, compassion, and *courage*.”²⁹

B. Prophetic How-Tos

Scholars offer various formulas for gaining and sustaining the courage to speak prophetically. For Tisdale, the courage needed for prophetic witness is a spiritual reality. The Spirit of God “gives the

²⁴ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xx.

²⁵ Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 18.

²⁶ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxiii.

²⁷ Snider, *Preaching as Resistance*, back cover.

²⁸ Charles L. Campbell, *Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 105.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 119. Emphasis mine.

prophet not only a call but also the message to deliver and the passion and courage to deliver it," she writes. "If the flames of prophetic passion are to be rekindled, it is the Spirit who will need to relight them."³⁰ Tisdale calls for reconnecting spiritual practices like prayer and meditation with social activism and advocacy—aspects of the Christian life that are often separated in Christian discipleship.³¹ In addition to their impact on courage, spiritual practices and temperament are essential for cultivating the character needed for prophetic preaching. Campbell suggests that because preachers are as susceptible to the temptations of the powers as anyone, "Preaching in the face of the powers requires pastors to live their lives engaged in the practices of nonviolent resistance. Without that commitment, preachers will not be able to discern the workings of the powers in the world or to resist them nonviolently in the pulpit."³² Thomas argues for the cultivation of the moral imagination, which is the means by which the preacher can "grasp and share God's abiding wisdom and ethical truth in order to benefit the individual and common humanity," even in the midst of chaotic experiences of human life.³³ Moral imagination helps evoke new vision, empathy, wisdom, and even the language of poetry and art to lift and elevate the human spirit.³⁴

For writing and preaching prophetic sermons, a commonly suggested tactic is to employ a pastoral approach, specifically recognizing that care for the congregation is both the precursor to prophetic preaching, and its orienting principle. Allen suggests that prophetic preachers approach their work as a movement from pastor to prophet. "If we sound off as a prophet without our congregation (or members of it) knowing and trusting that we care for them," Allen writes, "they will never accept us as *either* pastor or prophet. If, instead, we first establish a strong pastoral

³⁰ Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

³² Campbell, *The Word before the Powers*, 158.

³³ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxiii–xxiv.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xxi.

relationship with our congregation (and *all* its members), then they will trust us when we claim a prophetic voice, whether they agree with our stance or not.”³⁵ Without love, Tisdale says, a difficult message will not be received: “If prophetic preaching is born out of thinly disguised anger at a congregation, out of frustration with a congregation, or out of a desire to appear loving so that the message will be heard and accepted, people will know it. We cannot fake love in the pulpit.”³⁶ The preacher’s care for parishioners is able to outweigh (or counteract) the difficult words offered from the pulpit, allowing the hearer to receive a message that might otherwise feel hurtful or judgmental. Tisdale continues, “If the message we bring is genuinely born out of love—a love regularly practiced for even the most recalcitrant of sinners—hearts may well be opened to the prophetic message of the gospel in ways we cannot even begin to imagine or anticipate.”³⁷

C. The Message Reigns Supreme

Although homiletics distinguish between “pastoral” and “prophetic” preaching, most see intrinsic connections between the personal needs of individual parishioners and broader, communal concerns for justice.³⁸ Many go out of their way to avoid or denounce any dichotomy between pastoral and prophetic preaching, because both help people “reframe their lives in a way that provides a fresh, transforming, and restorative theological vision for living.”³⁹ Dale Andrews in particular argues that in the black church there is an intrinsic connection between pastoral and prophetic impulses, especially in preaching. He writes that as the center of worship black preaching is part of a communal effort “to nurture black personhood within the biblical revelation

³⁵ Allen, Jr., *Preaching in the Era of Trump*, 26.

³⁶ Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 43.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ John McClure explains this in McClure, *Preaching Words*, 100–101, 117–118.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 101. McClure is referring to work done by J. Randall Nichols, *The Restoring Word: Preaching as Pastoral Communication* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

of God's activity in spiritual and historical liberation."⁴⁰ For Andrews, because black preaching focuses on faith identity, it naturally brings together the care and nurture of the black person alongside the liberating and meaning-giving presence of God revealed in scripture.⁴¹

Still, tension exists between pastoral homiletic approaches and prophetic ones. Prophetic preaching is caricatured as angry vitriol about all that is wrong in the world, while pastoral preaching is parodied as prophetic preaching's opposite: preaching-as-therapy meant to make people feel better about themselves. In contrast to the urgency of the prophetic, pastoral preaching is perceived as coddling the hearer, avoiding the hard truths, and offering soft and fluffy words that ensure everyone stays comfortable. Both extremes can be homiletic "temptations":

[In the face of controversial social issues], we are tempted to preach spirituality, self-help messages, and a gospel of individual grace. We are tempted to soothe our consciences by saying the pulpit is not a bully pulpit, and proclamation and politics have nothing to do with one another. We are tempted, on the other hand, to shout out, "Damn, the torpedoes!" and forge ahead to preach on the above topics as one doing battle.... We are tempted not just to name and address the elephant in the church but to attack it like a wild boar in *Lord of the Flies*.... We are tempted to don the mantle of the angry prophet, speaking truth to power regardless of the consequences.⁴²

Thomas offers a similar dichotomous formulation:

Many clergypersons choose to be silent, realizing that "politics" is polarizing, and the best thing is not to offend anyone by saying or doing anything that remotely could be conceived of as "controversial." Some preachers resort to name-calling and condescending rhetoric that titillates an assenting and fawning audience, but effects no real change because it does not call people to the depths of their moral imagination for the potential of sustained and effective action and resistance.⁴³

These portrayals imply that the polarized (and mischaracterized) ends of the spectrum are to be avoided, and some hybrid or midpoint between the furious prophet and the passive consoler is

⁴⁰ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology & African American Folk Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 23.

⁴¹ Andrews highlights four major biblical tenets that are the commonly distinguished as "defining revelation for black churches and black theology," contribute to the development of faith identity, and undergird a communal ethos of care: creation and *imago Dei*, the Exodus narrative, the suffering of Jesus and conversion, and eschatology and the kingdom of God (Ibid., 40–49).

⁴² Allen, Jr., *Preaching in the Era of Trump*, 23–24. Comma after "Damn" is in Allen's text.

⁴³ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxiii.

preferred. Mary Donovan Turner writes that these distinctions are “artificial and misleading,” because, according to scripture, “Prophetic preaching is filled with grace...[and] the pastoral preacher is also not afraid to bring the community words that will truly feed and nourish its members. These words may challenge, correct, guide, and educate. A pastoral word brings what nourishes the community, even when that word is difficult to hear.”⁴⁴

However, juxtapositions of the pastoral and the prophetic—like those made by Allen and Thomas—are typically made *as part of an argument in favor of the prophetic*. In a post connected to the publication of *Preaching as Resistance*, the editor, Phil Snider, rejected the idea that a preacher has to choose between prophetic and pastoral orientations, and seemed to speak in favor of a hybrid or midpoint: “Preaching prophetically is among the most important ways to extend pastoral care, especially by equipping listeners to seek justice with and for those crushed by the ruling powers.” But, he continued, “If one doesn’t preach prophetically, at least from time to time as situations demand, one also neglects to preach pastorally.”⁴⁵ His logic seems to be that because prophetic preaching extends a particular kind of pastoral care, neglecting the prophetic means not being fully pastoral. It is rare, however, to find the reverse argument—that prophetic preaching without the pastoral is no longer prophetic. More often, the scale is weighted toward the prophetic, regardless of the consequences. A hybrid of pastoral and prophetic is preferred, but if push comes to shove, the prophetic should win out. Underlying the paradigm of prophetic preaching is a conviction that *speaking the prophetic message is essential*.

Allen walks the prophetic/pastoral line when he writes, “Preachers...are called to care very much about the consequences of our sermons. Granted, we should care a little less than we do

⁴⁴ Mary Donovan Turner, “Prophetic Preaching,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 102.

⁴⁵ Phil Snider, “10 Unfortunate Myths about Preaching as Resistance,” *Chalice Press*, last modified October 1, 2018, accessed October 3, 2018, <https://www.chalicepress.com/10-Unfortunate-Myths-about-Preaching-Resistance.aspx>.

about people *liking* us for our sermons. But we don't simply serve the content of the theological and ethical claims of Christian traditions; we also serve the church to whom this content is given.⁴⁶ Allen's concern is the relationship between preachers and the congregations that might "turn on us" if we speak openly about controversial issues. Preachers should be sensitive to their audiences and not berate them, Allen says. However, he continues, "When we step into the pulpit, our job is not simply to proclaim the gospel but to get the gospel heard—to *get it heard so that it might be believed and lived*."⁴⁷ Even as Allen identifies the relational consequences of prophetic preaching, he affirms the importance of the message and its impact.⁴⁸ The implication in many of these texts is that pastoral preaching without the prophetic dodges the preacher's responsibility for addressing the urgent issues of the day, but prophetic preaching without being pastoral is simply a poor *strategy* for getting heard by a congregation resistant to that which would challenge it. Rather than bearing theological or relational importance in itself, a pastoral approach becomes a mechanism by which the prophetic can be heard, like the spoonful of sugar with the medicine.

After sending out materials announcing the publication of *Preaching as Resistance*, Brad Lyons, president of Chalice Press, wrote:

We received a response saying what we need is less politics in the pulpit. This emailer seemed to fear the church would lose people because political sermons divide members. He believed church should be a haven from politics. I understand where he is coming from. I disagree, but I understand. *Preaching as Resistance* may not be right for your church or your ministry or your listeners. But for those who seek a prophetic call to justice, for those who crave words of encouragement in hard times, for those who bristle when unspeakable acts are inflicted in the so-called name of faith, and for those who seek to do

⁴⁶ Allen, Jr., *Preaching in the Era of Trump*, 24.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

⁴⁸ Allen recognizes the relational dynamics of preaching and advocates for conversational approaches to preaching that are not merely about message transmission. I use this quote to demonstrate the difficulty even conversationally-oriented homileticians have in working through the complexities of prophetic preaching and trying to thread the needle between message-driven prophetic homiletics and other approaches to preaching.

justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, *Preaching as Resistance* may be just what you need.⁴⁹

Lyons' words reinforce of the primacy of the prophetic message. Though he nods toward those who might not find the book useful, few pastors or preachers would want to be counted among those who *don't* seek justice, *don't* bristle at unspeakable acts, or *don't* want to walk humbly with God. The clear implication is that prophetic message should always be the order of the day, regardless of possible congregational disruption or division. Thomas makes the prophetic imperative even more stark:

If I do not reach deep into the moral imagination and envision a world beyond the supremacist, nationalistic, and oppressive culture in which I live, then I have sacrificed my principles and embarrassed my calling as a minister of the gospel. If I participate in preaching smooth patriotism and evangelism divorced from the lack of material prospects of the marginalized, or preach an over-promised gospel of wealth and prosperity that benefits the few instead of a dangerous gospel to serve the poor, then when I lay my head on the pillow at night, I am a non-Christian and non-person.⁵⁰

For Thomas, rejecting the call to speak and preach prophetically in this way is a denial of not only ministerial call, but of discipleship and even personhood.

As prophetic preaching denounces oppression, poverty, injustice, and human suffering, it seeks social change that will have an immediate and lasting impact on people's lives. For the preacher, a sense of critical urgency and magnitude undergirds the message. The feeling of urgency, however, makes it a problematic model for preachers who also want to attend to division or polarization within their congregations. On one hand, prophetic preaching presumes conflict and division as byproducts of the message, which is why courage is needed to preach prophetically, and why pastoral strategies are employed to help difficult messages be heard. On the other hand, if prophetic preaching is the primary model for addressing controversial social and

⁴⁹ Brad Lyons, "Why We're Publishing 'Preaching as Resistance,'" *Chalice Press*, last modified October 1, 2018, accessed October 3, 2018, <https://www.chalicepress.com/Why-Were-Publishing-Preaching-as-Resistance.aspx>.

⁵⁰ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxi.

ethical issues, the preacher is left with limited means by which to attend to ensuing conflict, because in the end the urgency of the message supersedes relational and pastoral considerations like conflict and division. Our main homiletic model for dealing with controversial social issues is, first and foremost, about getting a message across. As in the examples above, pastoral sensitivity is seen as reasonable and even necessary for delivering a prophetic message; not seeking to berate parishioners, for instance, demonstrates an appropriate prophetic tempering of the message so it can be heard more readily. But other concerns, such as how hearers will respond to the preacher after a controversial sermon or whether the sermon will cause conflict or division in a congregation, are largely dismissed—or are characterized as a failure of nerve or desire for avoidance on the part of the preacher, for which the only antidote is courage.

D. Competing Goods

In the early 2000s, homiletic researchers conducted interviews with 260 parishioners in 28 congregations to find out more about what churchgoers think about preaching and sermons.⁵¹ This *Listening to Listeners* study found that “The vast majority of listeners...give strong authorization for preaching related to controversial issues and reveal a very strong desire for their pastors to preach more often about difficult matters of life and faith.”⁵² However, one of the study’s advisory board members, Lee Ramsey, readily acknowledged that many preachers “simply do not accept this [finding about preaching and conflict] as true.”⁵³ Ramsey theorized that pastors reject the finding for reasons including a fear of conflict, an unwillingness to engage controversial concerns from the

⁵¹ Ronald Allen et al., *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), vii; Ronald J. Allen and Mary Alice Mulligan, “Listening to Listeners: Five Years Later,” *Homiletic* 34, no. 2 (January 1, 2009).

⁵² Mary Alice Mulligan et al., *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 92.

⁵³ Allen and Mulligan, “Listening to Listeners: Five Years Later,” 8–9, note 6.

pulpit, and the desire to be liked. Allen and Thomas name these fears, as well. Allen recognizes that when preaching about significant social issues like racism or homophobia, preachers may fear members of their church family “in the sense that we fear if we preach on issues like those named above which offend us greatly, these people will turn on us.”⁵⁴ Thomas confirms, “Many clergypersons choose to be silent, realizing that ‘politics’ is polarizing, and [believing that] the best thing is not to offend anyone by saying or doing anything that remotely could be conceived of as ‘controversial.’”⁵⁵

Tisdale notes that prophetic preaching can instill all kinds of fears in the preacher. “If I’m totally honest,” she writes, “I would have to admit that sometimes when I attempted to preach a ‘prophetic’ sermon, I did so with a significant amount of anxiety and even downright fear. Prophetic preaching makes me nervous.”⁵⁶ Tisdale proposes seven reasons why preachers avoid becoming “prophetic witnesses,” including several rooted in fear:

- 1) An inherited model of biblical interpretation that marginalizes the prophetic dimensions of scripture;
- 2) Pastoral care for parishioners (who are often dealing with their own grief and fear);
- 3) Fear of conflict, and specifically fear of adding to existing conflicts;
- 4) Fear of dividing a congregation;
- 5) Fear of being disliked, rejected, or made to pay a price for prophetic witness;
- 6) Feelings of inadequacy in addressing prophetic concerns;
- 7) Discouragement that our own prophetic witness is not making a difference.⁵⁷

Leah Schade’s research digs into clergy reticence about preaching on controversial justice issues. In one portion of her survey, Schade focuses on the “emotional” component of preachers’ hesitancy to preach about controversial issues, which are based on four of Tisdale’s categories (numbers 2 through 5 above): pastoral concern for parishioners, fear of conflict, fear of dividing a congregation, and fear of being disliked, rejected, or made to pay a price for prophetic witness.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Allen, Jr., *Preaching in the Era of Trump*, 23.

⁵⁵ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxiii.

⁵⁶ Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 13–19.

⁵⁸ Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, 21–22.

In order to test whether these proposed reasons held true for her respondents, Schade offered survey takers statements like, “People may see me as too political” or “Some people might withdraw their membership,” and asked respondents to indicate which reflected their personal hesitations about preaching on controversial justice issues. She then boiled down the responses to four main “emotionally-based” fears clergy harbor: 1) fear about hurting or dividing the congregation, 2) fear about compromising the clergy’s ability to effectively minister to the church, 3) fear about receiving negative pushback for being “too political,” and 4) fear about loss—loss of members, money, and their own positions.⁵⁹

While it is unclear how many preachers become dissuaded from prophetic or controversial preaching because of their fears, Schade does note that several pastors in her survey reported they had stopped or scaled back such preaching due to congregational pushback (such as parishioners who stopped attending worship or withdrew money from the church, or the threat of being forced out of a pastoral position).⁶⁰ Moreover, eighty percent of the clergy in the study reported that they had received negative feedback when they preached about controversial justice issues, which appears to confirm their fears.⁶¹ The negative responses preachers receive may also be a significant reason preachers were reluctant to believe the findings of the *Listening to Listeners* study, in which listeners claimed they *wanted* preachers to talk about difficult issues in their sermons.

Schade’s research highlights important distinctions that are often lost in discussions of prophetic preaching. First, preachers’ fears that they will (at a minimum) receive negative feedback after preaching on controversial issues appear to be confirmed. Controversial preaching can lead to conflict and division—at least between the pastor and some congregation members, if not also among congregation members themselves. This suggests that it is pastorally prudent to weigh the

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶¹ Schade, “Anger, Fear and Consequences of Prophetic Sermons,” 158–159.

consequences of possible conflict and division against the delivery of the prophetic message. It is not that the prophetic message is unimportant, but that divisive consequences in the congregation are real *and also equally important*.

Second, in prophetic preaching literature, preachers' fears about how a congregation will react to a controversial sermon are often presented as stemming from vanity or self-preservation. The courage needed to preach a prophetic sermon is articulated as the courage to overcome personal fears, including "fear of rejection, fear of being attacked by those who disagree with us, fear of not being able to adequately defend our point of view, or even fear of losing our jobs."⁶² For both Tisdale and Barbara Lundblad, an antidote is to name and confront our fears so that we can move beyond them. "Though we are afraid, we must speak," affirms Lundblad.⁶³ But Schade's research demonstrates that pastors worry *not only* about their own self-preservation, but about *what conflict and controversy will do to their relationship with—and relationships within—their congregations*.

Third, prominent in much of the prophetic material is the assumption that the potential detrimental effect on relationships is always worth the risk of the message. Yet if preachers are afraid to speak a prophetic word because it might cause damage to the relationships they have with their congregations, or to relationships within their congregations, then fears of prophetic preaching are not merely personal psychological or emotional blocks to doing the right thing. They may not be lapses of courage. Instead, *they are choices between competing goods: that of speaking a difficult but prophetic word, and that of sustaining particular kinds of relationships with and within a congregation*. In the framework of Craig Barnes, it is the tension of trying to preach a

⁶² Barbara K. Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 17.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 18.

prophetic *and* unifying word. In the framework of Wes Allen, it is trying to figure out how to preach not only *about* divisive issues, but *to* a divided church.

Because prophetic preaching is the primary homiletic model for dealing with controversial issues, the default posture is to prioritize the *message* rather than *relationships* when making homiletic choices about those controversial issues. From the perspective of prophetic preaching, “pastoral” approaches are often construed as placating attempts to “keep the peace” or avoid dealing with difficult issue, and thus such approaches are only appropriate as tactics and strategies to get the prophetic message across. The urgency of the message supersedes the potential relational consequences of its proclamation. As a result, the prophetic preaching paradigm as it has been constructed cannot *also* be expected to attend to the conflict it creates or from within which it emerges. If the preacher’s desire is to communicate a message of repentance and change in light of pressing contemporary concerns, prophetic preaching may be the way to go, but it is inadequate for the task of homiletically addressing the relational realities of conflict and division.

Further, the prophetic preaching paradigm largely casts aside the idea that relational concerns have significant merit when it comes to urgent issues. As a result, few resources have been invested in thinking about *the nature of the relationships* that are cultivated in and through prophetic preaching. For example, when the authority and sovereignty of the preacher are preserved in the prophetic preaching tradition, so, too, are hierarchy and, to some extent, the silencing of dissent. Yet many prophetic messages of justice and equality seek to affirm the importance of diversity and inclusion. Greater engagement with the concepts and dynamics of conflict as they relate to preaching helps elevate relational concerns within prophetic preaching and in other situations of division. Put another way, relational concerns should be part of the prophetic orientation because, on the one hand, prophetic preaching without this reflection could exacerbate the kinds of inequalities prophetic preaching seeks to overturn, and, on the other, the

restoration of whole and just relationships is central to the prophetic message of God's redemptive work in the world.

II. Beyond the Prophetic/Pastoral Bind

The majority of people interviewed as part of the *Listening to Listeners* study affirmed that preachers should address controversial and challenging issues from the pulpit. As one said, "Sermons should make us think a little. They shouldn't just be pat little messages to make us feel good every week."⁶⁴ But the study results did not give pastors carte blanche to preach whatever and however they see fit. Participants in the study offered specific suggestions. Crucially, interviewees did not want simple answers to complex questions. In fact, in many cases, they didn't want answers at all. Instead, listeners demonstrated a "longing for an authentic word from preachers who are willing to risk and join with others in the difficult task of understanding God's way amid life's challenges and crises."⁶⁵ Rather than telling them what to think, parishioners hoped preachers would help them learn how "to think through issues" with the eyes of faith.⁶⁶ In fact, listeners "rarely express a desire to hear their pastor or preacher represent a particular viewpoint when speaking about controversial or challenging issues...[they] are more interested in their pastor's understanding of how scripture or a Christian perspective influences their ideas."⁶⁷

Parishioners were not ignorant of the pitfalls of this kind of preaching, however. They acknowledged that there was risk for both the pastor and the congregation in preaching about conflict or controversy, not least because of the diversity of opinions present in any one community.⁶⁸ Listeners were particularly attentive to how a preacher might go about such a

⁶⁴ Mulligan et al., *Believing in Preaching*, 92.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 91–92.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

sermon, eschewing preaching that singled out or judged members of the congregation, and valuing sermons that offered multiple perspectives, “so that what is presented is either a ‘balanced view’ or a spirit of openness to alternative views.”⁶⁹ Specifically, pastoral sensitivity was important: “The listeners in our study express deep appreciation for pastors who voice respect for others, especially for those with whom they disagree.”⁷⁰ An overall sentiment was:

Many listeners simply hope that their pastors will offer informed, compassionate guidance in light of Christian faith and that the preacher’s comments will reflect an awareness of a variety of approaches and concerns when addressing life’s challenges. They acknowledge that preaching, like the other theological tasks of the church, involves ambiguity and complexity so that faithfulness bids us to speak to life’s difficulties without having to resolve every problem or know every answer.⁷¹

The *Listening to Listeners* study offers important perspective as to how preachers might address controversial or challenging issues. Both prophetic preaching and *Listening to Listeners* affirm that tough issues should be dealt with in sermons, and that the important issues of the day belong in the church. In fact, *Listening to Listeners* participants went so far as to say that they’d like to hear more often from their preachers about difficult matters of life and faith.⁷² But listeners seem rarely interested in hearing the pastor defend a position on an issue, and are more concerned about how sermons might “occasion a deeper encounter with life’s complex questions in light of Christian faith.”⁷³ Moreover, listeners reflected particular sensitivity toward diverse viewpoints in the congregation, and attentiveness to the impact of potentially divisive or volatile topics.⁷⁴ In essence, those who are hearing sermons aren’t much interested in being spoon-fed (or beaten up with) solutions, and even as they reflect longing for tools and insights with which to learn and grow they are equally aware of the destructive potential of controversial subjects in preaching. The

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 107–108.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

listeners are hungry to interpret life and faith in a complex world, and they, too, are worried about divisive fallout from doing so.

These insights from *Listening to Listeners* underscore the need to give more homiletic attention to conflict and division related to *and distinct from* prophetic preaching. Because prophetic preaching focuses on what is wrong in the world and the need to change direction and follow God's way, the literature about it serves as a catch-all for sermons on everything from sexism to climate change. But in congregational life, big-picture prophetic issues always overlap with personal relationships and local decision making. For instance, the choice to put solar panels on the roof might be the result of a church's broad commitment to environmentalism, but the debate about the cost of the panels becomes budget-focused squabbling among church members. Subjects that might be seen as primarily theological, like who is able to receive communion (children, for example), may be controversial even when they are not connected to social justice. Though some *Listening to Listeners* respondents reflected a fear of conflict or a wish to avoid it, the results more often showed a desire to learn how to engage difficult issues and resulting conflict with faithfulness—and with care for people who might feel excluded or judged, or who might disagree with the dominant viewpoint. The question of whether and how homiletics attends to conflict and division is thus related to, but not encompassed by, prophetic preaching. *What is missing in homiletic theory and literature is sustained attention to conflict and division as theological and practical dimensions of preaching.*

A. Differences in Tension

Conflict, as defined broadly by most experts, is what results from differences that produce tension.⁷⁵ Some theorists would add that differences exist in proximity or are brought to the fore by movement, but the basic concept is the same: conflict among humans results from living in a world where people are different from one another and exist in relationship together.⁷⁶ Given that differences are a normal and natural part of human existence, conflict is an inevitable reality whenever humans, no two alike, are gathered.

Consequently, one way to consider how or whether homiletic theory deals with conflict is to ask the question, “How does homiletic theory address *difference* and *tension*?” At first glance, in both Christian theology and homiletic theory it appears that difference—understood as the diversity that emerges from creation—is celebrated. We affirm the many cultures and ethnicities that are part of human experience, we teach our children about the multiplicity of animal and plant life in the creation story, and we highlight Pentecost as a moment when human difference (language in particular) is infused with the Holy Spirit, and divisions are bridged.

However, tension is mostly experienced (and thus expressed) negatively, and our desire is to quickly come to resolution or brush it aside—and for good reason. “We try to avoid situations which may lead to feeling hurt,” writes Carolyn Schrock-Shenk. “There is much about conflict that is just plain messy, chaotic, and anxiety-filled.”⁷⁷ The tension of conflict represents a threat to the connections that constitute who we were created to be—connection with God and with each

⁷⁵ Thomas W. Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture of Justpeace* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2010), 13.

⁷⁶ See Diana Francis, *People, Peace and Power: Conflict Transformation in Action* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002), 3.

⁷⁷ Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation,” in *Making Peace With Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation*, ed. Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 33.

other. In the context of Christianity, negative emotions and reactions to tension often become equated with sin, and we come to see conflict as displeasing to God:

Many of us have been taught God is absent in conflict. We have often worked to achieve a false unity based on uniformity of thought and action rather than oneness of spirit. This belief has devastated relationships and congregations. It has closed down emotions, honest expression, and dialogue about differences. It has often led us to speak and act as if we have the complete truth. Then we become insecure and suspicious when faced with different beliefs or opinions.⁷⁸

Christian conflict theorists point out that despite expressed support of diversity and difference in the church, we are challenged by the tension diversity can bring and have not always found good ways to deal with it. Sometimes our reactions such as “fight or flight” are embedded patterns of the larger cultural norms around us.⁷⁹ As Michelle Saracino writes, “Even with the best of intentions, Christians, like any other group, exhibit all sorts of adverse feelings and reactions when faced with others,” including powerful fear.⁸⁰ If difference and diversity are part of the created order, and tension and conflict are the natural outcome of difference and diversity, we are left with a disconnect between our affirmation of difference and our responses to the tension it brings.

This inevitable tension is rarely addressed directly in homiletic literature, and yet it lies at the heart of the fears preachers name when considering prophetic preaching or addressing controversial issues. It is a fear of the *consequences* of preaching—consequences that are primarily *relational*. Preachers are hesitant to preach about controversial issues because of the effects such preaching might have on the relationships between the congregation and the preacher, and among the congregation members themselves. *Listening to Listeners* suggests that these same concerns are also carried by those who listen. Schrock-Shenk writes that most Christian communities are not equipped theologically or practically to deal well with conflict because we believe that God is

⁷⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁹ Ronald S. Kraybill, *Peace Skills: A Manual for Community Mediators* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 9.

⁸⁰ Michele Saracino, *Being about Borders: A Christian Anthropology of Difference* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2011), 17–18.

absent in conflict, and because “We have seldom been taught how to be proactive in conflict and to understand that conflict transformation is a deeply spiritual task that demands commitment, discipline, new skills, much practice, and constant vigilance from each of us.”⁸¹

Both prophetic and pastoral preaching can themselves exemplify conflict avoidance. If the stereotype of pastoral preaching is that care for the congregation is best accomplished by not saying anything troubling or controversial in order to keep the peace and relieve anxiety, the prophetic corollary is privileging the voice and authority of the preacher over the diversity of opinions in the congregation and eliminating ways to express disagreement. Neither deals directly with the differences in the room (other than dismissing them explicitly or implicitly) and both seek to downplay or bring to resolution the tension different opinions or perspectives have created. Further, our spoken and unspoken Christian assumption that conflict equals sin—because of our concern for unity and harmony, our fears of disconnection and division, and our associations of negative feelings with God’s absence or displeasure—has left us theologically and homiletically bereft of resources to attend to differences or the tensions of conflict.

III. A Relational Homiletic

Preachers who take a strongly prophetic approach to controversial social issues and those who are concerned about the damage controversy might do to a congregation share a common desire: the restoration of *right relationship*. The social inequities and injustices of our world demonstrate the brokenness of relationships and communities; likewise, the fear of division and alienation wrought by conflict is often rooted in a fear of broken relationships. Thus one way to conceive of a homiletic approach that would transcend the prophetic/pastoral divide and attend to the tension and difference of conflict is to use a *relational* lens. What would a *relational approach to*

⁸¹ Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 34.

homiletics look like? How might a focus on *right relationship* add to homiletic theory—especially as a way to respond to conflict and division?

This dissertation argues for a relationally-frontloaded approach to preaching, but not as an alternative to dealing with conflict or truth-telling. Instead, I propose that preaching focus on the continuation and integration of relationality throughout the preaching act rather than bracketing relationship until some future moment after the message has been delivered. A relational homiletic centers on a theological anthropology of relationality in which difference, conflict, and interdependence are principal and undeniable forces that shape human experience. As it responds to conflict, a relationally-focused approach takes seriously the need to address difference and tension, and attends to ethical considerations like power, plurality, honesty, and constructive and destructive conflict. A relational homiletic finds its foundation in the interconnectedness (*koinonia*) of the members of the body of Christ as the heart of Christian life.

My formulation of a relational homiletic to address conflict begins in chapter 2 with an overview of the insights and concepts of conflict transformation, an emerging area within the field of conflict resolution. Conflict transformation marks a recent shift in conflict resolution away from externally-mediated, top-down, settlement-focused approaches to conflict and toward contextual, participatory, and relationship-oriented theories and methods. I explore the development of conflict transformation and describe the work of three scholars—Robert Bush, Joseph Folger, and John Paul Lederach—who specifically argue that constructive and effective responses to conflict require a relational orientation that extends beyond the presenting conflict situation. Conflict transformation can lead to more productive, just, and lasting outcomes because it maintains and improves the quality of interaction and moves relationships toward mutual respect and

engagement. As a catalyst for change, constructive conflict has the potential to transform unjust and violent situations toward justice and peace—when relationships are put at the center.⁸²

An interstitial chapter 2.5 bridges chapters 2 and 3. Here, I focus on particular theological orientations of Christian conflict transformation scholars and practitioners. Using analysis by Christian ethicist Ellen Ott Marshall, I articulate the theological rationale behind Christian conflict transformation as it has been portrayed by scholars and practitioners in conflict transformation. This includes how Christian theology both aligns with and is challenged by the experiences and expertise of conflict transformation scholars. My overview of Christian conflict transformation leads me to assert the need for a more comprehensive theology for conflict, particularly to examine more fully questions of difference and tension.

In chapters 3 and 4, I construct a theology for conflict that can undergird a relational homiletic. Using the work of theologians Ed Farley, Wendy Farley, and Miroslav Volf, I consider four interlocking topics: 1) the nature and dynamics of *difference* and *diversity* in creation, 2) the human experience of *tension* and *conflict* that result from encountering difference, 3) distinguishing *sin* or *evil* from difference or diversity, and 4) the role of *human relationship* in sin and redemption. Chapter 3 focuses on the tragic nature of the human condition, in which human beings exist as interconnected and diverse beings whose encounters with others are consequentially fraught with incompatibility and tension. I articulate the challenges of the tragic experiences of life and the sinful and idolatrous ways we respond to those experiences, including the rejection of compassionate obligation for the other and expressions of exclusion based on difference. Chapter 4 turns toward redemption and the ways in which we are saved both through

⁸² As John Paul Lederach writes, “When relationships collapse, the center of social change does not hold. And correspondingly, rebuilding what has fallen apart is centrally the process of rebuilding relational spaces that hold things together” (John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 75).

and for vulnerable and interdependent relationship with others, even as we are not removed from tragic realities of tension and conflict. I then suggest that kinds of Christian practice can shape us toward a relational way of being that aligns with God's intentions for creation and helps us prioritize orientations toward the other amid forces that would drive us apart.

Chapter 4.5 is another shorter interstitial chapter for the purpose of reviewing previous relationally-focused trends in homiletics and setting the stage for my approach. Chapter 5 then describes my relational homiletic for conflict. First, I outline its theoretical and theological foundations based on the theology for conflict articulated in chapters 3 and 4 and conflict transformation theory and practice in chapter 2 and 2.5. Second, I explain various aspects of its practice, namely: four *convictions* that undergird a relational homiletic; four formational *practices* for the relational preacher; and specific *implications* for the function, form, and content of sermons themselves.

Chapter 2

Conflict and its Transformation

Conflict resolution encompasses a variety of theories and practices dealing with the nature and causes of human conflict, and has developed into multiple approaches and responses among scholars and practitioners. Conflict transformation, a relatively recent development in the field, represents a shift from many previous assumptions about conflict—such as that it is intrinsically destructive, or that it needs to be avoided or controlled. Proponents of conflict transformation argue that constructive conflict is a critical part of human identity formation, interpersonal connection, and social change. They emphasize the importance of direct participation in and leadership of conflict processes by the parties involved because the exchange between and empowerment of the parties directly impacts how the conflict proceeds. Even more, conflict transformation focuses on the quality of relationships and interactions between parties in conflict, in addition to or even more than reaching a final settlement or resolution. For these reasons, conflict transformation is an intriguing conversation partner for the idea of relational preaching in situations of conflict.

In this chapter, I introduce the field of conflict resolution and describe the emergence of conflict transformation within it. I outline the characteristics of conflict transformation and point to particular elements that distinguish it from other approaches to conflict. I then more deeply examine two approaches to conflict transformation that particularly attend to the quality and continuation of relationships in and through conflict. Throughout this overview, I begin to sketch connections between the kinds of relational interactions we choose to employ and strengthen, and our goals and hopes in response to conflict.

I. Drawing Battle Lines

Scholars define conflict itself in varied ways, but generally reflect the idea that, *in our interactions with others, we encounter differences that produce tension*. Some scholars emphasize that conflict takes place between interdependent parties who perceive incompatibilities in their goals and desires.¹ Others name proximity and movement as factors in conflict, because differences are less significant when parties are at a distance or rarely encounter each other.² Christian ethicist Ellen Ott Marshall highlights the Latin roots of the word *conflict*, which mean “striking together,” to show how the confluence of difference and relationship are part of being alive. “Because we exist as different elements (and of different elements) in relationship to others,” she writes, “our existence is one of conflict...To be is to be in conflict.”³ These broad definitions illustrate that all kinds of conflict, from the simplest miscommunication to the bloodiest war, are born of the same elements: differences that in relationship or proximity cause tension. Conflict understood in this way is a natural, normal, and unavoidable part of life. In general, when I refer to conflict in this dissertation, I am referring to the natural and normal phenomenon of tension produced by difference.

Conflict resolution is a broad category of concepts, methods, and research dedicated to engaging and resolving human conflict. In addition to spanning academic disciplines, conflict resolution encompasses both theory and practice, and is applied to conflict at multiple levels, including in families, organizations, communities, countries, and internationally.⁴ Louis Kreisberg notes that despite divergent ideas about the focus, breadth, or even overarching theories of what

¹ Joseph Folger, Marshall Scott Poole, and Randall K. Stutman, *Working Through Conflict: Strategies for Relationships, Groups, and Organizations*, 8th ed. (New York; London: Routledge, 2017), 4.

² Francis, *People, Peace and Power*, 3.

³ Ellen Ott Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics: Conflict, Faith, and Human Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 2.

⁴ Louis Kriesberg, “The Evolution of Conflict Resolution,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, ed. Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenyuk, and I. William Zartman (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009), 15.

constitutes conflict resolution, there is general agreement within the field that conflicts can be better managed than they often are, and that destructive and violent conflict can be limited or avoided.⁵

The need to respond to and deal with conflict has been a part of human societies for all of human history, and various methods and approaches to conflict have developed over time. In the last century, contemporary conflict resolution as a field of study has come to include not just stopping violence but building conditions for peace, such as post-violence reconciliation, enhanced justice systems, and processes for conflict management over time.⁶ Some of these emphases emerged within peace and transnational negotiation movements following the First and Second World Wars in light of increasingly destructive methods of warfare, and due to heightened desire for international cooperation in response to fascism and totalitarianism. Liberation and decolonization processes, including non-violent resistance led by Mohandas Gandhi in the efforts for Indian independence and in civil rights struggles in the United States, also added to development and analysis of conflict resolution in relationship to social change.⁷

The academic study of conflict and its resolution reaches across multiple disciplines, from psychology to communication theory to intercultural studies to international diplomacy and peacemaking. In the first decades of the 20th century, for instance, social psychologists connected human conflict to the idea of “competitive struggle,” exemplified in social Darwinism and its insistence that human behavior (and thus conflict) could be explained “in terms of innate, evolutionary, derived instincts.”⁸ As social Darwinism declined, “psychological” and “social-

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁷ Ibid., 19, 21.

⁸ Morton Deutsch, “Introduction,” in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, ed. Morton Deutsch and Peter T. Coleman (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 11–12. Diana Francis argues that humans associate conflict with “pain, misery and death, of the violence and war with which it is associated” principally because human relationships have been framed across cultures in “competitive and dominatory,

political-economic” modes of thought, emphasizing internal psychological or external social and contextual factors respectively, became dominant in the social psychological study of conflict. Later theory and empirical study of conflict resolution in social psychology focused on the socialization of the individual and the ways in which individuals were shaped by context and experiences.⁹ Even game theory, which formulated in mathematical terms the problems and realities of conflicts of interest, contributed to psychological understandings of conflict.¹⁰

In communication studies, scholars of social conflict initially focused on rhetorical, persuasive, and diplomatic aspects of conflict, particularly in public settings and discourse during the social turmoil of the 1960s.¹¹ In 1972, however, communication scholars gathered in Philadelphia to give concerted attention to the idea of “conflict communication” as a distinct area within speech communication studies.¹² In subsequent years, scholars came to define conflict as including three elements: incompatibilities (mutually exclusive or diametrically opposed goals, often rooted in perceptions), an expressed struggle, and interdependence among two or more parties (wherein the parties need one another to achieve their goals).¹³ By this definition, conflict communication is often distinguished from other types of social interaction, including “persuasion, argumentation, compliance gaining and group decision-making.”¹⁴

Conflict resolution scholar Diana Francis traces the specific field that came to be called “conflict resolution” back to the academic study of international relations and organizational

rather than co-operative, terms,” an association that is “not inevitable” (Francis, *People, Peace and Power*, 3).

⁹ Deutsch, “Introduction,” 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13–14.

¹¹ Linda L. Putnam, “Definitions and Approaches to Conflict and Communication,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication: Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice*, ed. John G. Oetzel and Stella Ting-Toomey, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013), 2.

¹² Those views were captured in Gerald R. Miller and Herbert W. Simons, *Perspectives on Communication in Social Conflict* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974). Noted in Putnam, “Definitions and Approaches to Conflict and Communication,” 3.

¹³ Putnam, “Definitions and Approaches to Conflict and Communication,” 6–8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

management in the 1950s and 1960s, which was mainly the realm of conflict resolution theorists who were also practitioners.¹⁵ In those decades significant institutes and centers for the study and practice of peacebuilding, disarmament, and conflict resolution opened in the United States and Europe.¹⁶ The civil rights movements in the United States and elsewhere in the 1960s and 1970s “revealed how conflicts could be conducted constructively, often with little violence.”¹⁷ The years that followed saw a rise in alternative dispute resolution in court systems and practices of “neighborhood mediation” (particularly in the English-speaking world),¹⁸ as well as international mediation in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, among others.¹⁹ Such developments emphasized impartiality, negotiation, diplomacy, and mediation to the benefit of all parties.²⁰ Specifically, writes Francis, “‘Conflict resolution,’ as an approach and set of processes which led the field and gave it its name, is focused on mediated dialogue which seeks to address the fundamental needs of both or all parties to a conflict.” She adds, however, that conflict resolution in general does not “address major asymmetries of power and does not use the language of justice.”²¹

Throughout following decades, approaches to and understandings of conflict continued to shift. The communication scholars gathered in 1972, for instance, noted the emerging consensus that conflicts were not “an aberration that disrupted harmony” but were instead “natural, inevitable, and normal,” and were influenced by how parties involved chose to handle them.²² They also claimed that conflict itself was not bad or good, but could be “functional” and

¹⁵ Francis, *People, Peace and Power*, 6.

¹⁶ Kriesberg, “The Evolution of Conflict Resolution,” 6–7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸ Francis, *People, Peace and Power*, 6.

¹⁹ Kriesberg, “The Evolution of Conflict Resolution,” 9.

²⁰ Francis, *People, Peace and Power*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²² Putnam, “Definitions and Approaches to Conflict and Communication,” 10.

“dysfunctional,” which demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of the nature and function of conflict in relationships and society:

Conflict was highly beneficial in preventing system stagnation, stimulating interest and curiosity, fostering cohesiveness within groups, operating a safety valve to express problems, and invoking change. In contrast, it could be detrimental to relationships, produce inflexible behavior, lead to decreased communication, and result in escalated stalemates....Destructive conflicts were the ones in which disputants ignored the original goals and, instead, aimed at hurting or annihilating each other.²³

Since the late 1980s, the field of conflict resolution has expanded and diffused further. The end of the Cold War, political revolution in Eastern Europe, and peace processes in South Africa, Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine, among others, gave rise to possibility of “progress” and “people power,” in contrast to “realist” paradigms of previous generations.²⁴ New recognition that “enemies in intercommunal conflicts were usually condemned to live together after the violence stopped” led to greater emphasis on human rights, democratization, and peacebuilding for the future, rather than the mere ceasing of violent warfare.²⁵ Intellectual literature about nonviolent action and social transformation, peacebuilding by international agencies, debates about the effects of globalization, and normative and critical theory challenged previous models and approaches to conflict in myriad ways.²⁶ The wide ranging influences and orientations, as well as competing ideas between theorists and practitioners and disagreement about the field as “academic study” or practical training, led to varied approaches and responses to conflict.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Stephen Ryan, *The Transformation of Violent Intercommunal Conflict* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 8.

²⁵ Ibid., 9.

²⁶ Ibid., 12–16. Stephen Ryan outlines more fully the ways in which these elements, among others, affected conflict theory, but what I wish to highlight is the diversity and complexity of influences on thinking about and approaches to conflict in the latter decades of the 20th century.

A. *Fighting Words*

Hugh Miall has identified three major (and overlapping) approaches to conflict intervention that have come to the fore: conflict resolution, conflict management, and conflict transformation.

Conflict *resolution* theorists argue that it is possible to rise above conflicts through creativity, new thinking, and deeper exploration of its root causes in order to reframe the disputed issues toward common purposes.²⁷ Because the goal of conflict resolution is to move from “zero-sum, destructive patterns of conflict to positive-sum constructive outcomes” acceptable to all parties, resolution generally involves intervention and mediation by third parties who help propose satisfactory agreements.²⁸ Conflict *management* proponents, by contrast, see any kind of comprehensive resolution of conflict as “unrealistic,” because conflict among people with different values and interests is ineradicable; thus “the best that can be done is to manage and contain” conflicts when they erupt.²⁹ The management view of conflict focuses on political intervention and the use of power to set parameters and induce conflicting parties toward settlement.

Other practitioners and theorists took issue with aspects of both the resolution and management models. The language of “resolution,” suggested that conflict could (or should) be “ended” or “closed,” or even eliminated altogether.³⁰ “The problem with this view,” writes Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, “is that it is rarely possible nor desirable to completely close up a conflict even when we resolve specific pieces of it.”³¹ Conflict scholar and practitioner John Paul Lederach

²⁷ Hugh Miall, “Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task,” in *Transforming Ethnopolitical Conflict: The Berghof Handbook*, ed. Alex Austin, Martina Fischer, and Norbert Ropers (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2004), 3, accessed April 4, 2017, http://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2013/4682/pdf/miall_handbook.pdf.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁰ Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 35.

³¹ *Ibid.* Kumar Rupesinghe noted that a “resolution” approach to conflict is also culturally “Western” (he uses the term “Occidental”) in terms of its approach to time and cosmology: “Underlying the resolution perspective is the assumption that the conflict as a formation has a finite life—to be followed by an eternal afterlife either as ‘solved’ or as ‘intractable.’ This perspective is clearly Occidental. In the Judeo/Christian/Islamic perspective processes are characterized by their progress or regress toward...a final state of affairs, which may be good (heaven, resolution) or bad (hell, ‘intractable,’ like ‘the poor shall always

writes that as he worked with communities in Central America he discovered they had questions and concerns about the concepts of resolution and management in response to conflict. The language of resolution carried a “danger of co-optation,” and felt like “an attempt to get rid of conflict when people were raising important and legitimate issues.”³² The Latin American participants felt that conflicts happen for a reason, and wondered, “Is this *resolution* idea just another way to cover up the changes that are really needed?”³³

Frequently, resolutions to conflict were isolated from the systemic dynamics of power and oppression in which they were embedded, meaning any solution was short-lived and ineffective. Similarly, conflict “management” implied a need to control conflict in ways that could silence important voices, obscure critical issues that needed to be brought to the surface, and maintain the status quo rather than seeking necessary social change. Critics of management and resolution models questioned the prioritizing of control, containment, and settlement of disputes, and noted a lack of attention to the significance of structural inequality and injustice.³⁴ Focusing on negotiating

be with you’). The linear perspective is also found in Western macro-history” (Kumar Rupesinghe, “Conflict Transformation,” in *Conflict Transformation*, ed. Kumar Rupesinghe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 51). But, he argues, this perspective is not a given: “There is no good reason (except cultural bias) why conflict theory should, consciously or unconsciously, privilege Occidental time cosmology when an alternative is available. Here I am thinking of the Oriental, particularly the Daoist and Buddhist, time perspective with its cyclical notions of rebirth, couple to the possibility of progress toward higher states of existence” (Ibid.). Especially when working cross-culturally, he continues, it is critical to think about cultural norms, because “By contrast [to Western thinking], Buddhist time is infinite, there being for all practical purposes no beginning and no end, although there is the transcendence of *nirvana* to other unknown and unknowable types of existence. Correspondingly, we would expect a view of conflict *ad interminable*, no beginning and no end, flowing from eternity to eternity like an infinite river, possibly with a delta somewhere infinitely far out where the energies accumulated in that river pour into the ocean and take on other forms, but in no way extinguished. Again, time cosmology will impose itself on the conceptualization of conflict, demanding this image of the process, expecting actors and commentators to behave, talk and write accordingly, imposing neither beginning nor end” (Ibid., 54–55).

³² John Paul Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation of the Guiding Principles by a Pioneer in the Field* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), 3).

³³ Ibid., 3.

³⁴ Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 35.

the immediate needs of the parties involved, while important, often left underlying systemic and relational patterns unaddressed.³⁵

A third approach, conflict *transformation*, began to emerge out of these and related concerns. Language of “transformation” in conflict had been largely absent in the conflict literature during the Cold War, but gained traction soon after, particularly in so-called “asymmetric conflicts,” in which power imbalances between the parties made mediation inappropriate and ineffective.³⁶ By the 1990s, the language of conflict “transformation” was more commonly used and more fully articulated. Raimo Väyrynen argued that violent conflict “cannot be separated from the social structures and their transformations,” which would require transformation of the actors involved, the issues at stake, the rules by which conflict was enacted, or the structures themselves, such as through redistribution of power and qualitative change in mutual relations.³⁷ Robert Bush and Joseph Folger suggested transformation as an approach to mediation, most notably in the influential 1994 publication, *The Promise of Mediation*. Folger and Bush focused on relational processes rather than settlement or solution-oriented goals, arguing that “The unique promise of mediation lies in its capacity to transform the quality of conflict interaction itself, so that conflicts can actually strengthen both parties themselves and the society they are part of.”³⁸ Lederach likewise argued in favor of conflict transformation:

Transformation provides a language that more adequately approximates the nature of conflict and how it works and underscores the goals and purpose of the field. It encompasses a view that legitimizes conflict as an agent of change in relationships. It describes more accurately the impact of conflict on the patterns of communication, expression, and perception. Transformation suggests a dynamic understanding that conflict

³⁵ Ellen Ott Marshall, ed., “Introduction: Learning Through Conflict, Working for Transformation,” in *Conflict Transformation and Religion: Essays on Faith, Power, and Relationship* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 2.

³⁶ Ryan, *The Transformation of Violent Intercommunal Conflict*, 16–17.

³⁷ Raimo Väyrynen, “To Settle or Transform? Perspectives on the Resolution of National and International Conflicts,” in *New Directions in Conflict Theory: Conflict Resolution and Conflict Transformation*, ed. Raimo Väyrynen (London: SAGE Publications, 1991), 4–5.

³⁸ Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger, *The Promise of Mediation: The Transformative Approach to Conflict*, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: Wiley, 2005), 13.

can move in destructive or constructive directions, but proposes an effort to maximize the achievement of constructive, mutually beneficial processes and outcomes.³⁹

These scholars, among others, helped conflict transformation take its place “as the latest development in the lineage of approaches to conflict: conflict prevention, management and resolution.”⁴⁰

II. Forces of Nature

The history outlined above brings to the fore several conceptual shifts that distinguish conflict transformation theory from previous approaches, and help to define it more clearly.⁴¹ While some conflict resolution or management theories may see conflict as intrinsically negative and best avoided or prevented, conflict transformation theory considers the existence of conflict to be a natural part of life in human society—an inevitable result of differences of culture, belief, and experience that in proximity produce tension.⁴² Conflict simply *is*; it is part of human existence. In conflict transformation, the moral and ethical questions about conflict are not about its *existence*, but about possibilities, processes, and trajectories of response. Conflict transformation proponents do not claim that everything we might *associate* with conflict—such as violence or war—is normal and necessary. Our responses to conflict can be constructive or destructive; violent retaliation, for instance, is destructive *and* avoidable.⁴³ But, writes Schrock-Shenk, “The measure for whether a response is constructive is not whether conflict lessens. Rather, the criteria are whether the response moves the situation toward more justice *and* the people involved toward right and equal relationships.”⁴⁴

³⁹ John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 19.

⁴⁰ Marshall, “Introduction: Learning Through Conflict, Working for Transformation,” 3.

⁴¹ I am grateful to Ellen Ott Marshall for her synthesis of these shifts (*ibid.*, 3–6).

⁴² Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 13.

⁴³ Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 30–31.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31. Emphasis mine.

To that end, transformation theorists hold a positive view of conflict's potential for social good because they have seen and experienced conflict as "a necessary element in transformative human construction and reconstruction of social organization and realities,"⁴⁵ and thus "a vital agent or catalyst for change."⁴⁶ Stifling honest conflict in order to control and manage it can actually slow or deter needed social transformation; as Lederach notes, conflict management approaches can convey that "our primary interest in peacemaking is to reduce or control volatility," rather than to promote justice and change.⁴⁷ Moreover, conflict itself can be formational, because "conflict has the ability to transform our perceptions of self and others, our relationships, our whole social setting."⁴⁸ In that way, processes and practices that respond to conflict also have the potential to shape and transform us, and lead us toward positive outcomes in which "the goal is not only to *end* or *prevent* something bad but also to *begin* something new and good."⁴⁹

One of conflict transformation's significant shifts from the rest of the conflict field is its focus on constructive interaction and relationship between parties as a goal. "Resolution of particular issues may indeed be part of the process," Marshall writes, "but transformation pushes for 'deep-rooted, enduring, positive change in individuals, relationships, and the structures of the human community.'"⁵⁰ As conflict escalates, it generates a sense of weakness and incapacity among those involved, and parties become more self-protective, suspicious, hostile, and closed. "With or without the achievement of agreement," Bush and Folger write, "the help parties most

⁴⁵ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 17.

⁴⁶ Miall, "Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task," 4. As was mentioned above, Stephen Ryan notes the influence of non-violent change movements and research as a significant factor in the development of conflict transformation theory (Ryan, *The Transformation of Violent Intercommunal Conflict*, 12–13).

⁴⁷ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 17.

⁴⁸ Schrock-Shenk, "Introducing Conflict," 45.

⁴⁹ Kraybill, *Peace Skills*, 5.

⁵⁰ Marshall, "Introduction: Learning Through Conflict, Working for Transformation," 5. Marshall quotes Kraybill, *Peace Skills*, 5.

want, in all types of conflict, involves helping them end the vicious circle of disempowerment, disconnection, and demonization—alienation from both self and other.”⁵¹ The deep desire of those in conflict is to reestablish positive interaction and to feel competent and connected again; this is what conflict transformation seeks to achieve. While conflict can lead to pain, violence, and disconnection, *constructive* conflict “can bring surprising new growth and intimacy and understanding to our relationships.”⁵² Responding to conflict constructively can build our capacities to express needs and desires in open and honest ways; take responsibility for our actions; acknowledge and redress situations of injustice and victimization; and recognize and accept the value and dignity of others. Engaging in these activities “makes us better people; it improves our ability to live well and create a world in which others can live well.”⁵³

Proponents of conflict transformation emphasize that conflicts are embedded in larger contexts and layers of society. For systemic and structural change to take hold, stakeholders from high-level leaders to local community members need access to the process and its outcomes. Settlements negotiated externally by third parties are less likely to create durable peace because local communities have little buy-in, and there is often no mechanism through which they can speak truthfully about wrongdoing or work toward healed relationships.⁵⁴ In large scale conflict, relational connections across society, not just among the parties directly involved, are an intrinsic

⁵¹ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 52–53.

⁵² Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 27. Constructive and destructive conflict are marked by particular characteristics. In constructive conflicts, participants often demonstrate an intent to learn rather than to protect or defend; are motivated toward positive connection with others; respond in cooperative and empathetic ways; and show a capacity to change, adjust, and compromise. In destructive conflict, participants are rigid, insistent and inflexible; they want to protect themselves and hurt the other; they communicate in demeaning ways; and they display competitive domination and subordination patterns of relationship (Ibid., 37).

⁵³ Kraybill, *Peace Skills*, 6. Kraybill continues, “The criterion for success [in conflict transformation] is *not* whether or not ‘settlement’ has been reached. Rather it is whether or not people in conflict have changed or grown in ways that make them better people. More specifically, it is whether or not they have made practical choices that expand their ability to fulfill their potential as human beings and at the same time honor the worth and dignity of others.”

⁵⁴ Francis, *People, Peace and Power*, 39–40.

part of lasting solutions and social change.⁵⁵ But in all forms of conflict, transformation rests on the assumption that participants themselves have the tools and capacity for handling the conflict, and that any models for responding to it “will necessarily be rooted in, and people must respect and draw from, the cultural knowledge” of the people involved.⁵⁶ In that way, conflict transformation demonstrates a paradigm shift not only from violent or destructive conflict to nonviolent, constructive engagement, but from top-down, isolated negotiations to broad-based, relationally-focused ones:

[Conflict transformation]...in the widest sense, will entail not only the shift of specific conflicts from the arena of violence into that of democratic politics, based on the rule of law, but also the transformation of cultural assumptions about the exercise of power: the substitution of *power with* for *power over*, and the assumption of responsibility by “ordinary people,” individually and collectively, for the things that affect their own lives and those of others.⁵⁷

Inclusive and participatory processes that work toward positive change in relationships are needed in various conflict scenarios, not just in international negotiations. In interpersonal or organizational conflicts, parties engaged in conflict transformation are encouraged to “define problems and goals in their own terms,” rather than having a third party (however “neutral”) suggest or impose them.⁵⁸ When parties are responsible for their participation in the process and

⁵⁵ Stephen W. Littlejohn and Kathy Domenici, *Communication, Conflict, and the Management of Difference* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2007), 243–244. However, claims Lederach, the lack of authentic engagement in the public sphere is often the most significant weakness in sustaining genuine platforms for social change. On this point there remains much more to do, Lederach writes: “Our least-developed capacities are the practical mechanisms for how people, whole communities, are provided access and are engaged in the change process and how that engagement creates a sense of ownership, participation, and genuine commitment” (Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 61).

⁵⁶ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 10.

⁵⁷ Francis, *People, Peace and Power*, 7. Nonviolent action and activism has had a significant impact on the development of conflict transformation into something beyond mere “resolution.” Francis in particular has argued that nonviolent action against injustice is a partner with the resolution of conflict in building peace: “The essential values of the two fields, which can be summarised in terms of respect, are not only compatible but arguably almost identical, although one is more ideological/religious and the other more psychological/pragmatic in flavour. Nonviolence emphasises justice and conflict resolution concentrates on needs. Respect can be seen as bringing the two together, since respect for the needs of parties, and insistence on parity of esteem, is what can deliver justice. The focus on dialogue and on the systematic gathering of information is also shared” (Ibid., 47).

⁵⁸ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 13.

its outcome, conflict itself can become “a *positive force* to be embraced and harnessed for its potential to ‘open the door’ [to] genuinely meaningful outcomes and real closure, and—equally or more important—restoration of the parties’ sense of both strength and connection.”⁵⁹ The possibility of sustainable and lasting change that can emerge from inclusive, contextual, empowered conflict transformation is rooted in *and results in* stronger relational connections.

To summarize, conflict transformation advocates argue that conflict, rather than being something intrinsically negative, is normal and unavoidable. Our responses to conflict can be constructive or destructive, but conflict itself is a necessary element of change, so constructive approaches carry the potential for positive shifts in relationships and societies.⁶⁰ Because conflicts are not discrete, isolated events but are embedded in relational systems, patterns of engagement, and social structures, transformational approaches explicitly take into account the contexts in which conflicts take place with an eye toward addressing power imbalances and injustice.⁶¹ Theorists and practitioners of conflict transformation emphasize the quality of relationship interaction and the possibility of restored connection in the conflict process and purpose. Lederach offers a comprehensive definition that draws these elements together: “Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid., 256.

⁶⁰ Conflict transformation theorists note that how we envision conflict has an impact on how we respond to it. The idea that conflict has constructive potential is in some ways a choice or proclivity toward seeing conflict through a constructive lens, which allows us to envision its possibilities and amplify the factors that would lead to positive change. “As we all know too well,” writes Lederach, “many times conflict results in long-standing cycles of hurt and destruction. But the key to transformation is a proactive bias toward seeing conflict as a potential catalyst for growth” (Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 15).

⁶¹ Marshall, “Introduction: Learning Through Conflict, Working for Transformation,” 4.

⁶² Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 22.

A. Just as Well

As I have mentioned, there is debate in the field of conflict resolution about the importance of justice in conflict situations, and its relationship to goals like resolution and reconciliation. A quest for justice can seem a potential obstacle to resolution or reconciliation “because [justice] might be prioritized and thus delay the work on reconciliation,” and “because [justice] means that one pursues the interests of one’s group at the expense of reconciling with another.”⁶³ But focusing on reconciliation as the objective can end up glossing over injustice and the needs of victims in order to reach solutions and agreements more quickly and easily. Prioritizing reconciliation can also elevate and overvalue moments that seem to bring unity, even if those moments are thin veils over festering inequality or unnamed resentment.⁶⁴ (Again, such concerns helped lead to the emergence of conflict transformation, which critiqued conflict resolution and management models that seemed to favor settlement over addressing systemic issues of justice and inequality.)

Of particular importance here is that conflict transformation scholars and practitioners seek to hold justice and reconciliation together. In the frame of conflict transformation, reconciliation is not the same as resolution or settlement of a presenting issue. Reconciliation involves addressing power imbalances and increasing broad participation in conflict outcomes, as well as assessing the social contexts in which conflict takes place in order to push for equitable and lasting social change across lines of animosity.

Francis argues for the partnership of nonviolent action and conflict resolution, writing they are “blood relatives, in fact the twin halves of conflict transformation.”⁶⁵ Emphasizing the

⁶³ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 110. Marshall puts this in terms of teleological ethics, arguing that “One of the dangers of teleological ethics is that the moral agent might use the end to justify any means, concluding that anything goes as long as we are pursuing a moral end” (Ibid., 96). Interestingly, teleological ethics is also a way to explain prophetic preaching, in that when the goal is to get a message across, dismissing other dynamics or considerations (like the breaking of relationships) becomes justified on the road to the larger goal.

⁶⁴ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 111.

⁶⁵ Francis, *People, Peace and Power*, 41.

importance of attending to power dynamics when addressing conflict, Francis contends that when parties hold dramatically different levels of power they cannot enter into a dialogue of “independent equals” unless there is a shift in the balance of power.⁶⁶ The purpose of nonviolent action undertaken by a party with less power is to “bring about a situation in which the impact of the campaign and therefore the relative power of the campaigning group are such that it becomes worthwhile in the adversary’s eyes to enter into dialogue with them.”⁶⁷ Active nonviolence and protest can help set the stage for more productive dialogue and conflict engagement, after which “conflict resolution comes into its own when the scene is ripe for dialogue.”⁶⁸ Though Francis here articulates a sequential process of nonviolent advocacy followed by conflict resolution practices, her larger point is that conflict transformation must integrate justice and dialogue, and that power dynamics cannot be ignored in the efforts toward reconciliation and the restoration of relationships. To that same end, Francis asserts the critical significance of aligning the methods and goals of conflict transformation, arguing that they cannot be at odds:

The idea that outcomes or ends can be separated from processes or means is in itself fallacious. It underlies the belief that violence can produce peace, when in fact it erodes the ground on which peace can be built, throws ever further into the future the occasion for breaking the cycle of violence and starting something new. Doing things constructively—managing relationships, respecting others, building bridges, improving intuitions—*is* peace. There is no static, ideal outcome that can be arrived at once and for all: only people doing things, working at living together.⁶⁹

Justice cannot be denied, nor can power imbalances go unaddressed, because conflict is ongoing and perennial. Neither can manipulated or coercive means lead to resolution, because the ways we relate while addressing conflict have lasting effects. In conflict transformation, justice and the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 249.

building of respectful and honest relationships are intertwined, as are the means and ends of the processes of peacebuilding.

For Lederach, “reconciliation” means an encounter of adversaries in which there is space for “the acknowledging of the past and envisioning of a future” in order to reframe the present.⁷⁰ Reconciliation does not ignore what has taken place, the grief and loss it has caused, or the animosity that remains. Instead, Lederach envisions reconciliation rooted in the idea that “relationship is the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution,” and that encounter between conflicting groups must provide “opportunity and space to express to and with one another the trauma of loss and their grief at that loss, and the anger that accompanies the pain and memory of injustices experienced.”⁷¹ This is a paradigmatic shift in conflict resolution practices away from the framework and activities of “statist diplomacy” and toward “the restoration and rebuilding of relationships.”⁷² Reconciliation for Lederach is a place where truth, mercy, justice, and peace are put in conversation with one another, and each gets a say about the presenting conflict.⁷³ This place becomes a locus “where people and things come together” and where “truth and forgiveness are validated and joined together, rather than forced into an encounter in which

⁷⁰ John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1998), 27.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 24. He continues, “Contemporary conflicts necessitate peacebuilding approaches that respond to the real nature of those conflicts. While contemporary conflicts are indeed hard-core situations—the ‘real politics’ of hatred, manipulation, and violence—and require grounded political savvy, traditional mechanisms relying solely on statist diplomacy and realpolitik have not demonstrated a capacity to control these conflicts, much less transform them toward constructive, peaceful outcomes. Contemporary conflict thus demands innovation, the development of ideas and practices that go beyond the negotiation of substantive interests and issues. This innovation, I believe, pushes us to probe into the realm of the subjective—generally accumulated perceptions and deep-rooted hatred and fear” (*Ibid.*, 25).

⁷³ This is literally true; Lederach often uses an exercise in his conflict transformation workshops where participants take on the roles of “truth,” “mercy,” “justice,” and “peace,” and discuss what each entity is most concerned with in conflict situations. He describes this activity in several resources, but is detailed in John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2014), 83–92. In chapter 5, I explain how this exercise might be used in preaching.

one must win out over the other or envisioned as fragmented and separated parts.”⁷⁴ In this way, Lederach does not distinguish the goals of reconciliation and justice, but seeks both within the framework of relational processes and encounters where “diverse but connected energies and concerns driving the conflict can meet.”⁷⁵

Conflict transformation advocates hold together justice and reconciliation by focusing on the nature and qualities of the relationships of those in conflict, both during the conflict process and as desired outcomes. Neither justice nor reconciliation is possible if one party has oppressive power over the other, or if the groups have not been able to speak the truth of their experiences of the conflict and its ramifications. As Marshall puts it, “Justice is not a step in a process toward something else, namely, reconciliation. It is that justice and liberation are constitutive features of reconciliation. Reconciliation cannot be realized without justice because reconciliation...includes justice. Without justice, reconciliation is incomplete.”⁷⁶ Moreover, she argues, the disrupting and challenging elements of justice, liberation, and reconciliation are inextricably interrelated and must be held together as means *and* ends in the process of conflict transformation, in order to acknowledge and maintain the web of relationships in which we reside and which create obligations among us.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 29. In contemporary settings of conflict, Lederach continues, “The immediacy of hatred and prejudice, of racism and xenophobia, as primary factors and motivators of the conflict means that its transformation must be rooted in social-psychological and spiritual dimensions that traditionally have been seen as either irrelevant or outside the competency of international diplomacy. Reconciliation, seen as a process of encounter and as a social space, points us in that direction.”

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁶ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 111. In the last chapters of her book, Marshall makes a strong argument against any representation of reconciliation that would prioritize it at the expense of justice. “The work of justice making,” she writes, “requires that those in positions of power reckon with their privilege and work toward the redistribution of unjust advantage. That reminder underscores how self-serving the rhetoric of togetherness can be for those in power. True reconciliation requires addressing the causes of separation, not just calling for togetherness. Addressing the causes of separation requires disruption, resistance, penance, and change. In my view, this also requires frameworks (paradigm and narratives) that help us to value the nonlinear process that such work entails” (*Ibid.*, 111–112).

⁷⁷ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 112.

III. It's All Relative

Many of the questions raised by conflict theorists and practitioners that led to the development of conflict transformation echo the concerns of preachers in conflict situations, which I raised in the previous chapter. For instance, in prophetic preaching literature it seems clear that preachers believe conflict, or at least confrontation, is often necessary for change—a conviction that serves to justify prophetic messages in times of controversy. Additionally, the conflict between commitments to justice and liberation and the desire to foster compassionate care and relationship stands at the heart of the (so-called) prophetic/pastoral divide, even though both homileticians and conflict transformation scholars affirm the responsibility and intent to hold both together.

In other ways, however, conflict transformation raises challenging questions for preachers as they consider their roles and goals in situations of conflict. Do preachers see conflict as a natural and normal part of life? As potentially constructive or destructive, depending on how we respond to it? As centered around the quality of relational interaction rather than the presenting issues? Given that conflict transformation scholars advocate for broad participation and inclusion in conflict processes, what does that suggest about monologue preaching in moments of conflict? The integrated approach of conflict transformation encompasses these diverse considerations, and in so doing can push homiletics to more comprehensively consider the complex realities of preaching in situations of conflict. For this reason I find conflict transformation a compelling conversation partner for homiletics, and I address these questions and their implications in greater detail in later chapters.

To conclude this chapter, I explore more deeply the importance of the *relational lens and orientation* in conflict transformation. Throughout conflict transformation literature and research, practitioners and scholars emphasize the interconnectedness of relational dynamics in conflict: how the parties engage each other; the relational systems and networks in which the parties are

embedded; ongoing power imbalances and structural injustices; and how the quality and nature of the relationships themselves, during and after a conflict situation, affect the ebb and flow of conflict over time. Put another way, conflict transformation places relational values at its center and seeks relational means and ends in its processes—not only because they are effective, but because *the quality of the relationships themselves* matter at all stages of conflict transformation.⁷⁸

Here I outline two specific contributions by conflict theorists who examine how relationships between the parties in conflict—and in human interaction generally—function in conflict transformation. First, Robert Bush and Joseph Folger make an argument for the importance of a relational worldview that sees social connection as a good and conflict as an essentially positive phenomenon. Within their relational worldview, conflict transformation is centered on improving the quality of the interaction between the parties in conflict. These transformation processes and goals seek to strengthen human agency and connection amid conflict, not only to transform the presenting conflict but to develop ongoing capacities for seeing others in light of their common humanity. Second, through the idea of “moral imagination,” John Paul Lederach describes the impact of relational understanding and attentiveness in conflict. In Lederach’s construction, the moral imagination creatively holds together that which is currently real and that which might be possible in a situation of conflict, and does so while envisioning the whole scenario within a broader web of ongoing and future relationships with allies and enemies. Those who are catalysts for conflict transformation cultivate moral imagination that acknowledges our interrelatedness and look for opportunities to move from division and fear to respect and love in even the most polarized conflicts. The approaches of Bush, Folger, and Lederach are examples of

⁷⁸ Lederach argues that relationships are central in conflict transformation because “conflicts flow from and return to relationships.” He notes the need to distinguish the relationships from the presenting conflict: “To encourage the positive potential inherent in conflict, we must concentrate on the less visible dimensions of relationships, rather than concentrating exclusively on the content and substance of the fighting that is often much more visible” (Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 17). Focus on the content can sometimes obscure the very thing that needs tending in conflict: the relationship itself.

how relational motivations can be central to transforming conflict, and how strengthening and deepening relationship can become the means and ends of our responses to conflict.

A. *Think Positive*

Robert Bush and Joseph Folger contend that the goal of “settlement” in a mediated conflict is built on an essentially “negative” vision of human conflict. Conflict resolution practitioners, they claim, believe that the best course of action to achieve a “fair” settlement in conflict is to manage and control the conflict in order to limit its continuation or escalation.⁷⁹ Consequently, resolution processes are focused on order, control, and efficiency. Without these parameters, the productive outcome (the settlement) would be threatened by the inherent volatility and unpredictability of conflict. According to Bush and Folger, an implicit belief lies beneath those premises: that conflict will lead to harmful effects unless it is controlled in particular ways (usually by a “neutral” third party or mediator). This belief conveys an essentially negative view of conflict (that it will deteriorate or end without fairness if left to its own devices) *and* a negative view of the parties in conflict (because it implies that “human beings lack the capacity both to effectively govern their own affairs and to adequately consider others”).⁸⁰

The settlement perspective, Bush and Folger argue, is also undergirded by an “individualist” worldview in which interaction with others is primarily transactional and exists for the purpose of gaining what individuals need to fulfill their desires (i.e. to come to a “settlement” about what is fair).⁸¹ Within the individualist ideology, conflict requires control so it “does not spread or persist, so it does not lead to oppression, and so it does not squander satisfaction through

⁷⁹ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 243.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 244.

impasses and poor deals.”⁸² This perspective, in turn, is rooted in a larger view of social interaction as something potentially dangerous, negative, and likely to produce problems, and therefore in need of careful oversight. Paradoxically, Bush and Folger write, this perspective “views human beings themselves as lacking the very capacities needed to engage in both social interaction and conflict without harming themselves and each other.”⁸³

Though Bush and Folger do not explicitly claim that this view of human conflict is wrong, they argue that the vision on which particular practices rest has direct implications on its resulting methods and goals. Because alternative visions can lead to different methods and purposes, it is important for conflict practitioners and mediators to be aware of and attentive to the ideologies on which their theories and practices are based.⁸⁴ Bush and Folger’s interest—besides pointing out the importance of underlying ideologies, and revealing their own—is to offer an alternative position: a relational worldview based on understanding social connection as good, and envisioning conflict as an essentially positive phenomenon.⁸⁵

Bush and Folger argue that conflict is unpredictable and may even be uncomfortable, but it is not inherently explosive or exploitative. Tight control of the conflict process, which can disempower participants, is more likely to lead to frustration and dissatisfaction with the outcome rather than to a sense of justice and closure. By contrast, affirming that participants have inherent capacities for agency and empathy, and the ability to make “sound decisions about their own affairs” and “consider and understand the situations and perspectives of others,” helps to build the parties’ inner strength and connection with others.⁸⁶ In Folger and Bush’s vision, humans are

⁸² *Ibid.*, 245.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ This is an especially important point in their area of conflict resolution—mediation—because mediators claimed and were perceived to be neutral parties in conflict. Part of what Bush and Folger seek is to debunk the myth of the “neutral” mediator, and to encourage their colleagues in the mediation field to more honestly assess underlying ideologies at work in their practices.

⁸⁵ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 250.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

recognized as needing and seeking “measures of individual autonomy *and* social connection, freedom *and* responsibility, and a healthy balance and integration of the two.”⁸⁷ This orientation toward conflict and the parties involved reflects the idea that “social interaction in general, far from being a necessary evil, is a fundamental good.”⁸⁸

This alternative way of envisioning conflict also presents social interaction not as a mere means to an end (like settlement or resolution), but as part of an ongoing process of human identity and community formation, of “discovering and becoming ‘who we really are.’”⁸⁹ In encounters and interactions with other people (which necessarily lead to tension and conflict), we discover what is meaningful to us and what we want to do together and separately. We “transcend the unwanted isolation of the seemingly separate self and realize our participation in a common humanity larger than ourselves. In all of these ways, social interaction—far from being threatening—is profoundly nourishing of our human identity.”⁹⁰ In conflict, humans discover their individual identities in encounters and experiences with others, and they are formed relationally by those encounters as they are made aware of their own hopes, limitations, wants, and needs and those of others in situations of emotional and psychological discomfort and stress. As Bush and Folger summarize, “The essence of this view is that conflict interaction—precisely because it occurs at moments of great challenge to the human sense of agency and connection—offers an unusually potent opportunity to strengthen and deepen both.”⁹¹

⁸⁷ Ibid., 251.

⁸⁸ Ibid. Bush and Folger note multiple influences in the development of a “relational worldview,” such as feminist scholarship including the work of Carol Gilligan on women’s moral development in the 1980s, and other writers and scholars in political philosophy, communication, and sociology. “In sum,” they write, “a consistent set of ideas about human identity and social interaction, which we have called a relational worldview, has emerged in recent decades and has found support in a very wide range of fields and disciplines” (Ibid., 252–253).

⁸⁹ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 251.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 252.

⁹¹ Ibid., 253.

1. Shifts Happen

The relational worldview and positive orientation to conflict held by Bush and Folger have led them to specific mediation and conflict transformation practices that reflect these values.

Specifically, Bush and Folger advocate ways to activate and strengthen the “empowerment” and “recognition” experiences of the parties involved to improve the quality of their interaction.

Conflict generates feelings of weakness and loss of control, alongside confusion, uncertainty, and doubt. When we are in conflict, we experience “a sense of...powerlessness, diminishment, disregard, and victimization,” as we feel hostile and angry toward others. Simultaneously, conflict increases our focus on ourselves, and we become self-protective, guarded, and suspicious.⁹² The emotional and psychological experience of conflict immediately pushes people away from healthy ways of relating and understanding the other, and toward self-preservation, a reality Bush and Folger call “negative conflict spirals.”⁹³ These deteriorating cycles of disempowerment and demonization of the other lead to alienation.⁹⁴ Bush and Folger claim that while we may be angry about an issue or a situation, it is often the breakdown of the relationship itself that is the emotional center of most experiences of conflict:

In general, research...suggests that conflict as a social phenomenon is not only, or primarily, about rights, interests, or power. Although it implicates all of those things, conflict is also, and most importantly, about peoples’ interactions with one another as human beings....What affects and concerns people most about conflict is precisely the crisis in human interaction that it engenders.⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid., 49.

⁹³ Ibid., 54–55.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 50–51. “If a person’s core sense of identity is linked to a sense of both autonomy and connection, and if both of those are compromised at the very same time, it makes perfect sense that [conflict] will be a profoundly disturbing experience” (Ibid., 61).

⁹⁵ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 49. Pointing to research in the social sciences including social psychology and communication, they write, “What people find most significant about conflict is not that it frustrates their satisfaction of some right, interest, or pursuit, no matter how important, but that it leads and even forces them to behave toward themselves and others in ways they find uncomfortable and even repellent. More specifically, it alienates them from their sense of their own strength and their sense of connection to others, thereby disrupting and undermining the interaction between them as human beings. This crisis of deterioration in human interaction is what parties find most affecting, significant—and disturbing—about the experience of conflict” (Ibid., 45–46).

In Bush and Folger's theory and methods, conflict transformation seeks to reverse negative conflict cycles that lead to such experiences of "crisis" by activating a) the parties' capacities for strength and agency within themselves (in response to feeling weak or disempowered), and b) their understanding of and responsiveness to the other (in response to self-absorption).⁹⁶ Bush and Folger call these *dynamic shifts of empowerment and recognition*.⁹⁷ Empowerment processes support self-determination and awareness of inherent capacity for problem solving, and help the parties mobilize their own resources toward achieving their goals.⁹⁸ Such processes might include having the participants define the problems and goals on their own terms rather than having them spelled out by a third party, and encouraging the parties to decide how, or even whether, to settle a dispute. Not only do these approaches build self-respect, self-reliance, and self-confidence in the participants, they engender openness to others because of the empowerment and inner strength they build. Parties are also more likely to uphold and advocate for agendas and outcomes they had a hand in developing, and will feel more satisfied that the processes and results were reasonable and just.⁹⁹

Building from empowerment, *recognition shifts* between the participations are moments when a party moves away from self-absorption toward a greater understanding of the other.¹⁰⁰ "The hallmark of a recognition shift," write Bush and Folger, "is *letting go*—however briefly or partially—of one's focus on self and becoming interested in the perspective of the other party as such, concerned about the situation of the other as a fellow human being, not as an instrument for fulfilling one's own needs."¹⁰¹ The shift of the negative conflict cycle toward moments of

⁹⁶ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 54.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

empowerment and recognition move the conflict process toward transformation. Simply put, Bush and Folger assert:

The stronger I become, the more open I am to you. The more open I am to you, the stronger you feel, the more open you become to me, and the stronger I feel. Indeed, the more open I become to you, the stronger I feel in myself, simply because I'm more open; that is, openness not only requires but creates a sense of strength, of magnanimity. So there is also a circling between strength and responsiveness once they begin to emerge.¹⁰²

Empowerment and recognition shifts have further beneficial and constructive outcomes.

Because the conflict is focused on these shifts rather than on deriving a settlement, the conversation is not tightly controlled but is instead “patiently supported.”¹⁰³ The interaction offers the opportunity for the parties to share their deeply held feelings and assumptions that may underlie the presenting issue.¹⁰⁴ Practitioners of these methods argue that the conversations are less likely to lead to escalation or impasse because in difficult moments the parties are given the choice as to how they want to proceed, rather than having their options dictated or limited. In fact, repeatedly giving the power of choice and control back to the parties is a critical part of this kind of conflict transformation. In situations where the parties are angry or emotional in their exchanges, conflict transformation mediators do not intervene to try to defuse or contain the emotion: “For parties, choosing *how* they want to talk about things, including expressing strong emotions, is an important decision—and one to be left within their control.”¹⁰⁵ This process can lead to “greater calm and better communication” and *less* injustice and oppression because the parties take responsibility, speak openly about deeper issues involved, and make decisions that “consider and respond to each other’s needs based on genuine choice and understanding,” which

¹⁰² Ibid., 56.

¹⁰³ For the most part, Bush and Folger are focused on ways in which a mediator can help facilitate this process, but they also state plainly that these empowerment and recognition shifts and the regeneration of positive interaction can take place between parties even without the presence of a mediator (Ibid., 54).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 249.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 153.

offers greater satisfaction and closure in the minds of the parties themselves because they have freely chosen the agreements.¹⁰⁶

2. Practice Makes Purpose

Bush and Folger affirm again and again that the relational quality of conflict interaction is more important than any specific settlement or agreement. When what most bothers participants in conflict is the degeneration and downward spiral of the interaction with others, what they most want is restoration of constructive interaction.¹⁰⁷ As Bush and Folger write, “When the interaction between [parties in conflict] is humanized, the outcome—whatever it may be—will have a different meaning and quality than it would otherwise have, because they will see the situation and each other in the light of their common humanity, regardless of their differences.”¹⁰⁸ The very difficulties and challenges of conflict are moments of relational formation precisely *because* they are difficult and challenging; they can call out the best of what and who we are as autonomous and connected beings in relationships of freedom and responsibility. Conflict transformation prioritizes that constructive interaction *because* it is constructive, but also because it brings people back into relationship with themselves and others; it is premised on human dignity and interconnectedness.

Moreover, Bush and Folger contend that the driving force behind shifts toward transformational models of mediation are strongly *ideological* rather than springing primarily from academic or empirical learning about how conflict processes work.¹⁰⁹ Bush and Folger believe that “the shifts in the field toward transformative practice are explained by and reflect two profound

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 250.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 250.

¹⁰⁹ This is not to the exclusion of academic research; in fact they note the emergence of a “relational” worldview and orientation across multiple fields and disciplines, including developmental psychology, political science, law, feminist theory, sociology, ethics, and communication (Ibid., 252–253).

ideological impulses—a movement away from the ideology of social separation and conflict control, and a movement toward the ideology of social connection and conflict transformation.”¹¹⁰ Because they see human conflict as an intrinsic part of social interaction, identity formation, and the capacity for human agency and connection, they interpret conflict transformation through relational lenses, aimed toward relational ends.

Certainly Bush and Folger support and encourage this ideological shift toward a relational worldview. But there is more to their argument. “Purpose drives practice,” they proclaim.¹¹¹ Mediators and theorists who have claimed to be acting in “neutral” ways for the benefit of parties in conflict but were determined to help the parties reach a settlement were not as objective or “value-free” as they might have intended, because no matter what model is being used it is undergirded with ideological or value premises.¹¹² For this reason, Bush and Folger also advocate awareness and recognition of the ideological commitments and implicit values that underlie practices and methods. Not only does this awareness help practitioners be more honest in acknowledging their ideologies and values, it allows them to align their practices with their values, which ultimately makes the practices more meaningful and coherent.¹¹³ This a call to the field of homiletics, as well, to assess the claims we make about our practices and our purpose, especially in situations of conflict.

B. Can You Imagine

John Paul Lederach had spent decades working in conflict situations around the world when he came to a realization: building peace is more art than skill, a creative act more akin to the artistic

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 259.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 119.

¹¹² Ibid., 1.

¹¹³ Ibid., 2.

endeavor than the technical process.¹¹⁴ “My feeling,” he writes, “is that we have overemphasized the technical aspects and political content to the detriment of the art of giving birth to and keeping a process creatively alive. In so doing we have missed the core of what creates and sustains constructive social change. The corrective...is to seek the genuine connection of discipline and art, the integration of skill and aesthetics.”¹¹⁵ Lederach claims that the key to transcending cycles of violence is the generative and mobilizing power of the *moral imagination*, “the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist.”¹¹⁶ At the heart of the moral imagination is the recognition of the centrality of relationships in the process of human conflict.

In thinking about the cultivation of moral imagination for conflict transformation, Lederach considered the question, “What disciplines, if they were not present, would make peacebuilding impossible?”¹¹⁷ The four disciplines he identifies, which are the core of the moral imagination necessary for peacebuilding, rest on strongly relational premises. The first does so most directly: the moral imagination for peacebuilding finds life in “the capacity of individuals and communities to imagine themselves in a *web of relationship* even with their enemies.”¹¹⁸ Without strong webs of relationship across various layers of community and society, building constructive social change is not possible. When relational networks collapse, so does the center on which social change is built; rebuilding that center requires the rebuilding of relationships and the spaces that support them.¹¹⁹ “Over the years,” Lederach writes, “I have come to intuit more than scientifically prove,

¹¹⁴ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, ix.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, ix.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

to feel more than quantify, that the center of building sustainable justice and peace is the quality and nature of people's relationships."¹²⁰

For Lederach, the possibility of peace requires that persons see the relational and social patterns in which they are embedded, and acknowledge the ways in which individuals and communities are interdependent. This is not just interconnectedness with those like us or those with whom we agree, but with those who are on the opposite side of the fence or the firing line. As Lederach puts it, peace requires that we recognize that "The well-being of our grandchildren is directly tied to the well-being of our enemy's grandchildren."¹²¹ Further, we must come to understand our own place and role within that web and its broader patterns, for good or ill. Being able to see the larger web of relationships allows us to recognize and accept our interrelatedness in and impact on that web.¹²² "Patterns of violence are never superseded without acts that have a confessional quality at their base," writes Lederach. "...These acts emerge from a voice that says in the simplest form, 'I am part of this pattern. My choices and behaviors affect it.'"¹²³ The long-term transformation of conflict requires relational awareness and commitment.

A second discipline for moral imagination resists the power of dualistic and dichotomous thinking about other people. Conflict, especially polarized or violent conflict, is often heightened and escalated by stark, either-or categories about the groups and individuals involved: we are right

¹²⁰ Ibid., 76. Further, he writes, "Authenticity of social change is ultimately tested in real-life relationships at the level where people have the greatest access and where they are most directly affected: in their respective communities" (Ibid., 56).

¹²¹ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 35.

¹²² Lederach describes working in Latin America where often the Spanish word *enredo* is used to describe everyday conflicts. *Enredado* is to be tangled together (the root *red* is the word for net), so the main metaphor for a conflict already suggests interconnectedness among people. Lederach suggests that the words and metaphors we use to describe conflict are connected to the ways we think about and respond to it. So, for instance, when conflict means we are *enredado*, the solution has to do with untangling and restitching the net, the relationships. Most often the first question toward a solution was not "what do we do?" but "who do I know who can help create a way forward?" As Lederach puts it, "Solutions emerged from relational sources, connections, and obligations." (Ibid., 76–77).

¹²³ Ibid., 35.

and they are wrong; we are just and they are corrupt.¹²⁴ Lederach argues that moral imagination is “built on a quality of interaction with reality that respects complexity” and refuses the limitations of harsh, dichotomous categories.¹²⁵ Combining the idea of “paradox” (the holding together of seemingly contradictory truths that reveal a greater truth) and “curiosity” (attentiveness and inquiry into things and their meaning), Lederach suggests that *paradoxical curiosity* is the ability to approach social realities and even other people with a respect for their complexity while resisting dualistic categories of truth and remaining inquisitive about the possibilities of holding together seemingly contradictory social energies in a greater whole.¹²⁶ In paradoxical curiosity, complexity is a gift—a friend—because complexity offers the possibility of newness that has gone unnoticed, instead of the predictable traps and pitfalls of the false and bifurcated categories dictated by conflict. The power of paradoxical curiosity in moral imagination allows us to suspend immediate judgment in order to explore more fully the contradictions that are set before us. This does not mean relinquishing the possibility of making any assessments at all; instead an orientation of paradoxical curiosity “sustains a permanent inquisitiveness that vigilantly explores the world of possibilities beyond the immediate arguments and narrow definitions of reality, whose shores are only attainable by taking the arguments seriously while refusing to be bound by their visions.”¹²⁷

Lederach’s third discipline centers around the human capacity for creativity, which is needed in order to rise from and move beyond the “everyday” toward something new and unexpected.¹²⁸ While individual capacity for creativity is itself significant, Lederach suggests that what is fundamental is a belief that “the creative act and response are permanently within reach,

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 36.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 37. Lederach notes that the Latin *curiosus*, from which the word curiosity derives, is rooted in *cura*, which is both “cure” and “care.” Paradoxical curiosity is care-filled inquiry beyond what is typically accepted or assumed (Ibid., 36–37).

¹²⁸ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 38.

and most important, are always accessible, even in settings where violence dominates and through its oppressive swath creates its greatest lie: that the lands it inhabits are barren."¹²⁹ Lederach considers this a particular skill and gift of the artist, but it is true of any who embrace the idea that untold possibilities exist that can move us beyond narrow parameters of what seems "realistic" or "acceptable."¹³⁰ Moreover, those who believe in the possibility of creativity also make space for a creative act to emerge. This third discipline encompasses the *capacity* for creativity, the *belief* that creativity is possible beyond the confines of what is known and seen, and the insight and ability to *create space* that allows a creative alternative or solution to emerge. It is an immensely hopeful perspective, unwilling to dismiss anyone as a lost cause and always anticipating the possibility that others may surprise you with creative solutions. As Lederach puts it, this space for the creative act is embodied in a *quality of living* that expects, leaves room for, and can "give birth to the unexpected."¹³¹

Finally, the fourth discipline Lederach identifies is the *willingness to risk*. Situations of violent conflict obviously involve the risk of physical danger and harm. But by "risk," Lederach means something slightly different. In conflict, "Violence is known; peace is the mystery."¹³² The risk is to step out of or away from that which is known and familiar and toward that which is unknown, mysterious, and without any guarantees. Each of the first three disciplines requires risk. Refusing to give in to dualism and instead engaging complexity is risky because its outcomes are uncertain and the pressure is to conform. It is a risk to believe in the possibility of creativity and the potential of humans to find creative alternatives to conflict. And commitment to relationship always involves risk. "By definition," writes Lederach, "risk accepts vulnerability and lets go of the

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid. It is "a predisposition, a kind of attitude and perspective that opens up, even invokes, the spirit and belief that creativity is humanly possible."

¹³² Ibid., 39.

need to a priori control the process or the outcome of human affairs.”¹³³ While Lederach doesn’t use the word *courage*, he implies that courage is needed—courage not to be bound by what has been, but to open continually to others who might see things in ways that we do not, who might offer creative options we had not considered, who might be willing to join us in risking something new together. “Accepting vulnerability,” he argues, “we must risk the step into the unknown and unpredictable lands and seek constructive engagement with those people and things we least understand and most fear.”¹³⁴

These combined disciplines reveal the impulse at the heart of Lederach’s proposal: that relational orientations to conflict are a way of being, a quality of seeing the world, a vocation, a life purpose. It is not that individuals use relationally-attuned techniques or skills to achieve particular ends, or that they gain some quantifiable advantage from focusing on relationships. “People find innovative responses to impossible situations not because they are well-trained professionals or particularly gifted,” writes Lederach. Instead, he continues, “The essence...is not found so much in what they do but in who they are and how they see themselves in relationship to others.”¹³⁵ These peacebuilders see *with relational lenses*, which allows them to imagine a world shared with enemies, and to risk in order to strengthen and grow connections with others. The kind of imagination needed for conflict transformation “bursts forth as part of a life journey that cares about the nature and quality of our relationships and communities and about how we move from relationships defined by division and fear and toward those characterized by respect and

¹³³ Ibid., 163.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 173.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 165. For instance, Lederach writes, “What exactly does it look like to have a relationship-centric approach to constructive social change? I have come to believe that the answer lies with how we approach and understand relational spaces in a given geography, the fabric of human community broadly defined as the crisscrossing connections of people, their lives, activities, organizational modalities, and even patterns of conflict. I believe there are skills that accompany a spatial approach to change, but they are less like the technology of conducting good communication than the development of, and discipline to use, appropriate lenses, which bring things into focus....This approach asks us to look at relationships through the lenses of social crossroads, connections, and interdependence” (Ibid., 77–78).

love.”¹³⁶ *Because loving, respectful relationships are central to how people conceive of and operate in the world, moral imagination for conflict transformation becomes possible.*

As with the conclusions of Bush and Folger, Lederach’s assertions about moral imagination and the centrality of relationships in conflict transformation suggests that valuing relationship and responding honestly and effectively to conflict need not be in opposition. In fact, it is crucial that through creativity and imagination we focus on relational dynamics and connections during conflict—over against the pressures of dualism, polarization, or fear—in order for its transformation to be possible. This means that the preacher’s desire not to break relationships or cause further polarization might be a useful and even powerful impulse in responding to conflict, especially when that impulse is coupled with orientations and perspectives like valuing complexity. Moreover, it is not that preachers must choose between confronting real issues and maintaining relationships; in fact, there might be creative ways to deal with controversy *by* prioritizing relational orientations and goals, and by focusing on keeping relational possibilities open.

Equally important, Lederach argues that a relational orientation is more akin to a life journey and way of being than to the application of particular skills or techniques. His claim that this orientation is *vocational* suggests, on the one hand, that some people have specific inclinations toward and gifts for it. Lederach also argues, however, that people might be formed and shaped toward a relational orientation through (for instance) the cultivation of particular practices of observation, stillness, humility, and sensuous perception.¹³⁷ This kind of formation is like that of an artist, whose developing skills and techniques cultivate deep aesthetic vision and capacity for discovery, resulting in a “genuine connection of discipline and art, the integration of

¹³⁶ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 175–176.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 103–109. Listening, for instance, “...is the discipline and art of capturing the complexity of history in the simplicity of deep intuition. It is attending to a sharp sense of what things mean” (*Ibid.*, 70).

skill and aesthetics.”¹³⁸ For Lederach, the critical shift is toward a balance of technical aspects and political content with the ability to foster life-giving processes for conflict transformation—and to keep those processes creatively alive.¹³⁹ Put simply, conflict transformation requires relational orientation; an intentional, aesthetic cultivation of that orientation; and a commitment to processes that foster relational orientations in others.

¹³⁸ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 70.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

Chapter 2.5

Theological Approaches to Conflict Transformation

In the previous chapter I explained the major emphases in conflict transformation and how it emerged within the field of conflict resolution. Conflict transformation proponents perceive conflict as a positive catalyst for change, advocate for broad participation in conflict processes, affirm that participants have capacity for solving their problems, and emphasize the importance of relational connections within conflict situations. But how do we understand these elements theologically? What theological interpretation is necessary to understand conflict and respond to it homiletically?

Some Christian scholars and practitioners have offered theological rationale for conflict transformation, mostly in resources for congregational or church use and in broader introductions to conflict transformation. These theological explanations demonstrate the difficulty of interpreting conflict and its transformation in light of Christian faith, because from the get-go some theology seems at odds with basic presumptions of conflict transformation. Most of these scholars reject the commonly-held beliefs that conflict is a sign of sin, and that continual unity, harmony, and absence of conflict are what God desires. As a result, conflict transformation *challenges* Christian practice and belief, sometimes by pointing out that Christian theology has not deeply attended to the nuances and complexities of conflict and has instead adopted cultural norms and orientations.¹ By virtue of the work they do, these Christian scholars and practitioners sit at an intersection that

¹ Schrock-Shenk writes that in the church “in the absence of intentional learning, we have picked up society’s ‘fight, flee or sue’ responses” to conflict (Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 34). The “absence of intentional learning” suggests that churches have not paid significant—or sufficient—attention to what conflict is and does, because conflict requires intentional learning, and the lack of it means accepting unevaluated societal norms.

both affirms and critiques Christian theology, and are able to recognize and name theological inconsistencies and paradoxes that emerge from their work and expertise. In this interstitial chapter, I offer analysis of the preliminary theological work that has been done by Christian scholars in conflict transformation, and I identify theological claims they make and gaps or challenges that remain, which become the starting point for a theology for conflict I construct in chapters 3 and 4.

I. Speaking from Experience

Given that peacemaking and reconciliation have long been core Christian values across diverse denominations and communions, it is not surprising that many scholars and practitioners in conflict transformation find grounding for their work in Christian faith. Members of historic peace churches in particular, such as the Anabaptist and Quaker traditions, are often at the forefront of both academic study and practices of conflict resolution and transformation in both secular and religious settings. Ellen Ott Marshall notes, however, that in general the religious aspect of conflict transformation—either as a motivating factor behind it, or a formational aspect of it—has received little attention in conflict transformation literature.²

In one of few published pieces on the topic (a 2016 article for a Brethren journal), Marshall analyzed conflict transformation resources that were created by Christian scholars and oriented toward Christian audiences.³ Marshall notes that Christians involved in this work find that their theology “informs *and is informed by* the study and practice of conflict transformation,” which

² Marshall, “Introduction: Learning Through Conflict, Working for Transformation,” 8.

³ Marshall notes four theological convictions that underlie Christian conflict transformation: 1) conflict itself is a natural part of God’s creation; 2) God is present in the midst of conflict in a revelatory way; 3) God’s presence in the world has a particular direction, namely reconciliation; 4) transformation-focused approaches to conflict cultivate a space for God’s work of community-building and reconciliation (Ellen Ott Marshall, “Conflict, God and Constructive Change: Exploring Prominent Christian Convictions in the Work of Conflict Transformation,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 61, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 1–2).

suggests that Christian conflict transformation constitutes an ongoing act of contextual and practical theology.⁴ For Christian scholars the relationship between conflict transformation and theology is one of reciprocal influence and exchange based on concrete, real-life experiences.⁵ It is not that conflict transformation practitioners are merely seeking theological frames to fit their experiences; their experiences also help them interpret elements of Christian theology about conflict—including those which may appear theologically inconsistent, deficient, or outmoded.

For instance, the theological assertions that undergird Christian conflict transformation are rooted in (or emerge from) the wider claim that conflict can be a catalyst for positive change. Yet Marshall writes, “Our [Christian] tradition hosts some interpretations and practices that impede Christians’ ability to engage conflict constructively. Thus faith-based conflict transformation work includes a critical examination of theological convictions that discourage Christians from addressing conflict.”⁶ In explaining their theological perspectives, Christian conflict transformation advocates often begin from the presumption that there are theological barriers to the advancement of their cause. Conflict transformation begins its engagement with theology from the posture of seeking common ground with the Christian tradition *and* offering it a challenge.

A. *By Nature*

The primary theological obstacle to conflict transformation is the belief that conflict itself is a sign of fallenness and sin. As Lederach, who is Mennonite, puts it, there is “a common and rather strong perspective within Christian circles that conflict represents the presence of sin.”⁷ One of the

⁴ Ibid., 3. Author’s emphasis.

⁵ Even as he writes about the theological and biblical premises on which his convictions about conflict transformation rest, Lederach specifically states that he is “not a theologian prepared with formal tools of hermeneutics” but is instead “a practitioner who writes from the basis of experience and builds toward understanding from that inductive basis” (Lederach, *Reconcile*, 28).

⁶ Marshall, “Conflict, God and Constructive Change,” 3.

⁷ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 67.

reasons for this perspective is that conflict is often difficult and painful. “Conflict...is rarely neat and nice or full of warm, fuzzy feelings. There is much about conflict that is just plain messy, chaotic, and anxiety-filled,” writes Carolyn Schrock-Shenk. “Often the presence of these reactions has led us to believe conflict is negative precisely because it gives rise to such feelings.”⁸ But rather than acknowledging these feelings as normal and focusing on responding to them in positive ways, we have “determined that their existence means God is neither present nor pleased when there is conflict.”⁹

In response, Christian scholars in conflict transformation frequently point to the diversity of creation, which while complex and at times conflictual, is part of the natural order. For Lederach, the creation story in Genesis “has much to do with developing a theology of conflict,” because it is a revelation of God’s creativity and love of difference, as well as God’s love of humanity made in God’s image and given “godlike” freedom.¹⁰ Human difference and freedom give rise to conflict, but they are present in the fabric of creation from the beginning. “The very elements that make human experience rich and dynamic...are the elements that make conflict inevitable,” Lederach writes. “By way of God-commitments in creation, conflict was, is, and will be a natural part of the human experience. By the very way we are created, conflict will be a part of the human family.”¹¹ The Genesis story of creation sets in motion a pattern of diversity and interaction that cannot avoid conflict, and in fact affirms its normalcy: “Built into God’s original plan before the fall, humankind was conceived in such a way that made differences and conflict normal and inevitable.”¹² The inevitable conclusion is that conflict is part of God’s design, as Thomas Porter writes:

God created this world with no two snowflakes alike and no two human beings alike. Everyone is unique. God adds to this incredible world of difference the freedom to make choices. Then God puts us all into relationship with one another. We are all

⁸ Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 33–34.

¹⁰ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 63–64.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹² *Ibid.*

interconnected, interdependent. What arises naturally from this reality? Yes, conflict! It is part of the created order which God declares “very good.”¹³

Porter’s assertion both affirms a claim of conflict transformation scholars—that conflict can be good and difficult simultaneously—and a theological conviction about the multifaceted reality of creation. But he also points toward the complexity of articulating a theology about conflict. For instance, the idea that conflict is intrinsic to creation does not mean Christian scholars affirm that all that happens in conflict is without sin. Instead, transformation advocates claim *sin enters conflict through our responses to it*. Conflict is not sin, but sin can emerge as “a feature of the quality of our relationships.”¹⁴ For Lederach, markers of sin in conflict appear “when we want to be God, when we assume superiority, when we oppress, when we try to lord it over others, when we refuse to listen, when we discount and exclude others, when we hold back deep feelings, when we avoid, when we hate, and when we project blame with no self-reflection.”¹⁵ Similarly, as Schrock-Shenk applies the adjectives “constructive” and “destructive” to conflict, she suggests that destructive responses are sinful or less faithful than those that are constructive. For Schrock-Shenk, destructive conflict is that which produces alienation rather than connection, increases oppression rather than justice, equality, and right relationship, and leads toward rigidity and narrowness instead of discovery and new understanding.¹⁶ Marshall summarizes the overall impulse toward the idea of sin and conflict this way: though conflict is natural and necessary, “how we respond to these moments and circumstances of conflict warrants moral assessment and action. In other words, though we cannot choose whether to be in conflict, we can choose how to respond to it.”¹⁷

¹³ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 14.

¹⁴ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁶ Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 30.

¹⁷ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 3. She continues later, “We might respond to conflict in sinful ways, but it is not the same thing as sin. The main difference here is that conflict contains within it a possibility for good that sin does not....In conflict, we also have an emergent, a possibility for constructive change, the possibility of transformation. To say that conflict continues is not to say that history is perennial

Some scholars argue that because conflict is disorienting and painful it can offer opportunities for deeper relationships and spiritual growth. Dealing with conflict calls upon and develops spiritual gifts such as openness, compassion, and humility. Conflict can foster capacities for deep truth-telling, vulnerability, and trust-building, through which participants “respectfully articulate grievance, listen deeply to others, admit wrongdoing, change and rebuild relationships.”¹⁸ Even more, moments of conflict are spiritually crucial because the challenges of conflict test the very disciplines and virtues that are at the heart of Christian faith. As Lederach argues, “Our capacity to listen to God is only as great as our capacity to listen to each other when we are in conflict. I mean that literally. We test our real capability to listen, not when it is easy, but when it is most difficult.”¹⁹ It is not that the pain and suffering of conflict are necessary for transformation, but they can lead to particular kinds of vulnerability and humility that foster deeper relationship.²⁰ Moreover, because the experience of conflict leads to feelings of alienation and isolation, it can prompt in us an openness to and desire for God, which can lead to revelations and insight about ourselves and others, as well as about God.²¹

Interestingly, these scholars also claim that conflict can indicate the presence of forms of sin (such as oppression or injustice), and the need to address them. This perspective echoes practitioners in the broader conflict transformation field who argue that conflict is a means by which to promote social change. “All is not well with our world,” writes Porter. “We find injustice,

tragedy; it is to say that history contains the possibilities for change because conflict is present. Our moral task is then to realize the possibilities for positive, constructive change” (Ibid., 34–35).

¹⁸ Marshall, “Conflict, God and Constructive Change,” 3–4.

¹⁹ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 122.

²⁰ While Christian conflict transformation advocates affirm that conflict is natural and even God-given, they do not support the idea that the suffering caused by conflict is redemptive or part of God’s will. Instead, “Scholars, practitioners, and trainers understand their work in conflict transformation as an active response to suffering....Suffering is the starting place for the work of conflict transformation, intended to address the structures that create and perpetuate the suffering, hold offenders accountable, and facilitate healing for victims” (Marshall, “Conflict, God and Constructive Change,” 7).

²¹ Ibid., 6.

oppression, and evil, which we need to oppose, and, in fact, are called to oppose. Has there ever been any injustice, for example, that has been addressed without conflict? Conflict is necessary to engage injustice, oppression, and evil and is a source of energy to do so."²² Porter suggests that a faithful response to conflict includes the discernment of its purpose and importance. In conflict, we need to assess the nature of the conflict, its sources and foundations, and the social issues and dynamics embedded within it: Where is there injustice? Where is there oppression? Where is there inequity? In making these assessments, conflict offers us an opportunity to discern God's will and to listen to God's voice calling for change. As Schrock-Shenk writes, "We can begin to understand conflict settings as holy ground, as places where God is present in powerful ways, as opportunities to gain new insight and understanding. Imagine how different our conflicts would be if we could move from an 'Oh dear, how terrible' to 'What is God trying to say to us?'"²³ Conflict may be natural, but the moral assessment needed when conflict erupts is not only about choosing best practices, but about discerning the movement of God in and through that conflict.

Further, proponents frequently describe conflict transformation as an experience of the presence of God that opens up "holy ground" and "sacred space" between and among the participants.²⁴ Porter states this directly: "Conflict can help me understand, like nothing else, my dependence upon something beyond myself, and my interdependence with others—in short, my need for assistance from God and neighbor....The more I work with conflict the more I am aware that this is where God is most fully present."²⁵ Not only is conflict natural, normal, and impossible to avoid, it may just be that "one cannot pursue the kingdom of God without entering into conflict."²⁶ These practitioners offer a firm but nuanced theological affirmation of conflict and its

²² Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 14.

²³ Schrock-Shenk, "Introducing Conflict," 34.

²⁴ Marshall, "Conflict, God and Constructive Change," 5–6.

²⁵ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 17.

²⁶ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 75.

potential for good, while also highlighting conflict's complexities, such as discerning what is constructive and destructive, and assessing its cause, purpose, and importance.

B. The Bible Tells Me So

Biblical interpretation adds to the complexity of sorting out theology about conflict. Some passages seem to clearly pronounce that conflict is not what God intends for the human community. "One who insists that conflict is sinful has plenty of Scripture passages to cite for support," writes Marshall.²⁷ Passages throughout the epistles, for instance, consider conflict a sign of unholy living destructive to unity and community.²⁸ In some epistle texts, "Conflictual behaviors were associated with disobedience, lack of control, and the unruly passions," Marshall says. "These forms of conflict—strife, factiousness, quarrels, contention—are indeed discouraged as sinful behavior, a mark of internal turmoil in an individual and a sign that the community is in trouble."²⁹

If the epistles reflect an impulse toward calm and harmony in the community, the gospels tell a different story. Jesus himself is frequently involved in conflict, and generally he does not admonish his disciples against it. In fact, argues Marshall, some passages such as Luke 12:51 and Matthew 10:34 indicate that Jesus specifically saw his ministry as divisive.³⁰ He praises dogged faithfulness, such as that of the persistent widow in the parable of Luke 18, who cannot exactly be described as keeping the peace in her quest for justice. Similarly, Jesus' conflict-laden interactions with religious leaders exemplify the tradition of the prophets, who confront the hypocrisy and injustice of societies in an effort to change the systems. Jesus also articulates multifaceted means by which the community is to attempt reconciliation with a member who is in the wrong (Matt

²⁷ Ibid., 65.

²⁸ Ibid. Marshall writes specifically about Galatians 5:19–21, James 4:1–3, 1 Timothy 6:3–5, 2 Timothy 2:22–25 and Titus 3:9–11.

²⁹ Ibid., 73–74.

³⁰ Ibid., 76–77.

18:15–17), and a much less complicated “first be reconciled to your brother or sister” to anyone who wishes to make an offering to God (Matt 5:23–24). This reconciliation is not the avoidance, absence, or end of conflict. Marshall’s contention is that Jesus demonstrates a “recognition that conflict is part of social life,” and “a call to cultivate habits for living well together amidst conflict.”³¹

Jesus’ orientation toward conflict continually seeks to repair and deepen relationships in and through moments of rupture and division—perhaps most crucially when ruptures and division result from injustice, mistreatment, unfairness, or cruelty. “When members of a community wrong each other,” writes Marshall, “they must prioritize confession and rebuke because the offense will continue to damage the relationships and the community until it is properly addressed.”³² Jesus himself disrupts community in the form of rebuke and discipline *for the purpose of* the care and health of the community. Because the goal of these interactions is restoration and strengthening of relationships, rebuke cannot insult, belittle, or dehumanize, or be done out of malice or vengeance. Instead, the fact that we must address conflict—and the means by which we do it—matter because engaging conflict well is important for the community. “In other words,” Marshall summarizes, “Jesus commends a process of engaging in conflict that is motivated by care and that is helpful to the community.”³³

Jesus is not merely a prophet, but also a teacher; his purpose is not necessarily social harmony, but the reign of God. What the gospels demonstrate in particular is “a telos that is greater than the cohesion of the community,” writes Marshall, continuing, “When the kingdom of God is the goal, one enters into the inevitable forms of social and spiritual conflict in a way that

³¹ Ibid., 78.

³² Ibid., 80. Marshall continues by saying that this kind of confrontation is critical because unrepentant offenders in the community remain particular threats to those who are most vulnerable: “Confrontation and expulsion (if necessary) are not only essential to the health of the community; they are also necessary for caring for the community’s most vulnerable members” (Ibid.).

³³ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 81.

opens space for the kingdom to emerge.”³⁴ Marshall’s distinction between the telos of “cohesion of the community” and “the kingdom of God” is key. “When cohesion is the goal, one puts away conflict as an act of obedience and faithful submission,” Marshall writes.³⁵ Suppressing conflict can be a pastoral or relational act for the good of the whole—for unity in moments of specific danger or uncertainty, for instance, such as within the new communities represented in the epistles. In the gospels, however, the “new way of living in the world” initiated by Jesus continually points “beyond the community itself to the kingdom of God.”³⁶ Jesus has in mind something more than social cohesion built on “going along to get along.” Conflict is unavoidable, and it is at times also necessary; Marshall sees Jesus working in and through conflict toward the kingdom of God, both by calling for reconciling acts among his followers, *and* by affirming actions his followers take that reinforce “deep connections between faith in what could be and resistance to what is.”³⁷ Jesus does not gloss over the realities of injustice, and he is simultaneously focused on the *kind* of community or *koinonia* that is being disrupted or created in and through human interactions. In Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5 and 18, Marshall sees that “the goal is integration into the community, or reconciliation. And throughout each process, the emphasis is on practices that are grounded in care for the community and its members.”³⁸ She elaborates,

In his own actions and teaching, Jesus demonstrates how to exhibit virtuous behaviors in the midst of conflict. The virtues do not keep us from conflict; they indicate how we should behave in conflict....[Gospel texts] pass on traditions for dealing with offenses and transgressions in the community, and they convey wisdom about the disposition of love and an intention of care that must guide and ground our engagements with others. In other words, they call us to certain ways of being in conflict. These certain ways of being are the virtues, the dispositions that orient Christians toward the *summum bonum*, the kingdom of God.³⁹

³⁴ Ibid., 75.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 88. Lederach describes Jesus’ ministry as having a “quality of presence,” a grace Jesus expressed in “the way he chose to be present, in relationship and in the company of others, even with those who wished him harm” (Lederach, *Reconcile*, 45).

³⁸ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 81.

³⁹ Ibid., 89.

At its heart, Marshall's assessment of Jesus' approach to conflict reflects a decidedly relational orientation. For Jesus, both the means and ends of conflict encounters are rooted in love and care for the community and in a commitment to restitution and reconciliation—but not without addressing, confessing, and rebuking sinful actions that wrongly disrupt and distort community. Further, within this construct there is a sense of the formational power of conflict to shape the community toward the kingdom of God. The constructive and positive potential of conflict can shift dynamics toward interrelatedness and mutuality rather than inequality and injustice, and can transform individuals into a new way of being together.

C. Center of Attention

Christian conflict scholars have laid some practical theological groundwork for considering conflict transformation through the perspective of faith. Rather than articulating a full-fledged theology for conflict or conflict transformation, however, most of these scholars have offered supporting ideas for or alternative viewpoints to what they consider theological presumptions and misinterpretations about conflict. In her analysis, Marshall points out that theologies of conflict transformation are routinely subsumed into a theology of reconciliation, not least because reconciliation is the most common scriptural and theological basis of the work.⁴⁰ Marshall claims, though, that this trajectory toward reconciliation has consequences; for example, the ideas of nonviolent resistance and confrontation with injustice are frequently left behind, and conflict transformation is presented as “a particular approach to mediation or facilitated conversation.”⁴¹ Marshall suggests that this narrowing of the “open-ended” idea of transformation into

⁴⁰ Marshall, “Conflict, God and Constructive Change,” 13.

⁴¹ Ellen Ott Marshall, “Grounding Practices of Conflict Transformation: Are Theologies of Reconciliation Sufficient?” (presented at the Faculty Research Lunch, Candler School of Theology: Unpublished, 2015), 10.

reconciliation theology can limit our awareness of God's call and movement in and through conflict transformation, and she is interested in something more multifaceted. As she puts it:

As the end of transformation, reconciliation gives an open-ended concept a particular direction. What might be gained by further theological reflection on *transformation* as surprising, unpredictable, open-ended, non-linear, and tenuous (among other, more reassuring things)? In those pivotal moments, might God be doing something *in addition* to preparing us for reconciliation?⁴²

Marshall's question is similar to those that undergird my own interest in a more thorough theology for conflict. For example, difference and conflict may be part of the created order, but what do we do theologically with the tension and suffering that results from encounters with difference? At times, differences themselves, especially if they appear to be barriers to Christian "unity," can be interpreted as sinful; how might we theologically distinguish good or healthy difference from that which is detrimental to individuals or community (e.g. behaviors or beliefs that are destructive)? Further, the constant existence and persistence of conflict requires more intentional theological and ethical reflection, as Marshall affirms:

We need to develop theological and ethical resources that help us to value the ambiguous moment, the protracted conflict, the highly contingent and unpredictable peacebuilding process....If we are going to live well in the midst of ongoing conflict, we must be able to find meaning and value in the things that do not seem to conform to our hopes. As long as we have a linear notion of the path to reconciliation, then we continue to frame things as either moving us forward or backward, or as diverting us from the goal. We need mechanisms for theological and ethical reflection that help us to also find meaning in the setbacks and surprises. We also need mechanisms for theological and ethical reflection that more truthfully reflect the contours of conflict and change, which are anything but linear.⁴³

The perspectives that emerge from Christian approaches to conflict transformation demonstrate the complexity of interpreting conflict theologically, and the need for deeper engagement with some of its characteristics and ramifications. Earlier I stated that homiletics

⁴² Marshall, "Conflict, God and Constructive Change," 13. Emphasis mine. Elsewhere she concludes, "I think that transformation, like liberation, should have its own narrative arc and its own theological meaning, related to but not subsumed by a capacious understanding of reconciliation" (Marshall, "Grounding Practices," 19).

⁴³ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 115–116.

addresses neither difference nor tension (the components of conflict) in theologically complex ways. Marshall's analysis suggests that this theological deficiency is not restricted to homiletics. Discerning how to respond to conflict requires deep theological attention, reflection, and wisdom precisely because it is multifaceted, and because conflict is embedded in how we understand the nature of the human person, relationships with others, and creation itself. I am after a theology of conflict that can encompass healed relationships *and* nonviolent resistance to injustice; a theological affirmation of diversity that does not avoid or dismiss but might even affirm the discomfort and conflict it causes; and a telos of reconciliation that can stand alongside, without superseding, an ontology of God's work of transformation in us along the road. This is the challenge and goal of the next two chapters.

Chapter 3

A Theology for Conflict, Part One

As I survey the landscape of conflict transformation and homiletics and consider how relational preaching might engage conflict and controversy, I am aware of the need for a theology for conflict that can help undergird a relational homiletic. The preposition *for* is intentional; rather than trying to articulate a comprehensive “theology of conflict,” I am focused on theological themes that emerge from the questions raised by conflict transformation scholars and practitioners and how Christian theology might respond to those questions. Four interlocking theological subjects rise to the surface: 1) the nature and dynamics of *difference* and *diversity* in creation, 2) the human experience of *tension* and *conflict* that result from encountering difference, 3) distinguishing *sin* or *evil* from difference or diversity, and 4) the role of *human relationship* in sin and redemption. These interrelated concerns of difference; conflict, tension and other suffering; sin and evil; and the nature of human relationship are fundamental touchstones of my relational homiletic for conflict.

In constructing a theology for conflict, I draw on theologians Ed Farley, Wendy Farley, and Miroslav Volf.¹ The phenomenological approaches of Ed and Wendy Farley parallel the experiential perspectives of Christian conflict transformation scholars whose participation in conflict is the starting point for interpreting its theological meaning. Similarly, Miroslav Volf roots his understanding of identity, otherness, and reconciliation in his experiences as a Croatian

¹ Specifically, Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990); Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990); Wendy Farley, *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

reflecting on his war-torn nation.² Each considers theology in lively conversation with the realities of existing as a living human being. Ed Farley in particular focuses on the nature of the human condition, i.e. “what we are up against in our environment.”³ Helpfully, he suggests that the human condition is “a category of experience [that] has to do with things we are perennially aware of, things that evoke our ongoing responses and deep postures: suffering, other-relations, uncertainty about our future, and death”⁴—a list that resonates with my major considerations for a theology for conflict. I begin with Ed Farley’s assessment of the human condition and how human evil and good arise in relation to the situations and contexts in which humans find themselves.⁵

I. Can’t Get No Satisfaction

A first challenge for considering conflict theologically is grappling with the reality of difference and multiplicity in the created world. This question is not simply about the nature of creation, but about the consequences we experience as humans in a world of multiplicity. Ed Farley’s somewhat somber premise of the human condition is that situations in which humans exist, and

² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

³ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 27. Ed Farley calls the cognitive style of this book “reflective ontology,” which is focused on “perduring features that constitute the being of something in its region or situation,” and does so not through “straightforward perceptions, logical derivations, or experimental repetitions,” but rather “in ways of thinking that embody modes of experience and practical interests” (Ibid., xix). *Good and Evil* could also be described as a theological anthropology, but, as scholar Robert R. Williams notes, it is “more than an anthropology because it offers a theological analysis of redemption” (Robert R. Williams, “Tragedy, Totality, and the Face,” in *Theology and the Interhuman: Essays in Honor of Edward Farley*, ed. Robert R. Williams (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 80).

⁴ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 27. Farley goes out of his way to try to explain what he is doing and how and why he is doing it. His entire introduction is an apology and defense of his approach; one point of note is that Farley is aware of and attentive to critiques of ontologies that rely on an “abstract universal” or “essence,” which can be seen to “freeze reality,” be ahistorical, and gloss over particularity in inherently oppressive and dominating ways (Williams, “Tragedy, Totality, and the Face,” 82). Farley, by contrast, defends a “historical conception” of the universal, a “life-world universal” that does not exclude particulars or contingencies but is instead focused on the enduring features of human beings. Specifically, “Farley’s life-world ontological claim is that there are such things as agents, face-to-face relations, social organizations, events, processes; agential features such as temporality, emotions, and postures; and social features such as power and subjugation” (Ibid., 82–83).

⁵ Farley, *Good and Evil*, xv.

particularly the conditions of our well-being, “require and are interdependent with situations of limitation, frustration, challenge and suffering.”⁶ The ways in which humans experience reality and live in the world are riddled with difficulties that lead to various forms of suffering. As humans seek “satisfaction,” such as physical pleasures or the joys of relation or creativity, “suffering” interrupts our experience of satisfaction by harming our well-being, and/or by depriving us of development toward well-being.⁷ We suffer when we come to recognize our vulnerability and mortality, and we suffer in our inability to prevent loss, pain, and death.⁸ We also suffer when our sense of individual autonomy encounters the aims and agendas of others, which are often incompatible or in competition with our own goals.⁹ We run up against the difference and alterity of others, and it causes us confusion, frustration, discomfort, and fear.¹⁰

In our daily existence, the “inescapable incompatibilities” we encounter in the world around us are acutely felt in human relationships. As individuals, the ways in which we are contextually, historically, and culturally formed make us distinct and particular individuals who are not the same as everyone else. In our particularity, we want to be seen as beautiful, loveable, and worthy of respect not despite but because of who we are. We also have the potential to be more than our concrete characteristics, and to transcend social or physical constructs like gender, race, language, or ethnicity. In other words, we don’t want to be boxed in, stereotyped, or isolated because of who we are, not least because we have the capacity to imagine possibilities for ourselves beyond the concrete realities we experience.¹¹

⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷ Ibid., 121.

⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁹ Ibid., 123.

¹⁰ Ed Farley defines alterity as an experience of “the uninterchangeability and irreducibility of the other and a resistance and challenge to my autonomy and its claims” (Ibid., 36). “In other words,” he writes, “The other is a center of needs, aims, and practical actions that I cannot possess, occupy, or replace” (Ibid., 45).

¹¹ Ed Farley uses the terms “determinacy” and “transcendence” to express these concepts of self-awareness in the concrete or specific, and the ability to exist self-consciously in the face of possibilities, irreducible to our characteristics. The determinacy (our “contentful, historical concreteness”) and transcendence (our

Yet when we encounter these same uniquenesses in others, they evoke fear and anxiety in us.¹² Other humans are strikingly different from us, and our experiences are not interchangeable with theirs. As Ed Farley describes, humans experience other humans as different—as “*other*”—because that other exists “in the world alongside me but...contests my version of it and pursues his or her own aims or agendas.”¹³ The alterity and vulnerability of others awakens us to an awareness of our own, and we discover that we are intersubjectively formed but uninterchangeable, vulnerable but interdependent, alike but different, powerless but mutually responsible. In these encounters, we begin to see the impossibility of completely harmonizing the perspectives, aims, desires, and agendas of all persons. This leads to the uncomfortable conclusion that there are fundamental incongruities between and among us.¹⁴

Moreover, explains Ed Farley, “We human beings desire confirmation from the other of our integrity and reality. We aspire to approval, respect, and love.”¹⁵ These are good things, things that foster our well-being and pleasure, and that are made possible because of the diversity and possibility of the world in which we exist. Yet in such hoped-for experiences we are faced with an uncloseable gap between the “desiring and desired.”¹⁶ In the case of interpersonal relationships, “We passionately desire a community of intimacy that can bestow and receive unqualified love

“irreducibility to this concreteness”) of human beings are part of the “sphere of the individual” or of “personal being” in *Good and Evil* chapter 3, and chapter 8 where he discusses corrupted historicity and the creation of beauty (Farley, *Good and Evil*, 63–75, 154–170). For more on his spheres of human reality, see footnote 48.

¹² It is notable that in the corruption of the sphere of personal being, our fear and anxiety leads us to see “determinate” traits such as gender or race as all-encompassing and defining. As Ed Farley writes, “We permit our maleness or femaleness, our cultural loyalties, our being athletic or aesthetic, blue collar or intellectual to define our reality. This self-reduction is not just an external attitude we adopt toward ourselves. It is something we become, what our reality or being is as a way of existing in the world” (Ibid., 160). This is similar to the stereotyping tendencies Wendy Farley identifies as endemic to totalitarian views, though she names it as something one group does to another rather than to itself. See Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 28–29.

¹³ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 45.

¹⁴ Ibid. As he puts it, “Alterity...is both the uninterchangeability and irreducibility of the other and a resistance and challenge to my autonomy and its claims” (Ibid., 36).

¹⁵ Ibid., 104.

¹⁶ Ibid., 109.

and understanding. But the limitations of our knowledge in the face of otherness...prevent any specific individual or community from being this absolute fulfillment."¹⁷ The human condition is one in which the very differences and desires that are at the heart of being human and are the essence of a diverse creation unavoidably lead to misunderstanding, resentment, and suspicion of others whom we see as in competition with our aims and unable to fulfill our hopes.¹⁸

Ed Farley's intent in articulating the challenges and suffering humans face in relationship with others is not to portray the human condition in exclusively negative terms. Instead, he is stating with clarity the reality of the conditions we experience—and they are not *solely* conditions of suffering. The world in which this suffering is present is the same world that facilitates good for us and our well-being. As Ed Farley explains, "A 'good' world cannot be simply a mathematical structure, an endlessly self-repeating machine, or a kingdom of unbreakable laws. It is necessarily an open world of ongoing creativity, contingent happenings, and incompatible and competing entities and groups."¹⁹ It is not that suffering is to our benefit, but that suffering is the natural outcome of a world in which diverse beings enjoy the freedom to pursue that which is good and satisfying. The consequence of self-initiating human beings who are free to act, perceive, experience, choose, and pursue aims is that the world inevitably includes chaos, randomness, and resulting incompatibilities and sufferings.²⁰ Sufferings of various sorts are the "necessary conditions of creativity, affection, the experience of beauty, etc."²¹ The freedom and flexibility of the human condition that so often result in suffering are the preconditions of meaning and satisfaction.²² That

¹⁷ Ibid., 112. See footnote 43, which describes elemental passions and their fulfillment.

¹⁸ Ibid., 45–46.

¹⁹ Ibid., 149.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 29.

²² The possibility of satisfaction and well-being is also the basis on which Ed Farley understands reality as fundamentally good, in the sense that "the goodness of being means that the total complex of reality with its self-initiating entities offers to its participants environments that constitute conditions of survival and well-being. Available in these environments are materials appropriate for the well-being of occupants. The environment is also 'good' because it evokes experiences of satisfaction. The environment in which we live

which is good in human experience and contributes to human well-being is unavoidably interlocked with aspects of life that bring suffering.²³

A. Trial and Error

The seemingly paradoxical nature of the preceding premise—that conditions of human reality are both life-giving and cause unavoidable suffering—is challenging for theologians and preachers alike. Much theological thinking is couched in terms of “good” and “evil,” in which something that causes suffering cannot be good because suffering belongs in the category of “evil.” It doesn’t seem “right” that what facilitates human well-being would be fundamentally intertwined with suffering. In our belief that the created order should not include unavoidable suffering, we may be tempted to want to reconcile or relieve the tension created by such a paradox. We might want to argue that the suffering we experience is justified (and therefore redemptive or salvific) because of the good that comes out of it. We might try to deny that the differences between us are the cause of our suffering, or even deny that the differences exist. Or we might begin to think that because they cause suffering, differences themselves are the problem.

As phenomenologists, Ed and Wendy Farley are primarily concerned with expressing reality as it is. “The speculative question,” writes Wendy Farley, “as to whether or not conflict,

is both useful and pleasurable....An environment that offers the conditions and resources for well-being and satisfying experiences is the meaning of the goodness of being for all living things from cells to primates” (Ibid., 149).

²³ Wendy Farley also affirms that certain features of existence simultaneously make human life possible and suffering inevitable. She writes, “Multiplicity and variety enrich and perfect creation. Because individual creatures exist in social and ecological relationships with each other, creation is better than it would be if each entity were an isolated monad” (Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 32). But, she continues, that same diversity can lead to competition and conflict. Likewise, values can be in conflict, or the pursuit of one good can leave limited time for the pursuit of another, equally worthy endeavor. The finitude of embodiment leaves humans (and all creatures) subject to decay, frustration, hurt, and death (Ibid., 33). Our human condition, in which we operate as diverse, finite beings in a world of natural plurality, is both life-giving and a cause of suffering. Difference enriches our well-being *and* causes conflict and suffering, and this is part of what it means to be human.

embodiment, mortality, and history are strictly speaking *necessary* to the possibility of human existence is put aside in favor of the more descriptive claim that, necessary or not, these are features of life as we know it."²⁴ This may be unsatisfying for those who would prefer conclusive classifications of only right and wrong, good and bad. But Ed and Wendy Farley find the strict theological categories of good and evil insufficient to explain the fullness of the human experience. Instead, they suggest a different, non-dichotomous category, arguing that the inevitability of suffering intrinsic to the human condition should be understood as *tragic*.²⁵ Put simply, the human condition is tragic because "The very conditions of well-being are also conditions of limitation, conflict, discontent, and suffering."²⁶

The framework of tragedy provides a way to conceive of some forms of inevitable suffering (such as vulnerability, alterity, and finitude) outside the workings of evil or sin.²⁷ This does not suggest that suffering is required in order for beauty or creativity to exist—or that suffering is justified because of its relationship to beauty or love—but that they are simply inextricably and tragically connected.²⁸ Unavoidable forms of suffering are interrelated with beauty, creativity, and

²⁴ Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 33.

²⁵ Wendy Farley explains, "Christian theology has tended to be strenuously antitragic. At the beginning of history is a Fall that justifies suffering by interpreting it as a consequence of sin. At the end of history is the eschatological return to harmony, the cosmic overcoming of evil, and the redemption of the elect. The drama of salvation is firmly contained within a moral vision while anticipating a comic outcome. It is the neatness of this vision that disturbs me. It quells outrage over suffering by *explaining* it, and, worse, by justifying it" (Ibid., 12).

²⁶ Williams, "Tragedy, Totality, and the Face," 86. Williams continues, "However, this discontent and vulnerability are *not* sin or evil, but preconditions of such" (Ibid., 86).

²⁷ Ed Farley uses the terms "sin" and "evil" more or less interchangeably. Both should be understood as individual or social dynamics, postures, and actions that violate human well-being or human good beyond the realm of the tragic (e.g. through moral corruption, oppression, interhuman violations, or deprivation of the being of another). "Conventional wisdom perceives an irreducible difference between suffering and (moral) evil," he writes. "There is something qualitatively different between experiencing an injury and an act of cruelty, between bubonic plague and the holocaust. Theologies of the Hebraic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) use the term, *sin*, to make this differentiation" (Farley, *Good and Evil*, 120).

²⁸ It is important to note that Ed Farley is careful not to paint a picture of *redemptive* suffering—the idea that suffering *in general* is justifiable because of some "higher purpose" like beauty or love. Instead, Ed Farley specifies that the forms of suffering inherent in the human condition by virtue of our vulnerability and finitude are part of *the same dynamic* that brings about our well-being. Suffering is not causal to well-being as such (or vice versa), but that the two are interconnected in complex ways is simply how our tragic

affection, as well as that which is necessary for human growth and flourishing, and as a result, “No human being lives outside of or above the tragic interdependence of suffering and satisfaction.”²⁹

The incompatibility and incongruity we discover when we encounter other people or participate in a world of diversity can be understood as “benign” or tragic rather than malicious or evil. As Ed Farley illustrates,

Here we have the parent unable to simultaneously attend to the needs of all the children, the inability of an engaged couple to adjust their career plans to each other, and the impossibility of a firm to appoint all of its qualified people as its Chief Executive Officer. These incompatibilities effect misunderstandings, resentments, and suspected favoritisms, and with these, benign antipathies. The incompatibility of aims and actions is a feature of the situation of all living things... [But] benign alienation and its antipathies is neither a struggle of tooth and claw nor a simple harmony but rather a sign of the finitude of human being-together.³⁰

Tragedy allows us to describe the conditions under which we exist, including the discomfort we feel around others because they are different or because their aims are not the same as ours, without theologically equating that discomfort and incompatibility with something gone wrong.³¹

existence functions. Wendy Farley also conceives of the creation and humanity as an interconnected web of tragedy and life-giving beauty, in which tragic suffering is seen as inevitable but not more powerful than beauty: “The beauty of the world is in its variety and diversity. Yet conflict will inevitably arise as the multitude of creatures pursue opposing ends....From these conflicts, sorrows, and losses emerges the fierce beauty of creation. Sorrow must accompany beauty, but it need not overthrow the poignant loveliness of nature. Creation is tragically structured, but tragedy is neither the barrenness of nothingness nor the wickedness of evil. Tragedy is the price paid for existence—but the fecund grace of nature makes it appear that the price is not too high” (Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 60–61).

²⁹ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 124. Wendy Farley also grounds her understanding of suffering in a vision of the tragedy of the human condition, though with different emphases and objectives. While Ed Farley is articulating a phenomenology of good and evil (and thus also the tragic), Wendy Farley’s focus is on reconceiving Christian theology with suffering rather than sin as the center of the problem of evil. There are many echoes between the two writers, but enough differentiates how they understand tragedy that I will focus here on Ed Farley’s construction rather than trying to do justice to both. That being said, Wendy Farley offers a particularly helpful observation about suffering, creation, and evil, similarly asserting that suffering is not simply a result of sin: “Creation is ephemeral and its beauty arises in conjunction with the poignancy of its constant perishing. The beauty of the natural world, even when it is accompanied by the real anguish of pain and grief, expresses the goodness of what must inevitably pass away. There is sorrow here, but moral evil has not yet encroached. Suffering itself is not synonymous with evil” (Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 41).

³⁰ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 45–46. Emphasis mine.

³¹ Ed Farley argues that in classical Hebraic-Christian views, the origin of sin is represented as “an act of sheer will” rather than “a response to a condition, a way of dealing with the world” (Ibid., 128–129). Ed Farley critiques this formulation because it presupposes that suffering and tragedy are the “offspring” of sin,

Tension and conflict are all but certain when self-determining human beings who are different from each other interact in proximity. That such experiences of tension and conflict might be considered tragic does not diminish the reality of such suffering, but it distinguishes that suffering from sin.³²

That is the point. Envisioning the human condition as *tragic* means that difference and the tension and conflict it can produce can be understood and assessed *separately from dynamics of evil*. Through the lens of tragedy, a theology for conflict can affirm diversity as a natural part of the created order, *and* as a cause of conflict and tension—and do so without the presumption of sin. This leads to several implications in a theology for conflict. First, that which is evil, sinful, or wrong in the world *cannot be identified only or always by the presence of suffering*.³³ In a tragic world, the discomfort and pain we experience as a result of alterity, incompatibility, or finitude are not a reliable measure of evil at work. Second, the tension and conflict of difference or incompatibility *necessitate a different kind of response* than suffering caused by something gone wrong or emerging from evil. For instance, while tragedy and evil can both result in suffering, evil *requires renunciation, repentance, and restoration*. Tragedy, by contrast, evokes acknowledgment,

rather than sin being a response to a tragic reality. In the classical view, sin thus becomes “contextless” and without motivation “save its own formal possibility” (Ibid., 129). For Ed Farley, it is the tragic finitude and vulnerability of humans that sets the stage for the emergence of sin rather than the other way around.

³² In a refutation of social Manicheism, Ed Farley notes that, “If evil means anything which evokes a painful or negative experience, then...intrinsic incompatibilities [are] evil. However, since anything real can be the cause and occasion of pain, such a notion of evil would also have to identify evil with whatever is actual, a move that removes the basis for distinguishing between evil and good” (Farley, *Good and Evil*, 61–62).

³³ That the human condition is tragic requires acceptance that some forms of suffering are an inevitable reality in human life. This does not suggest, however, a posture of acquiescence in the face of suffering. Just because suffering is intrinsic to the human condition does not mean that humans should demonstrate willing victimhood or nihilism in the face of it. Wendy Farley argues that even though our situation may be tragic, tragedy itself does not destroy our ability to perceive the suffering of others, and in our compassion and care for others we can transcend that tragedy. When we are able to recognize another person as both human and suffering, it evokes in us compassion. The persistence of our capacity for recognizing and responding to suffering suggests that “Compassion is the resilience of the passion for justice that survives tragedy and in fact resists and defies it” (Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 39). Suffering—particularly radical and dehumanizing suffering—can and should be resisted in the name of justice, dignity and solidarity with victims, and she writes, “A tragic vision is branded by suffering, but the mark of tragedy is defiance rather than despair” (Ibid., 37).

discernment, and reflection as to how best to respond.³⁴ Being able to distinguish tragedy or benign antipathy from evil is critical to responding faithfully. Third, because encounters with difference can be uncomfortable or cause fear, we might be tempted to suspect that difference *itself* is a sign of danger or evil. But, as Wendy Farley states, “In order to discern whether a particular event or state of affairs is an example of the plurality of existence or is harmful or evil requires reflection and judgment.”³⁵ Information and investigation are necessary to assess the theological and ethical dynamics of specific situations. Even though difference or alterity can cause anxiety, tension, and even conflict, the *existence of difference* is not an indication of the presence of sin or evil.³⁶

In sum, by understanding some kinds of suffering outside the framework of good and evil, we are released from having suffering alone be our measure of the presence of sin or wrongdoing. Difference, likewise, can be analyzed separately from the tension it causes or the sense that such tension must automatically be bad. If the conflict and tension of difference are natural and interconnected with the conditions of our well-being, they need not be instinctually avoided or condemned. In a tragic framework, we are more able to assess the nature and character of the presenting conflict or tension because we are free from the preconceived notion that we have already erred in some way, or that we must be on our guard because something is amiss. On the contrary, when we experience the everyday tensions of interacting with different others, we can stop and reflect, and choose how to respond—with a posture of openness and receptivity rather

³⁴ Of course, tragedy also evokes grief, lament, sadness, solidarity, etc.

³⁵ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 37.

³⁶ To be clear, the fact that the creation is diverse is, in God’s words, “very good.” However, this assertion does not mean that *all forms of diversity* are good, or life-giving, or natural. Nor does the existence of diversity or difference *on its own* offer ethical criteria for how to respond to it. This assertion is meant to resist the idea that simply because difference causes tension or conflict or disrupts unity or harmony it is something evil or wrong. But this is not a blanket affirmation of all forms of diversity at all times. The point is that further criteria and assessment are needed to discern and ethical and faithful response to various situations in which difference is a cause of conflict or disturbance.

than fear and aversion, for example. We can examine how the conflict could be constructive or destructive, or ask whether the differences we encounter are doing us harm or merely challenging our accepted norms. When the most faithful course of action might *not* be to bring a swift end to conflict or tension, we are freed to ask, “*What is God trying to say to us?*”

II. From Bad to Worse

Of course, not all human suffering (or conflict, for that matter) does emerge naturally and neutrally from creation and the tragic human condition. Given that much human suffering and harm *are* caused by the corrupting effects of sin on human behavior and orientations, how might we differentiate between tragedy and evil? Ed Farley contends that there is a connection between the tragedy of the human condition and the emergence of sin and evil, because how we respond to the suffering we encounter in our lives—and specifically how we deal with the anxiety and insecurity of our tragic reality—is linked to evil and redemption. Moreover, Ed Farley’s entire interpretation of good and evil is intertwined with his understanding of human beings in relationship.

A. Suffering Leads to the Dark Side

For Ed Farley, that which is unavoidably tragic and that which has become distorted by sin are distinct, but they are not unrelated.³⁷ The multiplicity of sufferings humans experience—biological, interpersonal, emotional, existential—constitute “an intolerable condition that opens [human beings] to the dynamics of evil,” he explains.³⁸ Vulnerability, mortality, the experience of incompatibility with others, and the constant sense of anxiety and dissatisfaction that result from

³⁷ Ed Farley writes, “the tragic character of our condition is the primary motivating background of sin’s origin” (Farley, *Good and Evil*, 121).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

the gulf between our desired satisfactions and their fulfillment create a precarious human existence.³⁹ Evil emerges as “a kind of weakness” based in an incapacity to abide this chaos, insecurity, and insignificance.⁴⁰

In our desperate desire to find security, we use finite goods to try to anchor our subjectivity, to enrich and complete us, and to feel loved and understood.⁴¹ We try to make tangible “things,” including people, satisfy our underlying needs and desires, and squelch our fears and anxieties. These mundane goods, being limited and finite, are unable to solve our existential problems, but in our insecurity we begin to *think* of finite goods as ultimate, either by elevating them (e.g. our nation, family, economic system) to a position of destiny and ultimate universal meaning, or by limiting our understanding of ultimate meaning to the mundane object before us.⁴² The result is an idolatry of mundane things, which leads to postures and acts of evil.⁴³ Idolatry diminishes human freedom by narrowing our experience of the world, limiting our understanding of the actual realities of finite beings, and evoking malice, control, and domination over other

³⁹ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 144.

⁴¹ Ibid., 130.

⁴² Ibid., 134. In Farley’s words, “Once we think of those [mundane] goods as able to secure us against tragic vulnerability, we collapse the [eternal] horizon into these goods. We construe the non-mundane referent of desire to be the goods at hand. In other words, we mundanize the eternal horizon, the referent of the elemental passions” (Ibid., 134).

⁴³ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 144. In describing human desires, Farley provides a complex overview of three “elemental passions,” which are distinguished from but interconnected with three spheres of human reality. In footnote 48, I offer a short description of the spheres of human reality. Here I will give a brief overview of the elemental passions, as they are related to the motivations and desires that lead to idolatry. Elemental passions are “deep and comprehensive desires that appear to structure the very way we exist in the world and move through time” and are the root of motivations and behaviors (Ibid., 99). They are the passion of subjectivity, which is the passion of an agent for itself, to exist as itself (Ibid., 102); the passion of the interhuman, which is a passion for “reciprocal relations characterized by compassionate obligation” (Ibid., 103); and the passion for reality, in which the agent seeks “to understand the mundane realities around us” because that desire “finds satisfaction in their illumination and in their beauty” (Ibid., 108). The drive of the passions to achieve their ends and have their desires met is fundamentally tragic, in that there is always an “uncloseable gulf between desiring and desired” (Ibid., 109). This tragic dynamic of the elemental passions sets the stage for the anxiety and existential angst that plagues human beings, because we cannot fulfill our desires. Though both the spheres and the passions can be corrupted by idolatry, the discontent that leads to idolatry is fueled by the “intrinsic frustrations of the elemental passions” (Ibid., 131).

beings and things.⁴⁴ As idolatry emerges, “the self asserts an absolute priority...[and] the *other* is reduced to an instrument of self-securing.”⁴⁵ In turn, idolatry and evil lead to further (and often more extensive) human suffering through control and domination, abuse, suppression, and destruction. For Ed Farley it is not the unavoidable, tragic insecurity of the human condition that constitutes sin, but that we respond to our suffering in idolatrous ways.⁴⁶

Both the tragedy of our human condition *and* our idolatrous responses to it can cause suffering.⁴⁷ In our deep longing to avoid suffering, we are tempted to make an idol of that which we (mistakenly) believe will offer us security. This idolatry lies at the heart of human sin.

B. Face Value

These dynamics of suffering, idolatry, and evil manifest in particular ways in human relationships. But to understand Ed Farley’s relational construction requires a dive into the larger structure of his book. In his typology of the human condition, Farley describes three interconnected spheres of human reality—the interhuman, the individual, and the social—all of which are tragically structured and susceptible to the evils of idolatry.⁴⁸ Interpersonal relations and their idolatrous

⁴⁴ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 136–137.

⁴⁵ Williams, “Tragedy, Totality, and the Face,” 92–93. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁶ Late in his volume, Ed Farley admits to having drawn “an artificial and misleading picture of tragedy and suffering by abstracting it from human evil” (Farley, *Good and Evil*, 285). While tragic conditions do create and perpetuate human suffering, the drive toward idolatry is largely fueled by the evil and sin humans inflict on one another: “Much of what presses human beings to the desperate attempt to secure themselves is the suffering they experience from social and relational evil” (Ibid.).

⁴⁷ Wendy Farley suggests that any form of suffering can be resisted whether or not it is the result of evil because it causes pain to human beings: “A tragic vision is branded by suffering, but the mark of tragedy is defiance rather than despair. The beginning of a tragic vision is anger and sorrow at the face of suffering. The horror of suffering provokes resistance. As such, it is an ethical (and ultimately theological) response to suffering: it begins and ends as compassion....Compassion is the resilience of the passion for justice that survives tragedy and in fact resists and defies it” (Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 37, 39).

⁴⁸ The social sphere is “the sphere of specific human interactions plus all of the structures and processes through which they take place,” including laws, values, norms, language, belief systems, institutions, customs, and rituals (Farley, *Good and Evil*, 47–48). The individual sphere, also called the personal or agential sphere, is the sphere of “embodied, impassioned, self-transcending individual agents,” and includes our individual sense of determinacy (the specificities of personhood such as gender, culture, taste, etc.) and sense of transcendence (that more is possible than is determined by our specificities) (Ibid., 63, 68–69).

corruption are primarily located in what he calls the interhuman sphere, the realm of interpersonal relationship or “face-to-face relation or being-together in relation,” which is the reality constituted and existing between people in interpersonal encounter.⁴⁹ Though all three spheres are interrelated, the interhuman is primary because it gives rise to the possibility of a shared world, which is required for all the spheres. As Ed Farley puts it, “What the interhuman makes possible is a reciprocity of perspectives and a negotiation of differences so that collaboration on projects and the ascertaining of truth and reality are possible.”⁵⁰ Additionally, the interhuman sphere engenders a specific criterion needed for the working of the other spheres—the *face*, an interpersonal encounter with another person through which we are summoned to freedom and responsibility with and for the other.⁵¹

In this framework of the interhuman sphere lies our yearning to experience an “understanding and compassionate other,” but instead we encounter humans who are different from us.⁵² Other people exist in the world alongside us but have their own agendas and aims, which directly or indirectly challenge our understandings of the world.⁵³ We discover that they offer resistance to and contesting of our interpretations of them, and that the other has “an interpretation of my being from a perspective and location not my own.”⁵⁴ Where we might seek a reciprocity of understanding and compassion, we find instead a “reciprocity of autonomies”—the ominous perception of the other person as separate, distinct, and bearing his or her own interpretation of both the self and the other.⁵⁵ The other is someone like us from whom we want reciprocal relationship, but that someone also challenges our sense of autonomy and reminds us of

⁴⁹ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 33.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 29; Williams, “Tragedy, Totality, and the Face,” 94.

⁵² Farley, *Good and Evil*, 131.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

our limitations. Further, these experiences reveal the inherent interconnectedness of ourselves with others; the fact that we recognize each other demonstrates we already have been formed intersubjectively.⁵⁶ Such encounters lead to a “co-disclosure of fragility,” in which “I experience the other as not only centered and autonomous, but fragile before my interpretations and actions even as I experience my own autonomy as fragile to the interpretations and actions of the other.”⁵⁷ Encountering another person reveals our vulnerability and their vulnerability, our autonomy and their autonomy—and the difficult and complex reality that both of us are human, mortal, individual, interdependent, and uninterchangeable.

Ed Farley adopts and revises Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of *face* as the linchpin of this understanding of the interhuman. In the interactions of human beings, specifically when “human beings share emotions or engage in dialogue,” more takes place than “just negotiating agendas or calculating how self-interests might be met. Something is going on that is irreducible to the negotiations of power and status.”⁵⁸ Interhuman interaction exhibits something beyond utilitarian transaction between people.⁵⁹ “The sphere of the face,” writes Ed Farley, “is the sphere of emotional participation, and the discernment of the other is an emotional discernment. Because what is discerned is the other’s fragility or what Levinas calls destituteness and nakedness, the other is experienced as a summons to compassion.”⁶⁰ The face awakens “a desire to be

⁵⁶ Ed Farley writes, “Intersubjectivity is always already there when individuals become aware of themselves or self-consciously reflect about their relations to others. Intersubjective entanglements are already present and presupposed when we engage in empirical, deductive or reflective explorations” (Ibid., 37).

⁵⁷ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁹ Ed Farley’s construction of the interhuman emerges from “the discussions in continental philosophy from Husserl through Levinas,” but does so “to develop an ontology of tragic finitude as the background for the retrieved Hebraic-Christian paradigm of good and evil” (Williams, “Tragedy, Totality, and the Face,” 80).

⁶⁰ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 42. According to Williams, Ed Farley follows Levinas in the “unqualified priority to the face of the other” and “unconditional ethical summons of the face,” which entails obligation to the other (Williams, “Tragedy, Totality, and the Face,” 94). But Ed Farley “transforms Levinas’s austere account of the face at a philosophical level. Specifically, Farley’s claim is that the face not only summons to responsibility, it also evokes compassion. The sphere of the face is a sphere of empathy, emotional participation, and compassion....The modification Farley proposes is reciprocity: alterity is not just the cognitive elusiveness of

acknowledged, understood, and appreciated by the other, and the desire for an other on whom we can bestow acknowledgment, understanding and affection.”⁶¹ Moreover,

Being summoned by the fragility of the other not only evokes a suffering-with (compassion) but also a suffering-for (obligation). Obligation is a posture or disposition that comes into being as a hearing and felt response to the summons of the face. As the disposition to join with the other in her or his fragile struggles against whatever threatens and violates, obligation is on behalf of. As the compassionate disposition directed to the other in its fragility, it is obligation-toward. But concretely and actually, there is only one posture evoked by the summons, *compassionate obligation*.⁶²

Thus, the summons of the face “is an invitation to transcend self-preoccupation” and to respond with compassion to the vulnerability, autonomy, and needs of others.⁶³ In the interhuman realm, we become aware that encountering others is more than transaction, more than utility. Encounter and engagement with an other initiates a mutual summons of obligation and compassion.

C. Call and Response

How we respond—to difference, to tension, to conflict—is crucial to how we understand what it means to be faithful. How we respond to the summons of the face is the basis of Ed Farley’s understanding of the corrupting influence of sin and evil in human relationships. Our response to the call to compassionate obligation is not involuntary. We each choose how we will respond—we can accept that call, avoid or dismiss it, refuse to recognize it, or reject it entirely in dispositions of cruelty and malice.⁶⁴ Malignant (evil) alienation arises when the incompatibilities

the other or the height from which the other commands and disposes of my freedom, but a *reciprocity* of autonomies that disclose fragility” (Ibid., 95). For Ed Farley, “The summons from the other is something that evokes a response in which compassion and obligation converge” (Farley, *Good and Evil*, 41).

⁶¹ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 185.

⁶² Ibid., 43. Emphasis mine.

⁶³ As Farley writes, “We human beings desire confirmation from the other of our integrity and reality. We aspire to approval, respect, and love. And we bitterly resent the other who withholds these acknowledgements and deals with us as if we were not real agents. To use Emmanuel Levinas’s concept, we want genuine others to discern in us the face, which is to say, something that evokes from that other a response of compassionate responsibility....It desires an other who will respond aesthetically and emotionally to the mystery, uniqueness, creativity, and even beauty of the face” (Ibid., 104).

⁶⁴ Ibid., 43.

humans encounter in one another become antipathy that “displaces or reduces the summons of the face or distorts the relations that embody obligation.”⁶⁵ What begins as a tragic condition of vulnerability and frailty, of passion and need for loving reciprocity and compassionate responsibility, falls into corrupted evil when the summons of the face is replaced by idolatrous self-securing.⁶⁶

Through the concept of the summons of the face, Ed Farley provides a means by which to broadly evaluate the difference between that which is tragic and that which is evil in our relationships with each other. Interhuman relations define our being and identity as human agents, because “human beings are not objective entities external to their relations but are constituted by their relations.”⁶⁷ *Denying or rejecting compassionate obligation toward others is a sign of the corrupting presence of sin and evil in those relations.* We belong to each other; we are interconnected. We bear mutual responsibility for one another, and we are created for mutuality, reciprocity, and interpersonal engagement. Declaring our autonomy and self-sufficiency, or asserting the unnecessary or unimportance of the existence of an other, rejects the intersubjective reality of who we are as human beings-in-relation.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁶ As examples of this idolatry, we might develop a false dependence on another person and a distorted belief that a relationship is the key to our security and will protect us from our tragic vulnerability. Or, when our relationships are disappointing or frustrating, we might descend into cynicism, dismissing in despair the idea that genuine relations are even possible, and withdrawing from intimacy with others in favor of self-securing through independence. (Ibid., 187–189). Postures of control and domination, and even the violation of the very being of the other, are all possible idolatrous orientations (Williams, “Tragedy, Totality, and the Face,” 92). Ed Farley describes individual acts of violation against the face of the other in this way: “Harm to any living thing is a deprivation of its powers to live as its own distinctive kind of being. To violate is to deprive something of its powers of being, its powers of living, functioning, responding and even creating....We can not only be starved, subjected to pain, and physically incarcerated but also dehumanized, insulted, and manipulated. Acts of this sort deprive us of...the chance to experience and understand reality, and acknowledgement and affection. To be deprived of these things is to have our capacities or powers to exist in the world reduced. Deprivations are what we effect in the being of the other when we withhold acknowledgement and affection, when we falsely accuse, stereotype, and show contempt. In sum, deprivations are directed to the face of the other and they appeal to the face in order to wound the face” (Farley, *Good and Evil*, 236).

⁶⁷ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 44.

But evil, manifested in the rejection of the summons to compassionate obligation, extends beyond corrupted interpersonal interactions. As I mentioned, the interhuman sphere is interrelated with but primary to the social and individual spheres of human reality, because it makes possible both a shared world and the criterion of the face. Ed Farley argues that the face is also critical to the cohesion and right function of the three spheres together because what “unites the spheres in the cause of human good is the face.”⁶⁸ The personal and emotional encounter with another that engenders a sense of responsibility and compassion for that other is the means by which all realms of human reality remain connected to human good. In the interpersonal summons to compassionate obligation, the face is the “humanizing criteria” that structures all the spheres.⁶⁹

Conversely,

Minus the interhuman and the face, individuals use institutions for their individual purposes, and institutions deploy individuals for their agendas. It is only because of the interhuman and the face that individuals transcend their subjectivity toward others in compassionate obligation....Face-to-face relations, agents, and institutions all degenerate when they lose connection with the face.⁷⁰

When the summons to compassionate obligation is ignored or rejected, all relations become corrupted by evil, and the spheres themselves cease to function for good internally or corporately. The face is central to all expressions of good and evil; it is not merely that relations are corrupted by evil, but that corrupted relations corrupt everything else.

In broad strokes, Ed Farley claims that the flourishing of human good is interconnected with the acknowledgement of and participation in the interconnectedness of the creation, which is realized in human relations as the acceptance of the summons to compassionate obligation with and for each other. The consequential implication of Ed Farley’s larger argument in a theology for

⁶⁸ Ibid., 287–288.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 288. He continues, “It is the face that shows the other as one who can be murdered, violated, and manipulated, and as one to whom we are responsible. The face is the agent’s own face discovered in the alterity of the other and the other’s face experienced in the agent’s own sphere” (Ibid., 288).

⁷⁰ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 288.

conflict is that there is something intrinsic to interpersonal encounter and relationship with others that embodies and makes possible that which is good across the spheres of human reality, and without which evil is left to metastasize. Put another way, opening ourselves to other human beings is good even though the inherent incompatibility and conflict may cause us suffering. Likewise, because we are interconnected there is something fundamentally wrong about turning inward, isolating ourselves, or segregating from each other. For Ed Farley, this interhuman connection is encapsulated in the summons to compassionate obligation with and for each other.

III. Present Company Excluded

To summarize what I have articulated thus far, we experience suffering in the tragic limitations of our frailty and our finitude, and such suffering also occurs when we encounter the autonomy and diversity of others and recognize our incompatibilities with their perspectives and aims. While some of the difficulty we experience in these encounters can be chalked up to the limitations of our tragic existence, we are also prone to react to our suffering through forms of idolatrous self-securing, which result in sinful and evil actions and predilections. In interpersonal relations, self-securing idolatry overrides the compassionate obligation to which we are summoned by the vulnerable face of the other, and we reject reciprocal relations of affection and care in favor of neglect or outright malice. This manifestation of human sin then inflicts more suffering on others, and the cycle is perpetuated.

In what follows, I explore in greater detail theological and phenomenological expressions of the rejection of compassionate obligation—or, more colloquially, the ways in which our encounters with alterity can go wrong. Miroslav Volf's explanation of *exclusion* offers theological interpretation of our interconnectedness and the formation of identity in relationship to others. Beginning from patterns of creation, Volf describes the human person formed in relationship to

others, specifically in a differentiation process of “separating and binding” that, from the creation story, defines our identity as both part of and distinct from others.⁷¹ However, encounters with others also challenge that identity. When “otherness” feels threatening, we exclude the other in order to preserve who we see ourselves to be. Exclusion can take various forms, but is—like the rejection of compassionate obligation—an absolute prioritizing of the self and a resistance to honoring the other in the same manner as the self.

A. *Mistaken Identity*

Volf describes the “differentiation” process of identity formation as something exemplified in the biblical creation story. In Genesis, creation is marked by an “intricate pattern of ‘separate-and-bound-together’ entities,” in which creation is separated in some ways (e.g. light from darkness) and bound together in others (e.g. humanity as stewards of creation).⁷² Similarly, differentiation of people from each other is not only necessary—it is woven into the fabric of creation.

Differentiation is not segregation, but the development of *interdependence* in the process of formation and understanding:

The human self is formed not through a simple rejection of the other...but through a complex process of “taking in” and “keeping out.” We are who we are not because we are separate from others who are next to us, but because we are *both* separate *and* connected, *both* distinct *and* related; the boundaries that mark our identities are both barriers and bridges....Identity is a result of the distinction from the other *and* the internalization of the relationship to the other.⁷³

⁷¹ The impetus for Volf’s work emerged from cultural and ethnic identity-based divisions he experienced in Sarajevo, Los Angeles, and Berlin in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As Volf put it, the problem of “ethnic and cultural conflicts is part of a larger problem of identity and otherness...[a problem which] fought and bled and burned its way into my consciousness” (Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 16).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 65. Volf’s concept of differentiation is also connected to how he understands the nature of the body of Christ, which I discuss below. Despite this Christian focus, however, Volf intends differentiation and exclusion to apply to the human experience in general, not just intra-Christian relationships. Christians may be called in their relationships to other Christians through the symbol and reality of the body of Christ, but identity formation in differentiation and exclusion is applicable to all humans.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 66. Author’s emphasis.

Though Ed Farley does not discuss differentiation as such, there are clear echoes between the idea of being “separate and connected, distinct and related,” and Ed Farley’s assertion that when we encounter an other we become conscious of our autonomy and our intersubjectivity at once. Volf’s concept of differentiation is helpful for theologically articulating the correlation between these elements. In the development of identity, differentiation is both useful and necessary, and emerges from the interdependent nature of creation in its particularity *and* its relationality. In encountering others, we become aware of our identity as distinct individuals who are bound together in a larger creation.

However, when in our relationships with others we cannot tolerate the dynamics of differentiation, Volf claims, we resort to *exclusion*: the “violence of expulsion, assimilation, or subjugation, and the indifference of abandonment” of others, which replaces the dynamics of taking in and keeping out and the mutuality of giving and receiving.⁷⁴ Exclusion transgresses the process of differentiation by working against binding on one hand and separating on the other. On one side, we reject patterns of interdependence and claim sovereign independence instead, which dissolves the bonds of connection.⁷⁵ The other is seen as an enemy who must be pushed away, or as a nonentity that can be abandoned.⁷⁶ This is largely akin to the rejection of compassionate obligation that occurs when we assert our autonomy and lack of need for others—a form of idolatry of the self. On the other side, exclusion entails an “erasure of separation, not recognizing the other as someone who in his or her otherness belongs to the pattern of interdependence.”⁷⁷ Here, the other is seen as inferior and must be assimilated or subjugated to the self; in other words, the other is of use only as an accessory or extension of the self and not as someone with their own

⁷⁴ Ibid., 67.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid. Importantly, Volf notes that “exclusion is different from drawing and maintaining boundaries,” because boundaries make possible discrete identities, which are required for relationships with others.

agency.⁷⁸ In both cases, exclusion stands over against processes of differentiation, and thus in defiance of the nature of creation itself, as it violently reconfigures what was created for interdependence.⁷⁹

A person can also respond to threats to identity by surrendering to the other and allowing oneself to be sinned *against* by being excluded. Larger systems and dynamics of exclusion in society reinforce this tendency, because when we are excluded we are damaged by the evil of not being able to be fully ourselves, and our ability to resist that exclusion is weakened. Thus, for many:

[The] problem is not so much exclusion of the other from their will to be oneself, but a paradoxical exclusion of their own self from the will to be oneself....As a rule, exclusion of the self from the will to be oneself comes about as a result of acts of exclusion that we suffer. Hence it is not so much sin as it is an evil that cries for remedy. The exclusion of the self from the will to be oneself not only damages the self, but makes slippage into exclusion on the part of the other and therefore damaging of the self so much easier.⁸⁰

B. Space Invaders

How does exclusion take place? Because the self is constructed dialogically and in relationship with others (binding and separating), Volf claims that the other is from the outset part of the self.⁸¹ For example, to be female entails understanding of and relationship to that which is *not* female;

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 66. Volf notes that blanket inclusion is also unhelpful: "Vilify all boundaries, pronounce every discrete identity oppressive, put the tag "exclusion" on every stable difference—and you will have aimless drifting instead of clear-sighted agency, haphazard activity instead of moral engagement and accountability and, in the long run, a torpor of death instead of a dance of freedom" (Ibid., 65). Instead, claims Volf, we need to be able to make "nonexclusionary judgments." He writes, "I reject exclusion because the prophets, evangelists, and apostles tell me that this is a wrong way to treat human beings, any human being, anywhere, and I am persuaded to have good reasons to believe them....In my vocabulary, in any case, "exclusion" does not express a preference; it names an objective evil. A judgment that names exclusion as an evil and differentiation as a positive good, then, is itself not an act of exclusion. To the contrary, such judgment is the beginning of the struggle against exclusion....We need more adequate judgments based on a distinction between legitimate 'differentiation' and illegitimate 'exclusion' and made with humility that counts with our proclivity to misperceive and misjudge because we desire to exclude" (Ibid., 68).

⁸⁰ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 92.

⁸¹ Ibid., 91.

moving to an unfamiliar city includes awareness of being “not from here.” “The will to be oneself,” writes Volf, “if it is to be healthy, must entail the will to let the other inhabit the self; the other must be part of who I am as I will to be myself. The other over against whom I must assert myself is the same other who must remain part of myself if I am to be myself.”⁸² This is not unlike Farley’s articulation of the experience of interhuman encounter in which the realities of the other—frailty, vulnerability, threat—are interrelated with the realities of the self. In exclusion, however, this push-and-pull of identity tension leads to a kind of violence in which “Instead of reconfiguring myself to make space for the other, I seek to reshape the other into who I want her to be in order that in relation to her I may be who I want to be.”⁸³ The result is an impulse to recast the other person as something different than who the other person actually is in order to avoid being changed by the encounter. Writes Volf, “The separation necessary to constitute and maintain a dynamic identity of the self in relation to the other slides into exclusion that seeks to affirm identity *at the expense of the other*.”⁸⁴

This last phrase reflects the heart of Volf’s thinking: that it is not difference or even strangeness that divides people from each other, but *enmity*.⁸⁵ Enmity emerges when we condemn as antithetical to us the differences we encounter in others—judging them inferior or subordinate to that which constitutes who or what we are—and we simultaneously reject the possibility of being challenged or changed by the encounter. It is not that there are to be no boundaries between people; the entire idea of differentiation hinges on the importance of discrete identities as part of the creative process. Instead, “*what is exclusionary are impenetrable boundaries that prevent a creative encounter with the other*.”⁸⁶

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 91–92. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 67. Emphasis mine. Often the driving force behind exclusion, claims Volf, is a desire for “purity”—that is, an impulse that says “plurality and heterogeneity must give way to homogeneity and unity” (Ibid.,

It is notable that Volf's explication moves from the individual/personal to corporate/social expressions of exclusion, e.g. racism, sexism, genocide, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, holocaust. Though he does not describe in detail the movement from individual exclusion to social or cultural manifestations, it is clear that he sees them as connected. The movement toward exclusion takes place in the minds and hearts of individuals, even as it is manifested by whole societies. Thus there is a connection between the personal and the corporate when we choose to exclude. The drive to exclusion is helped along by particular language that makes the "other" into something less than human. For example, the use of dysphemism can "insert the other into the universe of moral obligations in such a way that not only does exclusion become justified but necessary because not to exclude appears morally culpable."⁸⁷ Others become nothing more than their objectifying descriptors, and the "dangers" they pose justify their exclusion.

Perhaps even more insidious is that exclusion is not simple ignorance about another, but often a willful misconstrual or distortion. "We demonize and bestialize not because we do not know better," writes Volf, "but because we *refuse* to know what is manifest and *choose* what serves our interests."⁸⁸ Indifference to the other, because "the system" has kept the other at a distance, is the most deadly. As Volf writes, "A 'system'—a political, economic or cultural system—insinuates itself between myself and the other. If the other is excluded, it is the system that is doing the excluding, a system in which I participate because I must survive and against

74). Purity asserts that I am set apart from (and typically above) others in some way, which is actualized in segregation between "us" and "them" (whomever they are). In its extreme, such exclusion takes the form of *elimination*, in which the "other" is such a threat to us that it must be destroyed or driven out in order for me/us to remain or restore our purity; "more benign" form of elimination is *assimilation*, in which the "other" is allowed to stay if they become "like us" (Ibid., 75). Alternatively, the "other" may be treated to *domination*, in which they are seen as inferior beings assigned to particular locations, segregated from places of power, given limited roles, and generally subjugated in order that they might be exploited to "increase our wealth or simply inflate our egos" (Ibid.). A third form of exclusion is *abandonment*, in which the other is simply ignored, hidden from view, and closed off from us so that we don't have to see or respond (Ibid.).

⁸⁷ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 76.

⁸⁸ Ibid. Author's emphasis.

which I do not rebel because it cannot be changed....I go about my business.”⁸⁹ Further, evil itself, embodied systemically, plays a role in the perpetuation of exclusion by falsely contending that “there is no choice” but to acquiesce to the system.⁹⁰ Among other things, the evil of exclusion can at once claim there are no alternatives, and create “an illusion of well-being...*shaping reality* in such a way that the lie about ‘well-being’ appears as plain verity.”⁹¹ As a result, “We are ensnared by evil not only with full consent, but without a thought of dissent and without a sigh for deliverance.”⁹²

Like Ed Farley, Volf offers to a theology for conflict a confirmation of the interdependence of humans, but Volf does so through the lens of creation and connects this interdependence to created diversity. The binding and separating process of differentiation is part and parcel of the work of creation, and is also the means by which we form identities and relate to other beings in their particularity and interrelationship with us. Because our identities are intertwined with others, however, encountering difference can feel like a threat to us and to who we understand ourselves to be. As a result, we overthrow the differentiation process and resort to various forms of exclusion, which violently reject the interdependence of creation. Where Ed Farley points to the denial of *compassionate obligation* as a marker of the presence of sin and evil in relationships,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 77.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 86.

⁹¹ Ibid., 89. Author’s emphasis.

⁹² Ibid., 90. Volf offers several explanations for human proclivity toward exclusion. The reality of others disrupts our status quo: “We exclude because we are uncomfortable with anything that blurs accepted boundaries, disturbs our identities, and disarranges our symbolic cultural maps” (Ibid., 78). The difference of others is seen as a harbinger of chaos in which our perceived norms and boundaries become contested. At times we make others the scapegoats of our sins and failures so that we can continue to live in the illusion of identities of righteousness. Excluding others also can be generated from our own self-hatred projected onto others, rooted in our discomfort “with strangeness within ourselves” (Ibid., 77–78). One significant reason is power: “More often than not, we exclude because in a world of scarce resources and contested power we want to secure possessions and wrest power from others....We exclude because we want to be at the center and be there alone, single-handedly controlling ‘the land’” (Ibid., 78). In sum, we desire stable identity (over against the chaos symbolized by the other), or stable existence (protecting what we’ve got or getting more), and the alterity of the other challenges either or both. However, Volf ultimately concedes that there is no complete answer to the question *why*, “just as no answer is available to the question about the origin of evil” (Ibid., 79).

Volf names various dynamics of *exclusion*, both personal and corporate, as a sign that the processes of creation have been circumvented by evil. For both Volf and Ed Farley, the heart of their theological understanding of being human is a belief in the interdependence and intersubjectivity between and among human beings and the creation as a whole. Conflict and tension are normal and natural in an interrelated world; *what stands against the creation (and Creator) are beliefs, actions and systems that deny our interrelatedness and prevent creative encounter with one another.*

C. See No Evil

As Volf has noted, human susceptibility to illusion and falsehood plays a critical role in the perpetuation of exclusion. The impulse to exclude is often built on the misconstrual or distortion of the true reality of the other. In a similar vein, Wendy Farley argues that *the refusal to acknowledge what is real* is central to ideologies of totality. The illusions and fictions of totalitarian views—the kinds of claims on which corporate exclusion rests—impose a singular version of reality that is universal and sovereign over all others. These are illusions that absolutize one way of being, one interpretive mood, one nation, one race, one religion, etc., and suppress knowledge of the “plurality, concreteness, and unique loveliness of beings that inhabit our world,”⁹³ by falsely rendering complexities of material reality into something monolithic, absolute, and abstract.⁹⁴ Like with Volf’s forms of exclusion, in totality “Whatever is not the One must be annihilated either by being assimilated into the One or by being destroyed.”⁹⁵

⁹³ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 21.

⁹⁴ “The movement of totality is one from particularity to a whole in such a way that the uniqueness and concreteness of existents is rendered invisible or irrelevant while the totality becomes absolutely real and valuable. Such a movement is alien to the desire for truth because it falsifies the reality of beings in order to make them fit a conceptual or political scheme. Such falsification is a violation of both truth and justice” (Ibid., 67).

⁹⁵ Ibid., 18–19.

Wendy Farley's overview of totality is a useful complement to Volf's discussion of exclusion because it interprets the emergence and perpetuation of totality through *diminishing awareness of and openness to difference*.⁹⁶ The illusion of totality is not merely a blindness or willful obliviousness to others, but an aversion to them that assumes differences themselves to be something bad: signs of inferiority, deviance, and depravity.⁹⁷ Moreover, Wendy Farley helpfully identifies the way totalizing illusions employ further fictions and falsehoods to support the overarching illusion.

Oppositional dichotomies, in which "one thing is perceived as absolutely good and real, while another is denigrated, its reality obscured, and any common ground between them is abolished,"⁹⁸ are a form of fiction leveraged by those in power to dominate and oppress. When reality is expressed as unambiguously good or evil, the factual and moral complexity of situations becomes hard to discern. In such a situation, individuals may feel released from "having to examine either our obligations or the practical details of a decision with any care" because the moral and ethical judgments have already been made for the whole.⁹⁹ Moreover, in dichotomous

⁹⁶ As Wendy Farley rejects these frameworks of totality or absolutism, she also notes that the flip side of the struggle for truth is *philosophical relativism* and "the moral virtue of tolerance degraded into indifference." (Ibid., 6). She cautions against both interpretations of plurality—those that offer an imperialist logic in which "all differences are signs of inferiority," and those so bound by constructionism that normative judgments are undermined (Ibid., 16). The alternative Wendy Farley suggests is to attend to the reality of beings and the multidimensionality of that reality, which includes contexts, principles, institutions, individual particularity, and common humanity (Ibid., 178).

⁹⁷ Wendy Farley contends that these dynamics are endemic to the so-called "Western world." "Since the 'age of discovery,'" she writes, "which coincided with the beginnings of capitalism to produce Western colonialism, intolerance of difference has been characteristic of the Western world" (Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 44). People or groups who differed from the "norm" (typically understood as educated, white, male, capitalist) were equated with inferiority. "In an encounter with another culture, for example, it could never be the case that it was interestingly different. It could only be interpreted negatively: not Christian, not white, not properly dressed, not literate, not recognizably artistic, moral, technological, or political" (Ibid., 19). The power of this way of thinking is critical to understanding what it takes to overcome it: "Western culture is deeply shaped by imperialist practices and patterns of thought. This shaping is so radical that one can perceive a logic of domination at work in the fabric of Western culture....The struggle for the idea of truth occurs in a context in which a distorting logic attempts to form a comprehensive whole that actively resists any critical leverage from which it can be transcended." (Ibid., 8).

⁹⁸ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 23–24.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 32.

logic, differing opinions are a battle between right and wrong: “Any disagreement between us cannot be a result of diverse interpretations or of a real, if unfortunate, conflict of interests or limitation of resources. [The claims of the other] are absolutely insane, unjust, a radical threat to us.”¹⁰⁰ Oppositional dichotomies erase the possibility of common ground or mutual interests, solidifying the distance between “us” and “them.”

Closely related to oppositional dichotomies is the *fiction of subhumanity*, which categorizes people into “human” and “less than human” groups based on social and cultural characteristics like skin color, gender, sexuality, language, education, wealth, etc. In this fiction, we sense that other people with whom we do not share certain qualities are “not entirely like ‘us’” and are less like persons than we are.¹⁰¹ Simply put, “The fiction of subhumanity defines other persons in a way that withholds recognition of them as human.”¹⁰² This leads to “a strange conflation of care and cruelty” in which the people we see as subhuman are also understood to be incapable of their own agency and must be “led by someone else”—thus becoming the objects of exploitation.¹⁰³

By putting others into subhuman categories and typologies, the dominant power affects how the diversity of others is conceived. Individuals within a “subhuman” culture are rendered indistinguishable and monolithic because the common factor through which they are judged (race, culture, language, etc.) becomes their only distinguishing feature, and diversity *within* their cultures is made invisible. At the same time, these “others” are diminished to nothing *more* than their cultures—usually as stereotypes or caricatures “oppositionally and hierarchically

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰² Ibid., 29.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 24–25.

arranged.”¹⁰⁴ Universal human dignity and infinite variability among human beings are “expunged” by the fiction of subhumanity.¹⁰⁵

But these fictions and illusions can be readily identified. One telltale symptom of illusion is any claim that “some historical phenomenon enjoys attributes of perfection or completeness,” as if at some point in the past there were some reality of unqualified goodness or wholeness.¹⁰⁶ Wendy Farley notes that visionaries from the Hebrew prophets to contemporary philosophers are clear that “nothing human beings know or experience can be a pure, undiluted presence.”¹⁰⁷ All moments and times are complicated and are understood differently from different perspectives; the presumption that a singular view can fully express the whole is fiction. Conversely, “any mode of thought or action that however tacitly presupposes the relative unreality of concrete existents is deeply suspect.”¹⁰⁸ Tangible and concrete experiences of people should take precedence over abstractions and generalizations that would dismiss those realities.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, Wendy Farley continues, “When beings can only be thought of in relation to an abstracted Whole, the probability is very great that one is in the presence of illusion.”¹¹⁰

Such illusions carry consequences beyond mere cognitive or epistemological mistakenness or ignorance. Illusion contributes to wanton harm and destruction of actual human beings while

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 37. Similarly, I would argue that when positive changes or progress have been made, it is also illusory to claim that the current moment represents the paragon of progress or righteousness over against all the epochs of the past.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. “The absolutizing of anything at all—religion, race, idea, method, name of God, nation—as if it could be in an unqualified, infinite, and unambiguous sense good and true, is a primordial act of illusion and violence.”

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Wendy Farley adds that there may be moments when, for heuristic reasons, abstractions or generalizations are appropriate or necessary, but such abstractions should always be understood as temporary and incomplete (Ibid.).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

often rendering that harm invisible or innocuous.¹¹¹ For the well-being of real people, the truth of reality requires the rejection of such totalizing visions:

A person is a sort of being that is absolutely valuable, irreducible to any category, changing, and complex; a person is always concrete; he or she participates in a variety of social relationships, but is not identical with these relationships. It is fundamental to human existence that it appear in the great variety of cultures, that it is diverse and concrete. Valuing common humanity values persons precisely in their cultural, religious, gendered variety as well as the uniquenesses and value of each particular person.¹¹²

Wendy Farley connects ethical thinking and action with a defense of plurality as a locus of truth.

The desire for truth requires a passion for the reality of other beings in their diversity and particularity, because it is only in recognizing the realness and multiplicity of beings that truth can be seen and known.¹¹³ To deny the multifaceted and specific realities of other human beings, or to define inherent differences as signs of that which is lesser or dangerous, is a rejection of the interdependent nature of a diverse creation, which is falsehood and illusion.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 38.

¹¹² Ibid., 29.

¹¹³ Miroslav Volf also argues the connection between truth and the ability to see the reality of others—and reality from the perspective of others. While God has the capacity to see things “panlocally” and from all angles and perspectives, Volf says, human beings do not. Still, “In a creaturely way,” he writes, “we should try to emulate God’s way of knowing...We can try to see the other concretely rather than abstractly, from within rather than simply from without. What human way of seeing corresponds to God’s seeing ‘from everywhere’? Seeing both ‘from here’ and ‘from there.’ Only such double vision will insure that we do not domesticate the otherness of others but allow them to stand on their own”(Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 251). Such double-vision requires stepping “outside of ourselves” to distance ourselves from what is inside and what we are used to, and to question it; moving into the world of the other to put ourselves “into the skin” of the other to try to understand their perceptions; and “taking the other into our own world,” comparing and contrasting “here” and “there,” letting the perspective of the other stand next to our own (Ibid., 251–252). The modest goal of the exercise for Volf is the possibility of coming to a common language and common human understanding that can “approximate the way an all-knowing God, who views things from everywhere, sees both us and them” (Ibid., 253). In this way, “The goodness which creates space in the self for the other facilitates the search for truth. Indeed, without *such* goodness, no movement from the self to the other and back will commence, no agreement will be reached. Each party will remain alone in their own truth, equally persuaded of the wrongness of those who disagree as they are of their own rightness. ...Without the will to embrace the other there will be no truth *between people*, and without truth between people there will be no peace” (Ibid., 258).

IV. Turning Points

The writings of Ed Farley, Wendy Farley, and Miroslav Volf outline the first premises of a theology for conflict. I previously suggested four interlocking topics to consider: 1) the nature and dynamics of *difference* and *diversity* in creation, 2) the human experience of *tension* and *conflict* that result from encountering difference, 3) differentiating *sin* or *evil* from difference or diversity, and 4) the role of *human relationship* in sin and redemption. What I have constructed thus far in relation to these topics leads me to the following claims:

First, in relationship to difference and diversity in creation: difference, plurality, and alterity are inherent to the created world and to the human condition.¹¹⁴ Denial or obfuscation of this reality is illusion and fiction. Not only is the creation full of diversity and difference, the separating-and-binding patterns of creation are patterns in the formation of human identity in which we discover ourselves to be separate but connected, distinct but related. It is the nature of the created order that our freedom to pursue our desires and aims as human beings is intertwined with existence of other free, autonomous beings with whom we are interdependent. It is a world in which we can pursue well-being, find meaning, and delight in beauty.

At the same time, in our encounters with others we run up against inescapable incompatibilities between and among us, which cause conflict. The existence and autonomy of others challenge our sense of identity and reveal our interdependence, vulnerability, and finitude. Thus the sheer reality of others and our encounters with them cause various kinds of suffering, including anxiety, fear, discomfort, tension, and frustration. For many reasons, including the misguided belief that conflict indicates the presence of sin, our inclination is to avoid and resist the

¹¹⁴ An implied assumption here is that the dynamics of the human condition were set in motion by God. Wendy Farley speaks more freely of divine “creation” than does Ed Farley, but for each of them the interpretation of the human condition—especially in its design toward human well-being—suggests its enactment by a divine power.

discomfort and distress of this conflict and tension. But, from a phenomenological and theological assessment, difference-based conflict and tension are simply part of the human condition of satisfaction and suffering. Thus we need other means by which to understand this tension and conflict *besides as sin* in order to respond faithfully.

This leads to the second topic: how to interpret the human experience of *tension* and *conflict* that result from encountering difference. The category of “tragedy” helps us envision conflict and tension as human realities without immediately characterizing them as something “wrong” or “evil.” In tragedy, some forms of inevitable suffering occur outside of the realm of sin and are simply part of the natural processes of creation. We may not like them, but people of faith can consider them differently if they do not have to be guarded against in the same way as sin. The category of tragedy allows for deeper reflection on the theological nature of difference, suffering, and sin, and how to respond faithfully to inevitable conflict.

Additional implications emerge here, as well, and they are largely connected to the third topic: differentiating *sin* or *evil* from difference or diversity. One implication is that because suffering and conflict that result from encounters with difference should not automatically be understood as sin or evil, the *presence of suffering* in those situations should likewise not be the only measure of the presence of sin or evil. (Human sin and evil *also* contribute significantly to suffering and harm, and perpetuate it systemically and communally. I return to the question of how to identify sin and evil below.) Another implication, then, is that the *presence of difference or alterity* is also not itself an indication of sin or wrongdoing. The diversity of creation is, in God’s words, “very good,” and encounters with difference can cause discomfort or tension. Information and context are needed to discern the benefit or harm of various kinds of difference and diversity.

A further implication is critically important: close discernment is required when we feel discomfort and fear around alterity, because our unexamined responses to difference tend toward

self-securing and identity-defending at the expense of the other. The insecurity and vulnerability of our tragic existence makes us susceptible to sin and evil, because in our fragility we turn to mundane objects and idolize them as we look to secure ourselves. This leads to interpersonal violations such as malice, neglect, and harm toward others.

The fourth topic, the role of *human relationship* in sin and redemption, emerges here. At the heart of idolatry is a rejection of the call to mutual compassionate obligation, which is evoked by interpersonal engagement and participation with another person. In interhuman interaction, we can choose to recognize and respond to our shared need for reciprocity and interdependence, or we can ignore or deny that need. The choice to respond to another with compassionate obligation is connected to a recognition of the vulnerable face of the other; in the absence of that recognition, evil is left to metastasize because we no longer see the other as part of us or as one to whom we owe reciprocal compassionate obligation. We deny the binding-and-separating patterns of creation and assert our independent or superior identity over against the diversity of the world around us.

When relationships are distorted by evil in this way, the symptoms are not suffering or the conflict of incompatibility as such, but *expressions of exclusion*, manifested in the violent reconfiguring of that which is overtly interdependent. Differences are re-envisioned as signs of inferiority, impurity, and threat, and are thus a cause for enmity, assimilation, separation, or elimination. The absolutizing of our identity or way of being rejects others as lesser and renders them dangerous, generic, or even invisible, each of which causes real harm to those with whom we are actually interconnected, and with whom we have responsibility for mutual care.

This turn toward sin and evil is rooted in illusion about plurality. Instead of accepting the complexities of our plural reality, we take false comfort in visions of fictitious, perfect historical moments or abstract, unified realities. Such visions gloss over particular and divergent experiences

and perspectives, and we acquiesce to the distorted view that individuals are merely examples of the abstract whole we claim they represent. Their concrete realities become less important to us than a theoretical category in which to put them. At the center of such illusion is the view that we are not bound to each other in interdependence and mutuality, but that we are justified in segregating from others because they are dangerous, corrupt, or tainted; they are less able to lead moral or ethical lives, less deserving or worthy, and less human than we are. In truth, however, difference and plurality are real and natural; totality, purity, and uniformity are illusion.

Our identity as human beings created by God is *relational*; we are interconnected with the creation, with each other and with God. The differences and multiplicity of the created world are natural and life-giving, but our experiences of them are not without difficulty and struggle. Because encountering difference and diversity reveals our interdependence, vulnerability, and finitude, such encounters challenge our sense of identity. The resulting conflicts and feelings of discomfort and suffering are tragic rather than sinful; they demonstrate the human condition in which our well-being is interconnected—and at times incompatible—with the well-being of others. But in our fear and anxiety we can lose compassion for and with the other and fall into egocentricity and self-preservation, and this leads to acts of evil: exclusion, dehumanization, segregation, denial of interconnectedness. Our well-being, our tragic human condition, our proclivity toward sin, and our redemption are all interwoven in our inherent relationality.

Tragic conflict and tension can lead to idolatrous and destructive ends—or they can deepen relationships, enhance interdependence, and embody and magnify redemption. How conflict, tension, and our human vulnerabilities are related to transformation and redemption is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 4

A Theology for Conflict, Part Two

In Christian theology, the end of the story is never that the world has been corrupted by sin and evil. God's participation in the creation and the lives of human beings is a movement of redemption and salvation of and from the effects of sin. In a theology for conflict, God's redemption erupts within the tragedy of human existence to overcome the temptations of egocentrism, isolationism, and exclusion. The very relationality, particularity, and diversity of creation are the source of its redemption from sin and evil.

I. Free to Be You and Me

Though the experience of being human is fraught with anxiety and vulnerability, it is not the tragic human condition that Ed Farley claims is transformed by the redemptive power of God. To remove tragedy from the human condition would be to alter that which also is the context for human well-being. Instead, God breaks the power of evil not by eliminating suffering, but by *providing the power to live under the conditions of tragic vulnerability without insisting on being secured by goods at hand*.¹ Farley calls this the experience of "being-founded," in which God, or the "eternal horizon," becomes known and present in human lives.² Finding grounding in an ultimate (and infinite) source of meaning secures us amid the suffering and challenges of insecure and finite life, and helps us risk entering into relationship with others.³ The power of being-founded is in relating

¹ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 143.

² *Ibid.*, 145.

³ Farley's explanations of being-founded are fleshed out in conjunction with his expositions of evil and redemption within the passions and spheres. Across these explanations, however, Farley resists an objective or singularly universal description of being-founded because, he argues, "only world processes and goods at

to the finite world (including other people) without using idolatrous and desperate attempts to instrumentalize others and things in order to make ourselves feel secure.⁴ In being-founded, the need for self-securing is replaced by a posture of courage that puts human reality into perspective and helps us exist in our fragility and vulnerability amid the sufferings and tragic incompatibilities of the world.⁵

An important dynamic of being-founded is that newfound freedoms are not a course correction that return us to “a generic description of human reality, minus evil.”⁶ Instead, claims Farley, “Something occurs in connection with the breaking of the powers of evil that introduces a *new set of possibilities of good* in human individuals and communities.”⁷ The effects of being-founded do not simply cancel out evil and return us to our initial tragic state, they open up new opportunities for human flourishing within our tragic reality. For Farley, “Freedoms are powers that arise from the effect of being-founded (and thus courage and faithfulness) on specific ways of existing toward the tragic. In other words, the powers of freedom are not just the absence of the

hand lend themselves to direct description” (Ibid., 144–145). Farley also appears concerned that attempting to describe being-founded as “a fundamental ontology of the immanent absolute” might also lead us to see being-founded as something we can accomplish ourselves: “What we cannot do is discover...pristine incidents of being-founded that are so compellingly real and public that they mediate our own founding” (Ibid., 145). But Farley insists that the being-founded is at once a “primordial and existential experience of freedom” while also occurring in connection with ordinary human interactions, such as conflicts, traditions, symbols, and interpretations of life (Ibid.). Moreover, humans experience being-founded not in a precise and repeatable formula or practice, nor an isolated, private experience disconnected from larger human communities. Instead, being-founded occurs through communities that expose the dynamics of idolatry (Ibid.).

⁴ Williams, “Tragedy, Totality, and the Face,” 88–89.

⁵ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 146. In “being-founded,” humans experience a sense of courage that: a) relativizes finite goods so that they are understood in their context and fragility (i.e. their lack of ability to bring security), b) allows humans to consent to the tragic character of being, and c) risks venturing into the world as a self, despite the world’s perils. (Ibid., 147–150). To this Farley adds an important caveat: “Consent does not demand an elimination of resistance to suffering of all kinds or a repression of the desire of elementary passions through or past mundane goods. Cessation of resistance would not be consent but resignation” (Ibid., 149). Instead, consent is an acknowledgement that there must be “sufficient flexibility in world processes to act, perceive, experience, choose, and pursue aims,” and such a world requires that we also consent to randomness, accidents, and tragedy (Ibid.).

⁶ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 118.

⁷ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

dynamics of idolatry but powers of existing in the mode of faith.”⁸ Freedom could not be an escape from our tragic condition because tragedy is also the context for human well-being. But the freedom of being-founded enhances and deepens our capacities for embracing and realizing the gifts of well-being that exist within our tragic reality.

A. Saving Face

Ed Farley’s full account of redemption takes place over several chapters in which he describes various freedoms that correspond to the redemption of each of the human spheres and passions.⁹ But being-founded and its resulting freedoms (which can be understood in more classical terms as salvation or redemption) are exemplified most significantly in interhuman relations. In the realm of the interhuman, the experience of the ultimate, grounding presence of God not only frees humans from the need to use others idolatrously to secure themselves, humans also find themselves opening to the vulnerability and beauty of the other, developing agapic passion for the intrinsic value and “face” of the other.¹⁰ We “sense in each other a beauty and worth behind our manifest limitations, neuroses, and idolatries.”¹¹ As Ed Farley puts it, “the dynamics of redemption press social entities toward openness to a criterion broader than themselves, the criterion of the face.”¹²

When we are no longer beholden to the idolatry of self-securing, we are able to encounter others without distorting the relationship toward our egocentric needs, natural or corrupted. As the

⁸ Ibid., 157.

⁹ Farley uses the term “freedom” to describe the powers or virtues that restore or transform the dimensions of human life that have been corrupted by evil or sin, as in “Freedoms are powers that arise from the effect of being-founded...on specific ways of existing toward the tragic” (Ibid., 157).

¹⁰ Ibid., 193. If being-founded were simply to remove all evil or corrupted forms of relationship from human life, we would be stuck with naturally and tragically egocentric (but not sinful) relationships of basic reciprocity or interactions rooted in instinctual biological tendencies. But the freedom of being-founded opens new possibilities for agapic relationship.

¹¹ Ibid., 246. Crucially, the beauty of the face is not based on socially-established criteria. Agapic relation transcends natural ethnocentric beliefs about beauty and worth, and is based on the “beauty of the creature as creature, a fit of form and function that comes with creatureliness itself” (Ibid., 246).

¹² Farley, *Good and Evil*, 289.

face of the other displays to us “the mystery of an irreducible otherness, an impassioned vulnerability, and a unique historicity,” it awakens our compassion and obligation.¹³ We not only recognize this summons, we want to move toward it. Instead of seeing a relationship as merely transactional (i.e., “what can I get out of this?”), we are drawn to the vulnerable beauty of the other such that “Our desire is not merely on its own behalf but merges with the desires of what is other.”¹⁴ We begin to see and to have affection for the other’s vulnerable beauty—not by losing or degrading ourselves, but because the other’s beauty (rather than our self-orientation) moves to the foreground.¹⁵ The combination of the *vulnerable* face, which summons us to compassionate obligation, and the *beautiful* face, the beauty of personhood itself, evokes affection and caring for the other.¹⁶ The beauty of the face draws us out of ourselves and toward the other, into *agapē*.¹⁷

In this way, being-founded, an experience of the presence of the sacred, leads to relationships that are reciprocal, mutual, compassionate, and affectionate. “Relation,” Ed Farley writes, “begins to be redeemed when being-founded transforms the corrupted existentials and reciprocities of individuals.”¹⁸ Reconnection with the face—the recognition of the vulnerability

¹³ Ibid., 191.

¹⁴ Ibid., 190.

¹⁵ Ibid., 193.

¹⁶ Ibid., 244. Specifically, “Communion or agapic relation is a relation governed by both aspects of the face, the summons to respond in compassionate obligation to the vulnerable face and the mutual appreciation of beauty that ends in affection.”

¹⁷ Farley’s use of *agapē* and its cognates is somewhat confusing. Being-founded as it relates to the passion for the interhuman and to the interhuman sphere both use the framework of *agapē*. But in his larger structure, he intends to distinguish interhuman “passion” from the interhuman “sphere,” and thus “agapic passion” from “agapic relation.” Additionally, the title of his chapter on the corrupted passion of the interhuman uses the phrase “agapic freedom,” which would seem to be applicable in both passion and sphere (though he connects it with passion). In any case, Farley argues that as a passion *agapē* draws us toward the needs of the other without denying our own, and evokes affection, appreciation, and caring for the other in such a way that egocentrism is placed the background (Ibid., 192–193). Agapic relation is “a relation of the face...and is present wherever human beings are thus to each other... Agapic relation is a relation of both compassionate obligation and mutually appreciating affection” (Ibid., 244). Accordingly, *agapē* as a passionate freedom desires “relation in the midst of others in forms of affection and mutual appreciation,” or a passion for the face, which is the basis of agapic relation (Ibid.). I note these complexities, but am choosing to interweave them rather than distinguish them in my text.

¹⁸ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 250.

and alterity of the other—draws “self-absolutized social entities beyond themselves to larger settings of human good.”¹⁹ *Redemption is manifest in the genesis or restoration of a particular kind of relationship: agapic relationship, in which the powers of evil and idolatry are broken in order for us to return to a relationship of faces.* In agapic relation, as we are freed from idolatry to see the vulnerability and beauty of others—those who are different from us and who do not fit our social norms—we come to see the innate beauty and value of creatures themselves. “It is the sacred manifested through the face,” Ed Farley writes, “that lures regional (familial, national, tribal) experiences of the face toward compassionate obligations to any and all life-forms.”²⁰

As the presence of the sacred leads us to transcend egocentrism and ethnocentrism and turn toward the needs and desires of the other, so too does that same presence build a sense of relatedness between formerly “alien” creatures.²¹ As Ed Farley puts it, “In agapic relation human beings relate to each other through a larger, even cosmic background which does not reduce beauty to the territories and hierarchies of ordinary loyalties. They relate to each other in and through their penultimate status as creatures of the sacred and as participants in the reality, goodness and beauty of being.”²² The sacred binds humans *as creatures*; the “creatureliness” of others—and ourselves—connects us to one another and to God. We discover that “There is no creature as such apart from a vast dance of creatures whose tune and rhythm is the presence of the sacred. It is the sacred that provides a frame of reference for worth and meaning.”²³ The sacred

¹⁹ Ibid., 289.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 244, 246. To be clear, Farley is describing a phenomenological experience rather than a specific process that can be captured or replicated. As such, he suggests the workings of the “sacred” in these experiences without being overly specific, writing that “To the extent that these agapic relations break the hold of false dependence and cynicism and transcend natural egocentrism, they bespeak the presence of the sacred” (Ibid., 244). Later he continues, “The same presence that draws the human individual beyond egocentrism to vitality and wonder is needed to create a relation based on the worth and beauty of creatures as such” (Ibid., 246).

²² Farley, *Good and Evil*, 249.

²³ Ibid., 246.

communicates to creatures their worth and beauty as creatures, which in turn fosters a mutual relation of transethnocentric affection among creatures and the sacred. This relation is the very meaning of communion and *koinonia*.²⁴

Reconnection with the face, which draws individuals to transcend (but not repudiate) themselves, brings people into relationships of deep *agapē*.²⁵ The experience of the ultimate, grounding presence of God (“being-founded” in Ed Farley’s words) offers courage and freedom that help humans exist within the tragedy of their condition without resorting to self-securing. Not only are humans freed from the need to use others idolatrously to secure themselves, they also find themselves opening to the other’s vulnerability and beauty, and developing agapic passion for the intrinsic value of the other. Redemption is thus intrinsically connected with—and manifested in—the restoration of interhuman relationships *as a way of both being and knowing*. In the redemption of being-founded, our self-understanding is interlocked with the reality of others, their vulnerability and beauty, and our compassionate obligation toward each other.

B. Mutual Admiration Society

The freedom of being-founded helps us transcend egocentrism and self-securing, and opens us to the vulnerability and beauty of the other in relationships of *agapē*. But Ed Farley also claims that reciprocal, mutual, compassionate, and affectionate relationships are *a way in which being-founded occurs*.²⁶ When evil enters into human reality and corruption disconnects humans from

²⁴ Ibid. For Farley, communion and agapic relation are interconnected. He recognizes the individual Greek words in the New Testament for reconciliation (*katagalle*), love (*agapē*), and communion (*koinonia*), but sees them as parts of a whole. Communion is “simply the over-all term for relation characterized by reconciliation and *agapē*... Reconciliation and *agapē* are not terms for two different things or two stages of redemption. They are simply descriptions of communion from different angles, the one from the angle of the overcoming of alienation, the other from the angle of relation itself” (Ibid., 243).

²⁵ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 289. It might be equally correct to say that reconnecting with the face and thus transcending the self and moving toward the other is also the way in which redemption is effected.

²⁶ As an example, he writes, “Human agents experience being-founded in conjunction with community-mediated exposures of the dynamics of idolatry. Being-founded is, thus, not a discrete apprehension that

the face, reconnection can occur through communities that communicate, mediate, and attest to the “universal face”—the face that transcends regionalism, ethnocentrism, etc.— and that demonstrate compassionate obligation and affection for any and all life-forms.²⁷ Ed Farley calls these groups “communities of the face,” which take as their *raison d’être* a relational embodiment of broad affection, care, and compassion for the universal face.²⁸ Redemption reaches human agents through communities of the face because this kind of community reconnects aspects of human life—individual, social, and interhuman—to the universal face itself.²⁹ Despite the imperfections and corruptions of all forms of human society including Christian institutions and bodies, Ed Farley argues that the *ecclesia* of the Christian movement is a community of the face because—or when—“its primary aim is to embody and attest the face for any and all, and to press all autonomous and local powers to open themselves to the face.”³⁰ The existence of transregional and transethnic expressions of Christianity in particular demonstrate the ways in which the church (*ecclesia*) does attest to the face beyond racial, ethnic or gender loyalties.

This idea is underdeveloped by Ed Farley,³¹ but what is clear is his assertion that humans-in-community, whose objective is the recognition and spreading of relationships of the face, play a role in overturning the corruptions of evil that tear us away from one another. God’s presence propels people into caring relationship and community with one another, and being in communities that value and lift up the face of others can lead to the experience of that same divine

chases away a worried and insecure world-view, but a participation in a historical milieu that existentially mediates the eternal horizon as a sacred presence” (Ibid., 145).

²⁷ Ibid., 290.

²⁸ Ibid., 291.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid. By “*ecclesia*,” or “*ecclesiality*,” Farley means “a [Christian] community whose ideal relationality is communion,” which is an “over-all term for relation characterized by reconciliation and *agapē*” (Ibid., 243). I am focused here on Farley’s discussion about Christian communities, but it is important to note that he does not limit communities of the face and of the sacred to Christian or Hebraic traditions; he is simply speaking specifically about how communities of the face function in Christianity.

³¹ As noted in Williams, “Tragedy, Totality, and the Face,” 97.

presence. Put simply, being-founded helps bring people into such communities; likewise bringing people into such communities can lead to being-founded because the experience of community awakens us to the beauty, vulnerability, and compassionate obligation of the face. Agapic communities that attest to the face can be *both the cause and result* of experiences of being-founded.

Ed Farley's articulation of redemption adds several elements to a theology for conflict. First, the conflict and tension that result from the tragedy of the human condition are mitigated by the presence of God, whose life-giving Spirit offers not escape from tragic suffering but courage and freedom as gifts of faith in response to the constraints of human existence. In God's redeeming power, we cannot expect to avoid conflict but we can live into the courage and freedom that lead us to respond faithfully to the evils of ego- and ethnocentrism. Second, because redemption's purpose is the reconnection of humans with each other and with God in agapic passion, the courage and freedom that is of God resists that which pulls us away from seeing the face of the other. In God, we are drawn from ourselves and into agapic affection for (rather than alienating fear of) others. We see the beauty and value of others simply because they are fellow sacred creatures, regardless and even because of social, cultural, or physical differences. In being released from our self-centeredness and opened toward the other, we also identify and orient toward God's presence, which is the impetus for our courage and freedom. Finally, participation in ecclesial communities and relationships focused on seeing the face of others develops our capacity to see, and awakens our awareness of God, who makes the seeing possible.

II. The Company We Keep

Ed Farley introduces the idea of the *ecclesia* as a place of redemption when (and in as much as) the ecclesial community attests to the face of the other. Miroslav Volf's description of the body of

Christ presents a similar concept, as he argues that God's dealings with humanity are for the purpose of reconciliation. For Volf, the body of Christ is oriented around and representative of the new reality God is creating through Christ: a community of self-giving that overcomes enmity.³² In essence, humanity is called to emulate the self-giving love of God in Christ for the purpose of reconciliation. "Inscribed on the very heart of God's grace," writes Volf, "is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents; *what happens to us must be done by us*. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in—even our enemies."³³ Of particular importance here are his reflections on difference within an integrated and united community of faith.

A. Same Difference

Volf's interpretation of the differentiated body of Christ builds from "the varieties of gifts but the same Spirit" described in 1 Cor 12. First, Volf recognizes that in Christian community, members have not changed "from the particularity of the body to the universality of the Spirit," but "from the separated bodies to the community of interrelated bodies—the one *body in the Spirit* with many *discrete members*."³⁴ Participation in the body of Christ does not mean submitting all previous distinctiveness to a single, imposed will or an abstract principle or law; members are not expected to be made uniform and homogeneous. Differences among the members remain within the body, because "baptism into Christ creates a people as the differentiated body of Christ. Bodily inscribed

³² Farley and Volf approach this from different angles. For Farley, though the phenomenological realities of being-founded and communities of the face can be expressed in Christian contexts, his main concern is not to delineate Christian theology as such, but to explain a broader phenomenological dynamic of good and evil that can be articulated through Christian frames (as well as others). Volf, on the other hand, is more Christological in his approach to describing the nature of engaging the other and overcoming enmity, and suggests its implications within a Christian framework, as well as beyond. Put another way, Volf articulates a vision from within the Christian tradition that can be applied more broadly, and Farley articulates a broader vision and explains its relationship to a Christian perspective.

³³ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 129. Emphasis mine.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

differences are brought together, not removed.”³⁵ What the unity of the Spirit provides is the means for differences to remain present and part of human identity without having those differences create barriers and hierarchies among the members:

The Spirit does not erase bodily inscribed differences, but allows access into the one body of Christ to the people with such differences on the same terms. What the Spirit does erase (or at least loosens) is a stable and socially constructed correlation between differences and social roles. The gifts of the spirit are given irrespective of such differences...Differentiating the body matters, but not for access to salvation and agency in the community.³⁶

Understanding the nature of the Christian community as a “differentiated body of Christ” suggests that Christians can belong to the new “culture” of Christ while retaining certain cultural particularities and identities. At the same time, though an individual’s particularity is not extinguished in order to be part of the body of Christ, the reality of God’s new world will be “more important than the culture to which we belong.”³⁷ For Volf, both of these elements are critical: difference is not only welcome but necessary within the body of Christ for the benefit of the whole; simultaneously, identity differences emerging from culture and context do not supersede belonging to one another in Christ.

Not retained in the body of Christ are socially-constructed roles based on difference, especially if those roles limit access to redemption or to agency within the body of Christ. No social or cultural factor can be allowed to lead to hierarchy or inequality within, or exclusion from, the body of Christ because its very nature is that of being opened up to (and by) the differences of the other. By definition, our new identity in Christ, the “allegiance to God and God’s future...breaks through the self-enclosed worlds we inhabit,” leaving us with a “catholic personality enriched by otherness, a personality that is what it is only because multiple others have

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 50.

been reflected in it in a particular way.”³⁸ As part of the body of Christ, we are opened to the other because “the Spirit unlatches the doors of my heart saying: ‘You are not only you; others belong to you, too.’”³⁹

Volf’s proposal makes several important points: participation in shared Christian community does not require the suspension or elimination of that which makes us particular selves—our gender identity, language, age, cultural background, perspectives, etc. Like Ed Farley, Volf sees such diversity as an enriching gift to the whole and central to the formation of a “catholic personality.” As such, those differences also cannot limit access to or participation in the body of Christ. However, Volf implies is that there *are* limits to the *kind* of differences that are acceptable in the body of Christ. Volf uses the phrase, “bodily inscribed differences” to refer to aspects like gender, ethnicity, and even language and other cultural factors, and these are clearly welcomed in the body. However, cultural or social perspectives and opinions that would advocate restricting access to the body of Christ based on such differences would not be admissible. For instance, a culturally-formed belief in the moral superiority or purity of a particular race, gender, or culture would not be an welcomed or enriching “difference.” The reason for this is clear: as followers of Christ we belong to each other and are formed in relationship with each other. That which would claim a natural or innate disconnection or enmity between us is antithetical to the body of Christ. Likewise, a belief that some persons should be treated as “lesser” in some way, for instance, or that ongoing injustice is a natural pattern of creation, would stand against the kinds of relationships and mutual belonging that are indicative of the body of Christ, and therefore would not be tolerable “differences” of opinion.

³⁸ Ibid., 51.

³⁹ Ibid.

B. Out of Body Experiences

For Volf, reconciliation is about overcoming enmity through self-giving love, a claim also connected to the body of Christ—both the symbolic and physical reality of Jesus, and the community created by Jesus among his followers. The suffering and crucified body of Christ, which is the “self-giving of the one for the many,” expresses the overcoming of enmity among people because Christ remains open to others.⁴⁰ It is through self-giving that hostility is “put to death,” and enmity is removed.⁴¹ Jesus’ crucified body is “the body that has refused to remain a self-enclosed singularity, but has opened itself up so that others can freely partake of it...the crucified Messiah creates unity by giving his own self.”⁴² Volf writes that when Paul claims, “It is Christ who lives in me,” Paul is arguing that the story of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ has become the center of Paul’s life, of Paul’s self.⁴³ This has not obliterated the person who “Paul” was, but has decentered that self and has instead put in its center other-focused love patterned after Christ. When Christ lives in us,

At the center of the self lies self-giving love. No ‘hegemonic centrality’ closes the self off, guarding its self-same identity and driving out whatever threatens its purity. To the contrary, the new center opens the self up, makes it capable and willing to give itself for others and to receive others in itself...For Christians, this ‘de-centered center’ of self-giving love—most firmly centered and most radically open—is the doorkeeper deciding about the fate of otherness at the doorstep of the self.⁴⁴

The body of Christ is a manifestation of God’s larger project of reconciliation, but that reconciliation is not exclusive to Christians. Instead, “God’s reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model for how human beings should relate to the other.”⁴⁵ The crucifixion and resurrection, God’s self-opening through Jesus, are the paradigm of the reconciling love of

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

God. Thus, "At the heart of the cross is Christ's stance of not letting the other remain an enemy and of creating space in himself for the offender to come in. Read as the culmination of the larger narrative of God's dealing with humanity, the cross says that despite its manifest enmity toward God, humanity belongs to God; God will not be without humanity."⁴⁶ God in Christ demonstrates the dramatic commitment God makes to restore relationship with and among us, despite our continual breaking of covenants with God and dehumanizing actions toward one another.

For Volf, because there is no situation that would preclude someone from being received again into loving communion with God, the same should be true of our efforts to reconcile with each other. We may feel justified in excluding others from our care or concern because of immoral or reprehensible behavior, but no such justification can be sustained, because the grace of God is an unearned gift. As Volf states, "The work of reconciliation should proceed under the assumption that, though the behavior of a person may be judged as deplorable, even demonic, *no one should ever be excluded from the will to embrace*, because, at the deepest level, the relationship to others does not rest on their moral performance and therefore cannot be undone by the lack of it."⁴⁷ Our relationship to others is based not on their (or our) innocence or guilt; all have sinned and fallen short. Because the embrace of God is extended to all, the *will* to embrace and welcome precedes judgment.⁴⁸ Volf's unflinching commitment to embrace reflects his unwillingness to allow for caveats or compromises that would weaken or limit this vision of God's intention. Volf seems to fear giving credence to any counterarguments, perhaps because even entertaining the idea of a less than complete reconciliation might disrupt the conviction that full reconciliation is possible and intended.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 29. "At the core of Christian faith lies the persuasion that the 'others' need not be perceived as innocent in order to be loved, but ought to be embraced *even when they are perceived as wrongdoers*" (Ibid., 85).

To be clear, Volf's will to embrace is not a rejection of justice or accountability. On the contrary, Volf argues vehemently for an end to injustice and violence. But wrath against injustice, restraint of perpetrators, and even punishment for violators are to be framed within the will to embrace the unjust.⁴⁹ Justice is formed and informed by the call to love and embrace, and by the overarching narrative of ultimate reconciliation.⁵⁰ Relationship is central to the nature of justice and to determining ethical responses to diverse situations, because in relationship we understand who we are to be:

If our identities are shaped in interaction with others, and if we are called ultimately to belong together, then we need to shift the concept of justice away from an exclusive stress on making detached judgments and toward sustaining relationships, away from blind impartiality and toward sensibility for differences. And if we, the communal selves, are called into eternal communion with the triune God, then *true justice will always be on the way to embrace*—to a place where we will belong together with our personal and cultural identities both preserved and transformed, but certainly enriched by the other.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 224–225. Volf states that there can be no justice without the will to embrace, saying, “My point [is] simple: to agree on justice you need to make space in yourself for the perspective of the other, and in order to make space, you need to want to embrace the other. If you insist that others do not belong to you and you to them, that their perspective should not muddle yours, you will have your justice and they will have theirs; your justices will clash and there will be no justice *between* you. The knowledge of justice depends on the will to embrace. The relationship between justice and embrace goes deeper, however. Embrace is part and parcel of the very *definition* of justice. I am not talking about soft mercy tampering harsh justice, but about love *shaping* the very content of justice” (Ibid., 220). This echoes Wendy Farley's argument that redemption rather than punishment should be the logic undergirding our response to injustice. She writes, “Compassion surpasses the narrow ethics of retribution and legalism by striving simultaneously against cruelty and for every creature....Compassion's sense of justice is based on its recognition of human dignity. This dignity is not destroyed by wrongdoing. Compassion condemns acts of violence or cruelty but is incapable of objectifying a person as guilty....Pity for suffering and help for the righteous might be expected of any decent person. But the radicality of compassion is shown in the labor to redeem sinners and to liberate human beings from their own evil. Just as compassion criticizes a legalistic understanding of justice by insisting on a positive vision of social equity and harmony, compassion also criticizes a legalism that contents itself with punishing the wicked. In both cases, it extends justice to include a positive restoration of well-being” (Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 84–85).

⁵⁰ Volf does believe that God's ultimate mission is reconciliation of the whole of creation, but he is aware that this is the work of God rather than human beings (who in pursuit of “ultimate reconciliation” tend to perpetuate various forms of oppression). Even so, the work of humanity toward even partial reconciliation is rooted in a theology of hope for that which will be ultimate: “Drawing on the resource found in Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God, in his death on the cross, and in the character of the triune God, I will advocate here the struggle for a *nonfinal reconciliation based on a vision of reconciliation that cannot be undone*. I will argue that reconciliation with the other will succeed only if the self, guided by the narrative of the triune God, is ready to receive the other into itself and undertake a re-adjustment in light of the other's alterity” (Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 109–110).

⁵¹ Ibid., 225.

C. On Forgiving and Forgetting

In broad strokes, I agree with Volf's argument that God's ultimate purpose is the reconciliation of all things. Still, his emphasis on self-giving leaves the door open for problematic implications.

Ellen Ott Marshall offers a specific critique I find convincing: she articulates what a self-sacrificial, atonement-based approach to reconciliation implies for victims of injustice and violence. As Marshall puts it, Volf "insists on the centrality and nonnegotiability" of the idea of "God's self-emptying love through sacrifice of the victim who then transforms into the agent of forgiveness" as the model Christians are to follow when confronted by violence.⁵² What is troubling about this approach, Marshall argues, is that the adherence to atonement-centered narratives of reconciliation "requires further sacrifice from victims as repayment of God's sacrifice for them."⁵³

For Volf, forgiveness is the key to any possibility of reconciliation, and because reconciliation is God's intent, forgiveness becomes paramount, just as Christ has forgiven despite his victimhood.

For Marshall, however, this neglects the reality of victims:

My resistance to atonement-centered narratives of reconciliation is that they condone the sacrifice of victims. The story not only identifies their suffering as Christlike, but it also calls them to forgive the undeserving offender as the Christlike response to suffering. This understanding of atonement applied to a process of reconciliation renders the victims of violence as agents of forgiveness for offenders, while sacrificing their own claims to justice.⁵⁴

For Marshall, reconciliation cannot be built on further sacrifice from victims, because the victims of violence should not also be made to bear the cost of reconciliation.⁵⁵ I, too, am

⁵² Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 102.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 107–108.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 105. Marshall's larger argument here is over the prioritizing of one narrative—in this case, sacrificial atonement—over other possible interpretive theological keys from Scripture. As she assesses the implications of Volf's work, she writes that a concerning dimension of the "single narrative approach" to Christian ethical decision making is that "one prioritizes adherence to the narrative over concern for people affected by it....The actions we take as we live out a narrative also make an impact on other people, and I think we must be accountable to them," (*Ibid.*, 107).

uncomfortable with a framework in which the means which effect reconciliation come at the expense of justice, including the justification or prolonging of victims' suffering. Marshall argues that a singular teleology of reconciliation can carry with it the potential to disregard other commitments—such as justice—for the purpose of reaching the goal of “reconciliation,”⁵⁶ and with her I affirm that the noble end of “reconciliation” cannot serve as a justification for the continuation or acceptance of injustice.

Additionally, my focus is not on the self-giving or suffering of the atonement, but on Christ's loving presence within us that helps open us to others in both giving *and* receiving. “Self-giving” love understood in this way is about decentering but not rejecting or sacrificing the self; through relationship with others we discover an identity formed with and alongside them. The focus for me is not on self-sacrifice, but on *remaining open* to the other. What I take from Volf is that even as we seek justice and accountability for wrongdoing, we cannot allow ourselves to begin to believe that relationship, transformation, and communion will forever be impossible or partial. I am emphasizing here *the openness to embrace* more than the particular image of reconciliation as self-sacrifice. Because we belong to one another, even the worst breaches of trust or violations of relationship cannot be allowed to break our conviction that we are inherently interrelated and are human beings together; in fact, the very reality that violations are both possible and traumatic affirms that we were and are interconnected. Volf's commitment is that faithfulness involves remaining open to the other—and particularly open to the *humanity* of the other—even when that openness is costly. This commitment is reflected in Ed Farley's assessment of remaining connected to the face of the other even as we experience the other as something foreign and even repellant.

⁵⁶ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 96.

This also reinforces the idea that the experience of being opened to the other and continuing to foster that openness *itself* has meaning and purpose in God's redemptive movement. We are continually transformed in our opening to others, beyond any movement toward final reconciliation, because we are continually shaped by encounters in which we allow "otherness" to change our perceptions and understandings of what it means to be interconnected and human. This echoes Marshall's questions about whether transformational processes of conflict might have their own telos and meaning apart from any final reconciliatory end: "What might be gained by further theological reflection on transformation as surprising, unpredictable, open-ended, non-linear, and tenuous (among other, more reassuring things)? In those pivotal moments, might God be doing something in addition to preparing us for reconciliation?"⁵⁷ The reality that humans are interrelated but distinct and are formed in relationships with each other suggests that *the very ways in which we recognize and make space for others* are central to our formation, our discipleship, and the working out of our redemption. In other words, *our orientations to others and the ways in which we relate together*—not just a final telos of reconciliation—are part of God's transformational and redemptive work in us.

III. For the Love of God

Wendy Farley also connects relationality and redemption through a phenomenological account of the nature and purpose of God's love. I focus on two elements she discusses, eros and compassion, because these help to more fully describe the trajectory and intent of God's love in human experience and reality. These aspects of divine love demonstrate how *particularity* and *relationality* are intrinsic to God's purposes and action in the world, connecting the ideas of truth to the importance of diversity and difference, and defying both the homogeneity of totality and the

⁵⁷ Marshall, "Conflict, God and Constructive Change," 13.

isolation of autonomy.⁵⁸ As she puts it, God's healing love "attests to the *relational character of redemptive power*. The value of alterity; the priority of relationship over isolation; compassion in the face of suffering; the repudiation of domination, terror, and judgment are contained in the symbol of love."⁵⁹ God's eros and compassion for the creation are redemptive for humanity and creation, even as they become means by which we render redemptive love to others.

A. Eros: Much to Be Desired

In *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, Wendy Farley argues that relationships of love are at the heart of creation and redemption. God's creation is itself an expression of relationality because in creation God expanded from self-contained unity to creative power with and for others. This relationality is embodied in the concept of *eros*, an aspect of divine power that demonstrates God's desire for that which is beyond God's self, a harmony of parts rather than an isolated being. "Creation is a sign of the value of alterity," writes Wendy Farley. "This value is symbolized by the divine eros, whose needless and eternally perfect reality externalizes itself in creation."⁶⁰ God as Creator has chosen and created *relationship* as the pattern of being among humans, in creation, and with God.⁶¹ "Love is the perfection of a system in which creatures exist in relationship and, ideally, in relationships of love and care," she claims.⁶²

⁵⁸ Wendy Farley argues that existential phenomenology offers a specific and useful orientation to the concepts of particularity and relationality: "Against quantifying scientific and philosophical theories and against political and social systems that would reduce human beings to a mere cipher, existentialists and phenomenologists affirm the dignity of personhood. Against the dogma of the isolated individual characteristic of modern philosophies and liberal economic and political theory, they uncover the essential and radical relationality that constitutes personhood. Existential phenomenologies attacked both the totalization and the isolation of human existence. To be a self, one must encounter the other as another person. The other is a unique self, not an interchangeable or representative unit, not a servant or object" (Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 75–76).

⁵⁹ Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 101. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 104.

Wendy Farley expands this understanding in *Eros for the Other*, proposing eros as a mode of relating that counteracts and contradicts tendencies toward totality. In human relationships, eros functions “as a metaphor for modes of thought and relationship whose movement runs in a direction opposite to that of totality: outward, toward others, toward the world.”⁶³ This orientation rests on the conviction that all beings and forms of beings—“persons, other animals, art objects, cultures, religions, ecosystems, galaxies, and so on”—are real and valuable in and of themselves, and not as merely as symbols or examples of something larger.⁶⁴ As a way of relating to others, eros is enchanted by the concreteness, variety, and beauty of others, and is “drawn out of the poverty of totality toward others, toward truth.”⁶⁵

Two important claims undergird Wendy Farley’s explanation of eros. First, as I asserted in the previous chapter, the truth of reality is embedded in the recognition and appreciation of its plurality and diversity. Simple tolerance of diversity is inadequate because tolerance seems to imply that we will put up with the fact of differences but we would prefer to believe in an underlying unity and oneness.⁶⁶ In contrast, Wendy Farley argues:

Reality is enacted pluralistically. A passion for the reality and acknowledgment of the obligations other beings impose on us require a delight in plurality. A capacity to recognize and love plurality is one criterion by which a conception of truth must be judged. It is a criterion imposed by reality itself in accord with its pluralistic and infinitely diverse embodiments.⁶⁷

⁶³ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 67. She continues, “The opposition between eros and totality does not translate into an opposition between concreteness and generality, the particular and the universal....The opposition between eros and totality is meant instead to describe two modes of relationship with other beings: one that remains more or less oblivious or hostile to particularity and one that is more fundamentally oriented to the concreteness—and therefore plurality—of reality” (Ibid.).

⁶⁴ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 67.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁷ Ibid. As she puts it elsewhere, “Reality is concrete, and because of this concreteness, it is infinitely multiple. This multiplicity is manifest in the endlessly various ways in which human beings organize themselves; it is manifest in the almost absurd extravagance of nature; it is manifest also in the multidimensionality of reality that simultaneously calls forth and condemns to partiality all interpretations: scientific, theological, scholarly, aesthetic, poetic, mythical, ethical, ritual, pragmatic, and so on” (Ibid., 21).

It is not that there cannot be points of connection or commonality within the diversity and difference we encounter, but that reality cannot be subsumed into a singular whole—especially since that “subsuming” often takes the form of totalizing and oppressive visions imposed by those in power or domination. Simply put, *the nature of reality is plural*.

Second, Wendy Farley notes that emphasizing plurality can seem a slippery slope to relativism, because it appears to justify all differences as good, and no particular characteristic or behavior as having ethical weight—as being “better” or “worse,” for example. The absence of a unifying absolute or singular reality common to all people may appear to give up any means by which to make ethical judgments. But does resistance to absolutism and attention to difference and particularity mean that truth remains relative to specific context or social construction? No, she concludes, because “Judgments about what is true or false, good or evil, humanizing or oppressive, will always be made concretely, with reference to historical situations, in particular social contexts. But the concreteness of judgment does not mean that it is arbitrary.”⁶⁸ Instead, the *kind of creatures beings are helps to give rise to ethical and moral decision making about what causes harm or what leads to well-being, and thus what is good or evil:*⁶⁹

The ways in which particular beings can be harmed or helped arise out of the kind of creatures that they are. Human beings can predictably be harmed by torture or slavery; an ecosystem can predictably be harmed by toxic wastes. The reality of others provides criteria for what is good or evil, for what is interestingly different, and what is damaging and cruel. That we can fabricate worlds that rest on fiction and oppression proves not how

⁶⁸ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 38.

⁶⁹ Wendy Farley roots her argument in metaphysics here, which relates to both her characterizations of totality and her assertions about plurality. “The entire life-world of a society is shaped by and shapes its ontological assumptions: institutions, moral codes, interpretations of religious symbols, the nature of education, the kind of work people do,” she writes. But an assault on the personhood of someone, an effort to transform a person into a thing or into something subhuman, metaphysical knowledge is involved. Such efforts are “an attempt to relate to others *as if* they were something other than what they are. Factual misrepresentation and overt lies play a role here, but the question of truth goes deeper down. The ability to recognize that others are real and to experience the claims their reality imposes upon us is not knowledge of only facts. It is awareness of the kind of beings we encounter: it is metaphysical knowledge. It is necessary to preserve these categories—beings, metaphysics, kinds of beings—in order to articulate the way in which existents remain irreducible to the societies in which they live” (Ibid., 12).

pliable reality is, available to any meanings we choose to give it, but rather how fragile it is and how correspondingly deep are obligations to care for it are.⁷⁰

In affirming plurality, she argues, we should not concede the obligation to make ethical judgments about right and wrong.⁷¹ Eros, both as an attribute of God and as an orientation toward relationship with others, is *an openness and inclination toward the specific reality of other beings*, which demonstrates and requires ethical obligation to others and an embrace of the pluralistic nature of reality itself.⁷² For Wendy Farley, attending to the particularity of beings and what and

⁷⁰ Ibid., 38. Wendy Farley offers a longer and more detailed explanation of this in a later chapter: “The ability to discern the right action arises from the concrete situation and may or may not translate well into universal terms. It has to do with insightful perception of the realities involved, realities that are neither universal nor arbitrary. The primary content of ethical existence is the navigation of unique and possibly unrepeatable situations. The fact that most of ethical life occurs in unique situations, as well as culturally concrete and nonuniversal ones, does not remove its reference to reality. A particular child, a socially discrete group of people, an ecosystem are all realities that can be badly or well understood; they can be treated in ways that are entirely inappropriate to them; they can be subject to incalculable harm. Whether a particular set of values or practices toward any of them is ethical or not is not simply arbitrary or entirely culturally relative. It has to do with how well particular practices relate to the kind of reality beings actually possess. There may be a good deal of variety in what constitutes appropriate relationships and practices, but it remains possible to determine that some practices are violent and inappropriate. This possibility does not lie in the universalizability of a rule or principle but in the reality of beings that, while malleable, are not entirely reducible to social constructions....The fact of difference does not itself decide either for or against the ethical quality of the practices, but the lives and experiences of [those involved] do.” (Ibid., 87).

⁷¹ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 16. Wendy Farley is specifically pointing out positive and negative impacts of postmodern thought and deconstructionism on absolute truth claims. As some scholars question previous constructions of “truth” and deconstruct “established certainties,” there are others by whom “an effort is made to reclaim an absolute, secure sense of truth” (Ibid., 3). This is the totality and fundamentalism against which she argues for the reality of plurality. She is also fully aware, however, that absolutism is just one of the difficulties “a contemporary struggle for a concept of truth is up against.” Oblivion to truth can also be accomplished by philosophical relativism, or by the moral virtue of tolerance that degrades into indifference (Ibid.).

⁷² Miroslav Volf makes a similar argument about God’s judgment and justice when he writes, “God is partial to *everyone*—including the powerful, whom God resists in order to protect the widow and the stranger. God sees each human being concretely, the powerful no less than the powerless. God notes not only their common humanity, but also their specific histories, their particular psychological, social, and embodied selves with their specific needs. When God executes justice, God does not abstract but judges and acts in accordance with the specific character of each person....God treats different people differently so that all will be treated justly....Why does God not treat all people equally but attends to each person in their specificity? Why does God not abstract from the relationship but instead let the relationship shape judgments and actions? Because God is unjust? No. Because *the justice which equalizes and abstracts is an unjust justice!*” (Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 222). Author’s emphasis.

who they are is how we come to understand “what would allow *this* being to flourish, given the kind of being this thing is.”⁷³

Further, our best intentions to do the right thing for the flourishing of another are likely to be distorted because our normal way of operating is to act out of what is most familiar to us, which is not necessarily what is suitable or normal for others. A primary dimension of eros, explains Wendy Farley, is a delight in the mystery and beauty of others, through which eros draws the self out of egocentricity and toward the other. The intrinsic beauty, value, and even unfamiliarity of another becomes enticing and magnetic, in that “there is something wonderful in the mere fact of something’s existence that cannot be deduced from anything else or articulated in terms of utility. The wonderfulness of something’s existence is a kind of pure gratuity; it is not good for anything; it is simply good that it is.”⁷⁴ Each creature demonstrates the “basic goodness of being,” and does so within the characteristics particular to that creature. In this way, the particularity and uniqueness of the other evokes curiosity and affection. In contrast to the movement of totality, which attempts to draw the other (the “object”) into the self, eros “draws the self toward the object.”⁷⁵ This movement toward the other requires a measure of detachment from the self, but both self and other are needed for a relationship. Thus:

...Idoltrous egocentrism is razed by detachment, but selfhood itself is not destroyed; it is, rather, reoriented from itself to others, to the world. It is this reorientation of consciousness that directs thinking and acting toward reality and opens up the possibility of truth. Another being is allowed to speak for itself, according to its own categories and modes of presentation. It is not arbitrarily subjected to methods or relationships that are alien or distorting.⁷⁶

⁷³ Wendy Farley, personal conversation with author, San Anselmo, CA, May 24, 2019.

⁷⁴ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 80.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 84. Additionally, “Awareness of the insufficiencies of totalities is not simply a formal awareness of the logical or existential irreducibility of persons to any whole; it is recognition of the beauty of beings. Reality is not simply a utility, nor is it the mathematical formula abstracted to learn something about the physical world, nor is it reducible to the needs and insights of ideologies or ideas. Beings, simply in their existence, are lovely and valuable. Beauty integrates an ethical dimension with an aesthetic one” (*Ibid.*, 79).

⁷⁶ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 84.

In our detachment from our own egocentrism, we are able to see the agency and unique personhood of the other.⁷⁷ In eros, we are released into delighting in the other as we re-center our gaze away from our own navels and outward toward the beauty of all that is around us and within others. Wendy Farley continues, “As oneself and one’s own interests recede in importance, the reality of others is permitted to gain ground.”⁷⁸ Though God does not need to be freed from egocentricity as such, God’s love as manifested in eros likewise delights in the uniqueness and particularity of creatures and beings in the creation, because “divine power is not self-contained and is not exhausted by self-contemplation but rather finds expression in creation,” and in the fulfillment of relationship with others that is love itself.⁷⁹

Finally, relationship with others is intrinsic to our reality, and intersubjectivity is the condition of our existence. “We become more fully human and more completely happy through relationships with others,” Wendy Farley writes. “The encounter with others’ suffering is obviously not the occasion of happiness, but, arising out of relationship with and delight in the other, neither is it simply a negation of the self. Ethical existence rooted in eros includes the recognition that fulfillment of human existence comes only in relationships with others, even when relations are experienced in the midst of suffering.”⁸⁰ The love of relationship exists in the very being of God, who out of a desire and passion for the reality of others embarked on the project of creation.

Eros manifests a predisposition toward diversity that is crucial in a theology for conflict. The plain truth of creation and reality is that it is plural, diverse, multifaceted. Not only are difference and particularity central to the self-opening of the being of God, whose love of alterity is evident in creation, the reality and presence of alterity are intrinsic to the experience of

⁷⁷ “Mystery remains essential to the reality of others: beings are not things and they remain exterior to any thought or system that would defraud them of their uniqueness.” (Ibid., 71).

⁷⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁷⁹ Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 106, 103.

⁸⁰ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 90.

relationships. Rather than this being a source of anxiety or challenge, *eros delights* in the particularity of beings because beings *as they exist in the world* are valuable and beautiful. Moreover, ethical responses to other beings require attention to and love for their particularity, to the *kind of beings they are*, in order to understand what would constitute their flourishing. The *eros* of God awakens in us a passion for the unfamiliarity of the other as something inherently good and mysterious and fascinating and valuable. Pulling us from the limits of our egocentrism, *eros* evokes care and affection toward others *because* they are different, beautiful creations of God, and there is a basic goodness in *being itself*. The suffering we endure when we encounter our limitations and vulnerabilities, often brought to the fore in encountering others, is interwoven with the joy and delight of others with whom we are interrelated and share both burden and celebration.

B. Compassion: A Care in the World

In human relationships, the outward orientation of *eros* toward the other is deeply intertwined with compassion for the other. “Freed from the illusion of egocentricity,” Wendy Farley writes, “one is made aware of the mystery and beauty of concrete, actually existing others. But having been tempted out of the retreat of egocentricity, one sees a beauty scarred by suffering.”⁸¹ Like Ed Farley’s assertion that to encounter others is to encounter the vulnerable face of the other, Wendy Farley claims that in opening ourselves to the other and detaching from exclusive attention to our needs, we are suddenly more aware of the needs and suffering of others—and that the inherent value of others, the goodness of their very existence and beauty, is being harmed in that suffering.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

“The simultaneous presence of beauty and its destruction releases two arrows piercing one’s heart: wonder and pain. Out of this coupling of delight and suffering, compassion is born,” she writes.⁸²

The human ability to feel compassion for another is dependent on being able to see the other person’s humanity, as well as their suffering. However, as I wrote earlier, humans have trouble seeing one another as full persons, and often encounter others as representatives or ciphers of some category other than full human being.⁸³ Compassion, therefore, exhibits a “resuscitation of the *capacity* to recognize another person as human, possible even in the midst of a tragically structured environment.”⁸⁴ In other words, compassion is both a demonstration of the ability to see the humanity and suffering of others, *and* the act of responding to that suffering with care, sympathy, and solidarity. This is not the same as pity, which can carry an air of condescension (and even dehumanization) toward the sufferer. Instead, compassion retains care for and delight in others *alongside* sympathy, and brings a belief in the dignity and value of creatures themselves: “Far from insulting the sufferer with gratuitous pity, [compassion] mediates to the other a sense of her own integrity. It sees through the suffering and recognizes the goodness that is not destroyed by the suffering; this recognition of the personhood of the sufferer allows compassion to sympathize with her.”⁸⁵

The human experience of compassion corresponds to but is not the same as divine compassion. God’s response to the suffering of human beings—even suffering that is tragically unavoidable—is compassion. As Wendy Farley puts it, “Compassion is love as it encounters suffering.”⁸⁶ But divine compassion has a particular power and efficacy; it offers not only a

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 37.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 37–38.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 79. Wendy Farley continues, “Compassion will not abandon sufferers to their suffering, even if it is necessary or deserved. Even pain and guilt cannot completely efface the dignity of the human being in compassion’s eyes. Compassion mediates a sense of the contingency of the suffering and the absoluteness of the dignity and in this way becomes an agency to resist the dehumanizing effects of suffering,” (Ibid., 80).

⁸⁶ Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 79.

solidarity of “suffering with,” but *opposition* to the destructive effects of that suffering. Divine compassion resists both the causes of suffering and the power of suffering to dominate those who suffer.⁸⁷ In God, “Compassion is the intensity of divine being as it enters into suffering, guilt, and evil to mediate the power to overcome them.”⁸⁸ Similar to Ed Farley’s concept of “being-founded,” divine compassion provides a power to resist suffering within the context of specific lived experiences.⁸⁹ Where a compassionate human might offer *assistance* to someone suffering and in need, God’s compassion empowers people for *resistance* against destructive suffering and the injustice that causes it: “As human beings and communities apprehend the presence of divine compassion for them and with them, they experience power to resist the degrading effects of suffering, to defy structures and policies that institutionalize injustice, and to confront their own guilt.”⁹⁰ This compassion does not rescue humans from suffering, but it is also more than simple consolation; compassionate power encompasses the enduring struggle against evil.⁹¹

Divine compassion is thus redemptive; in transforming suffering into a “fierce power of resistance,” God offers redemptive power that works to transform evil into “a locus of healing.”⁹² Moreover, by empowering life and opposing what degrades it, compassion “finds justice a constant traveling companion.”⁹³ Though some might equate compassion with passive softheartedness, in Wendy Farley’s construction compassion’s resistance to suffering and evil is

⁸⁷ Ibid., 116. “Compassion is present not only in the form of justice, but also in consolation and courage....In the midst of hopeless or intolerable suffering, redemption cannot lie only in the expectation that the suffering will cease. It will lie instead in the capacity of the sufferer to still taste the presence of divine love even through the torment. In the midst of suffering, redemptive power is present to prevent it from stealing a final victory” (Ibid., 117).

⁸⁸ Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 112.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 116.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 112.

⁹¹ Ibid., 116. Divine compassion is “the incarnation of divine love as redemptive power against the domination of evil. It is directed against the tyranny of suffering and sin to redeem humanity not *from* their historical, natural existence, but *for* responsibility and joy within this existence” (Ibid., 115).

⁹² Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 112.

⁹³ Ibid., 81.

embedded in the active desire and effort to redeem and transform that evil. Rather than responding to evil or sin with retribution, compassion “undermines the logic of punishment with the logic of redemption. It does not sacrifice condemnation of wrongdoing but seeks to overcome it rather than simply punish it.”⁹⁴

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is a symbol and concrete experience of this redemptive power in the life of the world and the church, one that continues to offer power throughout history and into the present. Wendy Farley argues that the incarnation is a “characteristic way” in which God is present and active in and through the relationships among Jesus’ disciples and the communities that formed around them, and in fellowship with those who were poor, sick, hungry and sinful.⁹⁵ For instance, she writes, “Table fellowship makes God present among human beings. The Johannine Gospel and epistles associate knowledge of God with obedience to the love commandment. It is in love and fellowship that redemptive power is made present to the community.”⁹⁶

The idea of compassion expressed by Wendy Farley suggests that despite and amid human suffering, the capacity to recognize the humanity of others is both a gift of God and a means by which we remain connected to one another as we resist the destructive power of suffering. In God’s compassion, we are given the power to resist elements of suffering that degrade us and the humanity of those around us, because compassion itself stakes a final claim over against that destructive suffering, proclaiming the presence of God’s love even amid torment. In compassionate relation, acts of violence and injustice do not erase the dignity of the human being

⁹⁴ Ibid., 85. “Compassion is extended even to moral evil....To the eyes of redemption, sin and suffering must be overcome together” (Ibid., 119).

⁹⁵ Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 113.

⁹⁶ Ibid. “The incarnation of God,” she continues, “in Christ, in the poor, in a community, symbolizes the efficacy of divine power in historical existence. The possibility of experiencing divine power through a person or historical event testifies to the self-revealing, self-manifesting nature of God and to the potential openness of creation to its creative ground” (Ibid., 114).

who commits them, even as such actions are vehemently rejected as abhorrent and evil. The reality that compassion exists as a response to suffering *is itself a revelation* that suffering cannot and does not have the last word, because even in the midst of suffering there is something deeper and greater that can move us to care, to empathy, and to love toward all who suffer.

C. Out of Context

The intertwining elements of eros and compassion point to a redemptive way of responding to a world of difference and division. In eros, the particularity of others is a source of delight and desire, which draw us away from egocentrism and the temptation of totalizing illusions. Though a focus on the reality and specificity of others can seem to limit the capacity for ethical discernment because it appears relative or endlessly contextual, in fact the opposite is true; the concrete realities of individuals *are what is real*, and decisions about what does creatures harm is necessarily attentive to context. In the specifics of context and personhood we are able to recognize and respond to an other as a human who is suffering and in need of compassion; the kind of beings we are offers insight about what leads to our well-being. Attentiveness to particularity is not arbitrary but resists the temptation of generalizations that ignore real persons. As Wendy Farley argues,

Moral behavior that proceeds only from commitment to duty, obedience, or abstracted principles inevitably fails to recognize others. It sees principles rather than persons; it loves its own righteousness rather than others. The failure to recognize the concrete other removes the connection through which knowledge of concrete needs and circumstances arises, knowledge which is essential to determine what concrete actions would assist in a particular situation. What is 'real' in this ethic are not particular persons or situations but abstractions: Loyalty, Justice, Obedience, Honor.⁹⁷

Eros, by contrast, "can negotiate the many dimensions of ethical life—principles, tragic conflicts, individual others, institutions, diversity, and commonality among peoples—because it is

⁹⁷ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 89.

guided by the reality of other beings.”⁹⁸ It is maintaining the relationship and connection between principles and persons that matters, writes Wendy Farley, as well as holding together the multidimensionality of existence for any particular individual so they are not reduced to any singular aspect of themselves. For eros, ethical action necessitates “a responsiveness to values, beliefs, principles, as well as aesthetic and religious sensibilities” and is “shaped by the principles, values, religious ethos through which one’s own ethical life is made concrete.”⁹⁹ Cultivation of eros and compassion amid the suffering of human life require attention to various interlocking levels of particularity and experience, including individual personhood, larger culture and the sacredness of being intrinsic to all creatures.¹⁰⁰

D. Out of Practice

In the human condition, redemptive orientations and dispositions are in a constant struggle against the temptations of self-securing. Remaining open to the other requires cultivation, regular observance, and action in day-to-day life—in other words, *practice*—so that we learn to align our values and actions, and are formed and shaped over time by practices that embody those values. Eros and compassion, for instance, are qualities and gifts of God, but they are also patterns that can be cultivated in us as part of spiritual, personal, and communal formation. It may seem odd to claim that being-founded or eros and compassion are gifts of God and *also* require practice. But theologians Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra note that there is formational interaction between God, Christian disciples, and Christian practices:

The content of [Christian] practice challenges, lures, and sometimes drags its practitioners into new ways of being and knowing that are commensurate with that practice—and thus, if it is rightly attuned, commensurate with the well-being of creation. Living within such practice gives [people] certain capacities that enable them to read the world differently—

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Wendy Farley, personal conversation with author, San Anselmo, CA, May 24, 2019.

even, we would argue, more truly....[Additionally] insofar as a Christian practice is truly attuned to the active presence of God for the life of the world, participating in it increases our knowledge of the Triune God.¹⁰¹

Other-orientations like eros and compassion require effort, deliberate practice, and moral discipline, especially in a world where temptations and pressures propel us toward illusion and abstraction. Wendy Farley suggests that a first step is to recognize the limitations of our own experience, our own vision, our own knowledge: “The struggle toward truth requires a practice or practices that order one toward others in their unique beauty and suffering, practices that permit the exteriority of reality to be acknowledged. Only when this exteriority is recognized can one begin to enter into truthful relationship with others.”¹⁰² A second step is embedded in the first, because the practice needed for openness to others—and thus the pursuit of truth—is engaging in relationship with people who are different than we are: “The effort rightly to understand those with whom we share a world is necessary to entering into relationships of responsibility, compassion, and enjoyment with them.”¹⁰³ This includes fostering a disposition that “displaces the fascination with the self and with the securities of total knowledge” with an outward curiosity and openness. Attention to the reality of others and their concrete needs “enables one to understand them better, with greater complexity and profundity, and to become more adequately responsive.”¹⁰⁴

As Ed Farley has asserted, communities of the face are communities of redemption in which agapic relation is made possible because of witness to and on behalf of the face—and they have a role to play in redemption. Redemption that occurs through the freedom of being-founded cannot be experienced in isolation but is intrinsically intertwined with the recognition of the

¹⁰¹ Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 25. Dykstra and Bass define Christian practices as “things people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in light of God’s active presence for the life of the world” (Ibid., 18).

¹⁰² Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 190.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 185–186.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 191–192.

vulnerable face of the other. It is essentially incomprehensible to think of “individual” redemption because redemption itself occurs in and is a result of moving toward relationship. As Ed Farley puts it, “The reality of this community is not the mediation of [salvific] resources to separate agents but of agents-in-relation under the face and before the sacred.”¹⁰⁵

The church can be an example of this kind of community because (at its best) it cuts across dividing lines of region, class, culture, and other socially-determined categories, and its nature and purpose as a community is to reach across those divisions. Specific practices of communities of the face would, at a minimum, include participation in that which creates and nourishes such relationships in a community. More tangibly, however, “a community of the face calls forth strategies and activities not just to that community’s self-maintaining functions but beyond itself to the spheres that human evil would separate from the face,” including through its communal education, preaching, and rituals.¹⁰⁶ Ed Farley does not expand more fully on this thought in this volume (in fact, the above quotation appears on the last page!). But though it may seem that he makes a soft case for the importance of practices that foster communities of the face, his entire argument revolves around the idea that participation in face-based relationships and communities is itself salvific, even as redemption can draw persons into such community.

Strikingly, these practices are often most difficult to embody and enact in moments of conflict. Difference and tension stir our fears and defenses, so situations of conflict can be the exact spaces where we want to cling to our identities and our sense of being right rather than exhibiting curiosity about others and the way they experience the world. Conflict also threatens the relationships themselves, making them feel tenuous and fragile. As a result, eros and compassion can be scarce at the moments when they are most needed. Intentional practices that

¹⁰⁵ Farley, *Good and Evil*, 292.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

cultivate these orientations and that reconnect us to the God of eros and compassion are critical. Ed Farley names education, preaching, and ritual as practices that can keep us connected to the face and help us resist that which would separate us from one another. Wendy Farley names practices that orient us toward eros and compassion for the other shift perspective (away from sole focus on the self and toward the experiences of others), foster relationships across difference, develop dispositions of curiosity, humility, and openness, and maintain connection with the humanity of others. In and through such practices, we become attuned to God's eros and compassion for the world, increasing our knowledge of it and tapping into its reconciling and healing power in the face of the other.

IV. Relatively Speaking

In the last chapter, I proposed four interlocking topics that are key to a theology for conflict for a relational homiletic. The last of these topics, the role of human relationship in sin and redemption, has been the primary focus of this chapter, leading to the following conclusions about relationality and God's redemptive work.

God's way of being is inherently relational, and God's intention for humanity and the whole of creation is likewise toward relationality. God's passion and love for others is made manifest in the creation, in which God rejected self-contained unity and isolation and instead created an entire cosmos of interconnectedness. God delights in the diversity and plurality of creatures, and God's orientation is outward—toward others and otherness—because of their mystery and beauty. The centrality of God's intention for and love of relationality is juxtaposed against human sin that rejects compassionate obligation, denies interconnectedness and embrace, and asserts superiority, autonomy, and dominance over others.

God's response to human sin and evil is redeeming action among humans for the purpose of restoring relationship. The presence of God breaks the powers of sin and evil and introduces new possibilities for good; as we experience the security of that which is Ultimate, we receive courage and freedom to risk relationships despite our fears and anxieties. As we are drawn toward others and their otherness, we resist the temptations of ego- and ethnocentrism. In restored relationships of the face, we are able to see others as the vulnerable and beautiful beings they are. We no longer perceive others as instruments of our security, but as human beings who are fellow creatures under God. Seeing others as sacred and valuable does not remove the inevitability of conflict or incompatibilities, but courage and freedom help us respond to conflicts and tension without dehumanizing others or needing to disparage their intrinsic value. In communities of the face, we learn to recognize the movement of God, which draws us toward relationships of mutuality and truth and resists that which would disguise or distort the face of the other. God desires these relationships among us and God's presence is encountered in communities that manifest them, even as God's presence is the impetus for them. In God's redemptive power, we reawaken to and more fully recognize our interconnectedness and interdependence, and recommit to remaining open to the other. *We cannot be ourselves—or receive God's redemption—without each other.*

Just as Jesus Christ is the embodiment of self-opening that overcomes enmity, the members of the body of Christ are a differentiated but interrelated people whose common identity and mutual belonging is found in the embrace of Christ. Those who find themselves embraced by God through Christ are called to embrace others, both within and outside the body. We remain ourselves while also opening ourselves to make space for others, whose individualities change us and enrich the whole. Through openness to others, we overcome enmity, in accordance with God's will for reconciliation.

Eros and compassion demonstrate the redemptive power of God's love in an affirmation of particularity and relationality. God's love for the created world reflects the outward orientation of "eros," which delights in the alterity and beauty of others and desires to enfold them in relationship. Through other-focused love, God reorients humans away from their inclinations to idolatrous self-securing, and toward humble curiosity about and honest care for others. God's eros for the diversity and the specificity of beings stands against totalizing visions that harm individuals and deny the truth of reality. In compassionate love, God opens human beings to see the beauty and suffering of others, to remind us of our common humanity, and to resist the forces that degrade and dehumanize. Compassion defies structural and interpersonal injustice and stimulates confrontation with our own guilt and culpability. Most importantly, compassion reveals that suffering does not have the last word, and that deeper and greater love—in the form of suffering with others, and resisting life-destroying forces—can emerge in response to evil.

At the heart of a theology for conflict is this affirmation: we are constituted by our relationships. "Relational" describes the kind of beings we were created to be. A theology for conflict is thus *a theology of recognition and acknowledgment of the implications of our interconnectedness*. Further, redemption is interconnected with relationality and manifested in the restoration of loving relationships. This necessarily means we stand against abuse, exploitation, and violence because they are sinful and relationship-destroying responses to human conflict.

Simultaneously, conflict and tension remain inevitable in human reality. In this life, our tragic condition and its consequences are not erased by the experience of God's presence. Conflict itself is not sinful, but is an expression of the incompatibilities of a diverse world. However, our responses to conflict and tension can lead to sin, and are what redemption seeks to redirect toward God's purposes. This suggests that the very ways in which we respond to each other in conflicts can also have redemptive power and meaning. The deepening of eros and compassion, the

building of communities that resist totalizing tendencies, and the capacity to abide the tension and discomfort of difference are all possible moments for God's redemptive presence and movement.

Chapter 4.5

Other-wise Homiletics and Beyond

In chapter 1, I argued that homiletic theory was in need of a relational homiletic to deal with conflict, and I built that argument on analysis of the prophetic preaching model that often becomes the homiletic response to controversial social issues.¹ But other areas of homiletic theory—specifically conversational, collaborative, and other-wise preaching—have also assessed the relational assumptions underlying traditional homiletic forms. In this interstitial chapter, I provide a brief overview of some of the contributions of these theories, to which I am indebted, in order to more clearly distinguish my understanding of a relational homiletic for conflict.

I. Mixed Messages

As I described in the opening chapter, prophetic preaching is focused on the delivery of an urgent message in a critical moment. However, the transmissional or “message” orientation of homiletics is not limited to prophetic preaching. In her overview of modern homiletic history, homiletician Lucy Rose finds that despite some shifts in recent decades the vast majority of preaching models remain based in a transmission model of communication: the preacher is the authority figure who has received and/or interpreted a message (from God through scripture) that is then to be transmitted to the congregation as “truth.” In this model, the preacher is above or ahead of the congregation in knowledge, experience, or insight, and is thus the “answer-person, an

¹ As Mary Donovan Turner writes, prophetic preaching “deals with difficult social issues and calls members of the community to accountability in light of their relationship with the God who created them” (Turner, “Prophetic Preaching,” 102.)

authoritative interpreter of scripture and life.”² Bringing the message to the congregation is the preacher’s role, leaving the congregation in a subordinate position of receiving or rejecting it.³

This understanding of preaching is predicated on a knowledge or authority gap between the preacher and the congregation. Prophetic preaching seems to presume such a gap, in that the preacher has come to urgent conclusions that the congregation needs to hear. The prophetic preacher is not only interpreting and transmitting a message but feels heightened tension and pressure to be heard and understood in order to get the critical, life-and-death point across. When the preacher’s prophetic message consists of critique, judgment, and call to accountability that has been heard and received by the pastor but needs to be transmitted to the congregation, the gap between the two is further widened by fear on both sides.

Over its history, homiletics in general has been predicated on a persuasive- or argument-focused rhetorical approach. Richard Lischer writes that “The Western rhetorical tradition to which the sermon is heir is agonistic, that is, conflictual, oppositional.”⁴ He continues, “Our predecessors were trained to *defend* the truth and to *demolish* the claims of the opposition, to *attack* every weakness, to *shoot down* all their arguments, to *score* points, and to *win*.”⁵ The homiletic norms of message-centered and transmissional communication, as well as of persuasive argument, set up a oppositional relationship between the preacher and the congregation from the get-go. In light of the legacy of the rhetorical tradition in homiletics, it seems especially hard to fathom preaching on a conflicted issue that would *not* take the form of rhetorical argument. But some of these assumptions about the nature of preaching have begun to be challenged.

² Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴ Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 154.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 155. Author’s emphasis.

II. Conversation Pieces

In recent decades, some homileticians have proposed conversational orientations toward preaching, including in its preparation and form, and in how the role and authority of the preacher are understood. While the traditional sermon form has been a monologue, the idea of dialogue or conversation is not historically foreign to preaching; within the context of a liturgy, for example, the sermon is part of a “holy dialogue” of announcing good news that (in theory, anyway) then prompts congregational response.⁶ A few homileticians have even suggested that preaching might consist of an actual conversation in some form. Generally, these approaches are not gimmicks or means to reach new audiences through homiletical creativity and innovation; instead, “These various approaches to preaching share a commitment to empower a genuine sense of shared responsibility for the preaching and worship of the church among those gathered.”⁷

Underlying many conversational modes of preaching is an interest in and an appeal for different kinds of relationships—not only between the preacher and the congregation, or the congregation and the text, but also among congregation members, and even between the congregation and those outside the literal and figurative church walls. Proponents of various forms of conversational preaching argue that traditional modes of preaching generate problematic understandings of preachers and their (often solo) role in interpreting and proclaiming good news, as well as also inadvertently manifesting and perpetuating relationships at odds with *koinonia*—the shared and mutual fellowship of the Christian community—which the church hopes to be and become. The broad critique brought by conversational theorists is that traditional preaching acquiesces to modes of delivery and authority that can obscure or dismiss theological and

⁶ David J. Lose, “Preaching as Conversation,” in *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World*, ed. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen, Jr. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 72.

⁷ *Ibid.*

homiletic objectives, such as developing an interpretive community, diminishing the separation of preacher and congregation, etc.

For example, in her book *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, Rose recalls her sense of disconnection from traditional understandings of preaching that brought her to ask, “What *is* the purpose of preaching? What is preaching’s function in the life of the church?”⁸ Rose then proposes a form of conversational preaching in which “preaching’s goal is to gather the community of faith around the Word where the central conversations of the church are focused and fostered. In conversational preaching, the preacher and the congregation are colleagues, exploring together the mystery of the Word for their own lives, as well as the life of the congregation, the larger church, and the world.”⁹ Rose’s understanding of Christian community and the relationships within and around it are interconnected with—and in some ways made possible through—the communal, nonhierarchical, personal, inclusive and scriptural commitments of conversational preaching.¹⁰ These adjectives reflect the nature of conversational preaching *and* the kind of community preaching and worship are to build.

Rose couches her proposal in dialogue with and frequently as a corrective to “dominant voices” in homiletic theory: what she calls “traditional” or “classical” homiletical theory grounded in rhetoric; “kerygmatic” theory, which emphasizes the essential core of the gospel and the sermon as an event in which God speaks; and “transformational” theory, in which the sermon is an event that transforms the worshippers.¹¹ To each of these voices, Rose offers gentle but specific critiques around two major themes: 1) concern about relational separation and division that is represented or perpetuated by certain ways of conceptualizing and enacting preaching, and 2) the

⁸ Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13, 37, 59.

need to address dominant assumptions about language and epistemology that have been masquerading as absolute and universal. I have described Rose's understanding of the separation and division between the preacher and congregation, which is often presumed in traditional forms of preaching.¹² Kerygmatic preaching, meanwhile, is focused on the experience of the individual hearer, which leaves congregation members divided from each other in the preaching moment because they experience the Word of God individually and personally, but not communally or relationally.¹³ For Rose, this stands against the nature of the Christian community, in which "the individual is...inseparable from the community, and the community, inseparable from the individual. God's activity is concerned with both the church and the individual and cannot affect one without affecting the other."¹⁴

The second theme in Rose's work critiques uses of epistemology and language. Preachers have often assumed the universality of certain experiences (typically their own), believing that "their experiences of texts or their interpretations of what texts 'say and do' are normative," which then turns the sermon into "a vehicle to transfer those experiences to the congregation."¹⁵ However, argues Rose, different life experiences "eventuate in different interpretive theories."¹⁶ Universalizing the preacher's experiences and interpretations wrongly and unacceptably privileges them, when in actuality all interpretations are "historically conditioned and vested with self-interest."¹⁷ Rose's concerns about language and epistemology reflect her commitment to the broad

¹² Rose's primary critique of this model is that for many preachers such a separation or division is not the foremost experience of the pastor's relationship with the congregation. Instead, Rose argues, "More fundamental than differences between the preacher and the congregation are experiences of belonging, shared identity, and mutual interdependency" (Ibid., 22).

¹³ Ibid., 52.

¹⁴ Ibid., 51.

¹⁵ Ibid., 79.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., 80. Similarly, Rose raises concerns about language, including that traditional preaching often takes for granted that "words grasp and convey reality" in a one-to-one relationship, thereby failing to take seriously that language itself participates in "the sins and distortions of the generations and cultures that use and shape it." (Ibid., 32, 83). Put another way, Rose is calling into question the belief on the part of some

inclusion of all people in the body of Christ—not just as passive recipients in worship, but as active interpreters of scripture, faith, and life. Hegemony of experience or language limits full participation of the community because it lifts one voice above the others, which reinforces division and separation rather than mutuality and solidarity.

Crucial for Rose is “whether sermonic interpretations, proposals, and wagers serve to foster all the central conversations of the church as the people of God, whether they upbuild the communities of faith in their local and global configurations, and whether they respect and invite the voices of the silenced, the disenfranchised, the poor, and women.”¹⁸ Conversational preaching affirms that the responsibility for the upbuilding of the church belongs to the whole community.¹⁹ She writes, “The preacher and the worshipers are equal partners on a journey to understand and live out their faith commitments.”²⁰ Over against the effects of preaching models she critiques,

preachers that language can, in a direct and unbiased way, convey “truth” with clarity, specificity and finality. Because our understanding of language itself has changed over time, we now recognize that the meaning of words can be “slippery” and “without clear significations”—in other words, not absolute, universal or unambiguous (Ibid., 55). Thus in terms of both language and epistemology, Rose expresses discomfort with universalizing, settled, and controlling or absolutized understandings of both speech and thought. To this she also adds reservations about the plausibility of an “unchanging” kerygma, wondering whether “essentials” of the gospel can be known and defined, questioning who defines kerygma, and circling back to the uncertainty of language and knowledge (Ibid., 53–54). Rose challenges dominant views of preaching and interpretation that would seek to impose a single way of understanding, experiencing or speaking of faith on a complex and diverse congregation and world, especially in light of how which such imposition can result in exclusion, silencing and disenfranchisement.

¹⁸ Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 106. Rose reimagines a form of preaching that would invite and evoke conversation, and this approach is mirrored in how she writes and presents her ideas. While she plainly states her disagreements and concerns, she does so without claiming absolute answers or universal knowledge, and instead offers her ideas as tentative interpretations, proposals and wagers, echoing her preaching model (Ibid., 100–101). Often, she poses open questions that illumine her reimagining, such as: “What is preaching all about for those of us who experience preaching as fundamentally a connected process?” (Ibid., 30), “What is the content of preaching in the absence of an unchanging, self-evident kerygma?” (Ibid., 53), “What would homiletical theory look like that gives priority to the Word entrusted to the community?” (Ibid., 52). The manner and tone of the book—its use of questions, and its inquisitive and dialogical ethos overall—provides space for conversation and connection across differing perspectives. Rose states explicitly that she is proposing “a” conversational understanding of preaching, intended to stand alongside other understandings, enriched by the “constant need for the enlargement, the confirmation, as well as the correction of other descriptions of preaching in the larger conversation called homiletics” (Ibid., 7). The ethic and orientation of the reimagined preaching she seeks is embodied in how the book itself is written.

¹⁹ Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 98.

²⁰ Ibid., 91.

Rose seeks to upbuild the Christian community through conversational preaching of inclusion, interdependency, mutuality, solidarity and partnership.

What Rose proposes shifts the *relational* orientation of homiletics. Her interpretive norm for preaching focuses not on the abilities of the preacher, but on the collective voices and wisdom of the gathered body. Those in the pulpit and the pew “are interdependent, not separated by a gap but joined in common discipleship and common tasks....The preacher and the congregation stand together as explorers.”²¹ For Rose, conversation is both the method and end of preaching; participatory, nonhierarchical, and inclusive preaching is part of the larger conversation of faith taking place in and through the interpretive community.

III. Table Talk

The desire to address perceived problems in homiletics also lies behind John McClure’s model of “collaborative” preaching.²² McClure’s interest is to develop consultative and collaborative forms of leadership for the church for the sake of congregational empowerment generally, as well as in the ethos and orientation of preaching.²³ Like Rose, McClure juxtaposes his proposal against historical and contemporary homiletical models. In the first, *sovereign preaching*, the leader “embodies the point of final decision within the congregation, whether or not that person has actually unilaterally made these decisions or not.”²⁴ Sovereign preaching exemplifies a hierarchical model in which “relationships are built on emulation, obligation, and obedience,” and the authority of both preaching and scripture is centralized in the interpretations of the

²¹ Ibid., 90.

²² John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

²³ McClure writes, “Consultative and collaborative forms of leadership...are more effective when leaders hope to build the kind of strategic prophetic, evangelistic, and pastoral commitments that are needed in our churches today” (Ibid., 12).

²⁴ Ibid., 31.

preacher.²⁵ A later model, *inductive preaching*, sought to address some of the concerns about the sovereign style by focusing more attention on the thoughts and experiences of the hearer.²⁶

Inductive sermons engaged the experiences of the listener first, and were often left open-ended so that hearers could draw their own conclusions.²⁷ However, other problems persisted or emerged: the inductive model placed emphasis on identification between the preacher and congregation, which, while attempting to address the distance between them, often resulted in the mistaken assumption of shared or universal experiences.

In response to these concerns, McClure looked for ways that the principles and practices of truly participative dialogue could be incorporated into a genre that remains “essentially monological.”²⁸ His proposal is “roundtable collaboration” preaching designed to “*engage in and influence* the ways that a congregation is ‘talking itself into’ becoming the Christian community.

...The preacher collaborates with members of the congregation, galvanizing in the pulpit the actual talk through which the community, in response to the biblical message, is experiencing and producing in its own congregational life and message.”²⁹ The roundtable or collaborative preaching model involves members of the congregation in discussion and discernment of the scripture text and its interpretation, and the conversation—both content and process—becomes the basis for the sermon. In the collaborative model, relationships between preacher and hearer are built on “justice and love,” wherein members of the congregation discover they are equally children of God with insights to contribute (justice), and they experience hospitality not only to their own thoughts and ideas, or in welcoming the thoughts and ideas of others, but in living in

²⁵ Ibid., 32–33.

²⁶ Ibid., 39.

²⁷ Ibid., 41.

²⁸ Ibid., 47.

²⁹ Ibid., 50. Author’s emphasis.

“compassionate solidarity with others” (love).³⁰ The process of communal biblical interpretation and discussion *is itself the way in which* the Word of God becomes known:

We must seek out the unique, strange and sometimes bizarre interpretations of the gospel that are around us in our culture, in the minds and hearts of good church people, and latent within the recesses of our own lives, and come to terms with these in the pulpit. We do not do this in order to appear contemporary and inclusive or to make our preaching seem more relevant. We do it because we believe that the Word of God becomes known when real people (who are in reality more different than they are alike), strive to discern and express their solidarity in Christ.³¹

Collaborative preaching and the engagement of multiple, unexpected, and diverse voices in the process of biblical interpretation are not merely means to a sermonic end, nor a hospitable approach to communal congregational faith development; these are ways in which the community—including the preacher—comes to know and hear the Word of God. It is within and through the community that the Word of God is revealed—not because it has descended from on high, but because it has emerged between and among the members of community in their interactions with each other. McClure puts it this way: “The Word of God arrives, not as a decisive judgment or as a personal insight, but as an emergent communal reality. Hearers discern God's Word as a new reality in the community that is emerging piece by piece through the give-and-take of an open, ongoing, homiletical conversation.”³²

Both Rose's conversational and McClure's collaborative models for preaching make an essential point about some traditional modes of preaching: they inherently divide preacher from hearer, interpretation from collaboration, and preaching from shared leadership. More specifically, homiletic models can actually *disrupt* relationship in the Christian community by creating or exacerbating distance between the preacher and congregation, limiting voices and privileging

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

³² John S. McClure, “Conversation and Proclamation: Resources and Issues,” *Homiletic* 22, no. 1 (June 1, 1997): 5.

particular perspectives, modeling top-down and hierarchical leadership in the pulpit (even if there is collaborative leadership in other aspects of church life), and making use of preparation, content, form, tone, or delivery of a sermon that contradicts the mutuality, solidarity, and community proclaimed in the words. Both conversation and collaboration are models of preaching that seek to lift up the relational aspects of a homiletic event, and to align homiletic methods and means with the relational and theological content of the sermon. Rose and McClure assert that the event of preaching can model, create, and transform relationships. Relationships between and among the members of the body of Christ can be constituted in and through the sermon as the members of the body open themselves to each other and to the work of the Spirit among them. Emerging from convictions about inclusion, equity, and shared leadership, these are clear shifts in homiletic theory that point toward more relational constructs and approaches.

IV. Significant Other

In a subsequent book, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*, McClure further expands and deepens his thinking about how interactions among people relate to preaching.³³ Here, McClure is focused on “other-directed movements” in homiletics, and particularly to “other-wise homiletics” that are, “in every respect, other-inspired and other-directed.”³⁴ Following postmodern and deconstructive philosophical trajectories, McClure suggests that an emerging focus on the “other” in homiletics is an attempt to both “become wise about other human beings—to gain wisdom about and from others in preaching,” and to put homiletics (like other fields) under deconstructive erasure so that it might more fully be affected and reshaped by the

³³ John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

proximity and reality of “others.”³⁵ While it is not possible here to explicate McClure’s full argument, I will point out particular ways in which he understands the reality of and encounter with the other as a transformational dynamic for homiletics.

Beyond the roundtable-style desire to include the diversity of congregational voices in the interpretation of scripture in order to communally experience the emergence of the Word of God, other-wise preaching claims that the very experience of encounter with “others” is not just interpretive, but transformational. Like Ed Farley, McClure tracks Emmanuel Levinas in describing how encounters with others are interconnected with knowing and understanding the self. Such encounters lead to experiences of self-erasure in which our own identity is undermined by being exposed to the other as we “bear witness to the glory of the Infinite” in the face of that other.³⁶ In moments of encounter, we become aware of the ethical obligation we have to the other—“compassionate obligation,” in Farley’s words. For the preacher, this can first lead to awareness of responsibility and subsequent homiletical risk-taking in the form of advocacy, intervention, or public witness in preaching.³⁷ Further on the journey toward other-wise commitment, the preacher may recognize the ways in which authority, traditions, ontologies, and even language come into question in light of the other, realizations that can begin “to threaten the preacher’s identity and ways of thinking.”³⁸ But from this sense of erasure can emerge a new vision of a free and just society, and sense of reclamation, where the preacher “begins to find new ways to understand herself or himself in relation to others.”³⁹ Over time—and many times—other-wise preaching seeks

³⁵ Ibid. McClure articulates various ways in which critical theory, structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstructive phenomenology have impacted homiletic theory and shifted it toward a focus on “others,” and in homiletics has been prompted to “exit” from many of its traditional ways of being and “re-encounter something of the nature of proclamation at its deepest levels” (Ibid., 1).

³⁶ McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching*, 120–122.

³⁷ Ibid., 134.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 135.

to make space for the other and their strangeness, because when we encounter their “otherness” we witness the glory of the Infinite:

Other-wise commitment feels deeply the proximity of human others and the nearness of an impinging alternative reign of God in which things are indeed other-wise. This commitment is more than an outward display of solidarity. . . . It involves decisive, existential caring. Levinas makes it clear that fullness of life is found only in our openness to the absolute mystery of the other. In the neighbor’s face (visage), we experience an absolute obligation toward compassion, resistance, justice and hope that grips our lives and holds us to a new vision for all humanity.⁴⁰

In recognizing that the face-to-face encounter with another is an experience of the Infinite that changes us, other-wise preaching recognizes the preaching act to be transformational as the preacher and the congregation see (and, in collaborative preaching, hear) one another, encounter the Infinite, and cannot remain unchanged.

In McClure’s argument, encountering and engaging with others can shape the content and style of preaching, alter the preacher who participates in such encounters, and affect the very nature of preaching so that what takes place in the sermonic event itself becomes a witness to and experience of transformation among the congregation members who also encounter the other and are changed.⁴¹ Or, more accurately, the preaching event *is* an experience of transformational, other-wise encounter. McClure suggests the beginning must be an other-wise *commitment*, a

⁴⁰ Ibid., 134.

⁴¹ One aspect of other-wise preaching is an interpretation of “witness” and “testimony,” in which (following Paul Ricoeur) McClure takes “witness” to refer to “testimony as act” and “testimony” to mean “testimony as narrative” or testimony as the telling about what has been witnessed (Ibid., 123). In this configuration, “witness” is a “sign of the absolute” (perhaps an encounter with the divine, or a human action reflecting the divine nature) to which we give “testimony” by narratively telling and interpreting what happened (Ibid., 124). Testimony understood in this way is the bread and butter of weekly preaching, in that preachers frequently speak about a witness event (an original encounter or experience) and bring it to life for the congregation. In other-wise preaching, however, the preacher brings “his or her ongoing, changing narrative testimony...to the rupturing of totality by the glory of the Infinite revealed in the vulnerable face of the other” (Ibid., 125). That to which the preacher intends to testify is in fact *occurring* in the sermon. The preacher and congregation, in seeing the Infinite in one another and being transformed by its glory, are *experiencing witness* even as the preacher is *speaking testimony*. Put another way, the preaching event, in which testimonies are shared, *becomes an experience of God because of the relationships in the room and beyond*. In being together, encountering one another deeply and authentically, and being open to the real life of the other, we are changed and transformed.

“commitment to human others of all shapes and sizes and a personal and theological commitment to exiting the biblical, theological, social, experiential, and cultural hegemonies that exist within and beyond the churches.”⁴²

Also building from Levinas and from McClure’s *Other-wise Preaching*, homiletician Ronald Allen focused his attention on “others” in his book, *Preaching and the Other: Studies in Postmodern Insights*.⁴³ In what is largely an overview of how themes of postmodernism might be interpreted within and have an impact on homiletics, Allen focuses on diversity and otherness as two aspects of postmodern thought and suggests implications they pose for preaching. At a broad level, Allen encourages pastors and preachers to become comfortable with otherness and diversity in order to resist resorting to sameness and uniformity, and instead respond with openness and hospitality to others. For Allen, recognizing otherness itself has significant benefits, including coming to understand ourselves more fully, learning from and acknowledging our limitations, and improving relationships across markers of difference, such as race and ethnicity, culture, denomination, theology, etc.⁴⁴ Allen suggests that the reality of otherness reminds the preacher that there are diverse viewpoints within any congregation, and that the preacher cannot presume sameness among the congregation members, or assume that the preacher and the congregation share the same perspectives or presuppositions on scripture, theology, or personal experiences.⁴⁵

Allen also notes, however, that “While I am convinced that the movement to respect Otherness contains insights that should guide all aspects of ministerial practice, including preaching, some aspects of the encounter with the Other raise questions and issues that deserve continued reflection.”⁴⁶ In particular, he suggests that some forms of encountering otherness can

⁴² McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching*, 133–134.

⁴³ Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights* (Chalice Press, 2008).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 36–37.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

be challenging and even shocking to congregations, and that a lackadaisical naïveté about the difficulties and complexities can cause people to retreat to what is familiar.⁴⁷ Moreover, while the category of “otherness” can help people think about encountering and engaging deeply with people who are different—especially for people in contexts and cultures that have a predilection toward uniformity and sameness—this does not mean that all aspects of otherness need to be endorsed or accepted. For instance, it is okay to disagree with or object to the ways others behave or the choices they make, especially if they are ethically or theologically troubling.⁴⁸

For McClure and Allen, the concept of the “other,” particularly as it has developed in postmodern thought, has shaped their thinking about the nature and purpose of preaching. Each writer begins from the premise of wanting to examine how postmodern and deconstructive philosophies have impacted homiletics, and each has come to similar coalescence around the role of the “other” as a significant theological and ethical influence in homiletics going forward.⁴⁹ Allen and McClure develop the argument for other-oriented homiletic approaches and commitments in response to shifting conversations in philosophy and phenomenology. And, though they do so differently, both of them critique homiletic trajectories that (intentionally or unintentionally) forward concepts of sameness, uniformity, and hegemony—especially at the expense of encounter with the “other.” Within and beyond homiletic theory, they claim, such orientations are theologically and ethically problematic, and require intentional deconstruction and revision.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ McClure explains, “I have felt for some time that deconstruction was a significant form of other-directed textual analysis that could be used in support of an ethical perspective on homiletic theory....The more I studied the writings of Levinas, the more I convinced I became that the idea of radical alterity or ‘otherness’ within his work could make a positive, ethical deconstruction of preaching possible” (McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching*, x). Allen writes, “I believe Christian preaching has much to learn from postmodernism, but that we cannot simply baptize postmodern points of view and ordain them for the pulpit. I am less interested in postmodern approaches to preaching *per se* than in preaching that creates opportunities for people living in the postmodern ethos in the new millennium to encounter the gospel. What can preachers learn from postmodernists that can help congregations enter into lively conversations with the gospel?” (Allen, *Preaching and the Other*, 1).

V. Frames of Mind

The conversational, collaborative, and other-wise approaches to preaching that I have outlined are built on related but distinct theological frameworks. Rose's conversational preaching emerges from an *ecclesiology of community* and of the church as a "household" of hospitality, mutuality, and solidarity.⁵⁰ As Rose puts it, "Conversational preaching takes place within a worshipping community where some degree of shared faith and commitment gives rise to the worshipers' sense of being a household of God or an ecclesial family."⁵¹ Similarly, the primary metaphor for roundtable preaching is embedded in its name: an inclusive, welcoming round table of conversation without hierarchy or inequality.

For Allen, openness and hospitality toward otherness is rooted first in an *ontology of diversity*: the reality that in the "mind-boggling variety and difference" of creation that God fashioned, each being is given its own integrity for the purpose of living together "in mutually supportive (covenantal) community."⁵² In our diversity we are to be in community together, and this is why we honor one another. He writes:

We are to practice hospitality to one another, which includes respecting the Otherness of those we encounter. We seek to engage in active support that reinforces the distinctiveness of each member of the community while creating a community in which all elements are mutually enhancing. Differences are not threats to be subsumed into sameness but are specific gifts from a God-given infinity of gifts.⁵³

In *Other-wise Preaching*, McClure offers a primarily *philosophical and ethical basis* for engaging otherness, which is based in Levinas's understanding that the reality of the other calls us

⁵⁰ Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 122.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵² Allen, *Preaching and the Other*, 42. Allen resists Levinas's ethics-based orientation, arguing that ontology should precede ethics: "According to Levinas, this command [to respect and honor the Other] should create the mores and practices of a culture rather than the other way around—that is, respectful response to the Other should call forth a community's values rather than the beliefs of the community creating respect for the Other....[However], traditional theology grounds ethics in ontology: who we are (ontology) determines what we are to do (ethics). What we do (ethics) indicates who we believe we are (ontology)" (*Ibid.*, 42).

⁵³ Allen, *Preaching and the Other*, 43.

toward infinite responsibility.⁵⁴ In the final chapter McClure also suggests four primary theological frameworks that guide other-wise preachers. The *social gospel* approach emphasizes the social origins of sin and strives for God's reign of justice, righteousness, and compassion on earth. A *liberation theology* orientation emerges from experiences of oppression and inequality, and, perceiving sin primarily as social and structural injustice, stresses God's identification with and bias for those who are marginalized, outcast, and "other." *Christus Victor theology* roots the church's identity in the resurrection as resistance to death-dealing forces of power and oppression. A *theology of victimization* begins from an awareness of the tendency to scapegoat "others" so that they become unremembered sacrifices, and argues that Jesus's sacrifice on the cross puts an end to the need for scapegoating and sacrifice, thus instigating a new form of community life for all.⁵⁵

I will note here one other relationally-oriented homiletical approach, one that begins from a *theology of reconciliation*. In *The End of Words*, Richard Lischer puts homiletical purposes and practices squarely in the camp of reconciliation. He grounds his efforts in the biblical theology of 2 Corinthians 5:19, in which God in Christ is reconciled to the world and gives to us the message of reconciliation; Lischer writes, "The mystery of God, captured in a message about what God has done, is now entrusted to us. And what God has done, on both a macro- and a microscopic scale, is reconciliation."⁵⁶ As the heart of God's mission and ministry with and for humanity (and creation), reconciliation becomes the telos of human mission and ministry, as well. Thus in Lischer's homiletical understanding,

At the heart of the universe lies a mysterious, hidden Being whose very self is moved by love for all that he has created. In the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, that Being has been revealed as one who is perpetually turning toward us as if to

⁵⁴ Specifically, McClure writes, "My goal is to show that Levinas's ethical deconstruction of ontology and human discourse, rooted as it is in the interruption of the totality of Being by the face of the other, permits both a radical critique of homiletics and the sustained development of an ethical-theological homiletic theory. Levinas's profoundly Jewish theological ethic of testimony can ground Christian proclamation in an ethical and kenotic 'tearing up' of oneself toward the other" (McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching*, 8).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 135–138.

⁵⁶ Lischer, *The End of Words*, 133.

welcome us home, the way a mother and father open their arms to a wayward child. Whenever we preach, our sermons participate in this, God's definitive gesture toward the world. The end of preaching is reconciliation.⁵⁷

Lischer similarly invokes the "other" in relation to the method and trajectory of preaching, noting that while sermon content may not always be about forgiveness or reconciliation, it should make two "reconciling provisions." First, the sermon will "patiently seek to understand the position of the Other, even when that Other *is* the audience or sits among the audience," and second, it will "leave the door ajar to a future that no one, including the preacher, can fully comprehend."⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that Lischer has in mind that the sermon itself has the capacity to effect some measure of reconciliation—or should at least not take steps that actively work against reconciliation. For Lischer, the relational goal of reconciliation has bearing on the content, language, and style of sermonic address (though perhaps not the monological form itself).

Rose's ecclesiological orientation, Allen's ontological focus, McClure's ethical-philosophical approach and theological-homiletical frameworks, and Lischer's reconciliatory telos demonstrate some of the many ways relational considerations of preaching have emerged within the broader homiletic field, and have done so from various starting points. Approaches and models of *relationship* and *relationality* across difference have become significant elements in homiletic theory and practice in recent decades, and have begun to shape not only content and style but understandings of the purpose of preaching.

This overview sets the stage for my framing of a relational homiletic for conflict, which both draws from and is distinguished from the relational orientations to preaching that have come before. The relational homiletic I will propose builds on some of the foundational elements established by Rose and McClure in particular, because their work helps shift homiletic focus from

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 160.

the centrality of the message to a more communal orientation in which the processes of sermon preparation and delivery are understood to be integral to the outcome of the homiletic event. Fundamentally, the transmission of a message is not the sum total of what takes place in a sermon—and, despite what the preacher hopes to communicate, other homiletic elements can undermine the meaning and reception of the intended relational message.⁵⁹

Additionally, these theories indicate that the message of the sermon cannot be divorced from the means and methods by which it is produced and offered—and as such more attention needs to be paid to how sermons are crafted and delivered, whose (literal) voices are heard, how privileged positions are being universalized, who has responsibility for interpretation, etc. Even more importantly, collaborative, conversational, and other-wise preaching suggest that the practices of preaching *have the capacity to manifest and transform relationships within the gathered community*. Strikingly, not only can relationships of inclusion, welcome, hospitality, and understanding be enhanced and reinforced by these homiletic approaches, some traditional forms of preaching have in various ways (intentionally and unintentionally) reinforced hierarchy, privilege, hegemony, totality, uniformity, and exclusion.

A relational understanding of preaching as I am crafting it challenges and stands alongside proclamatory, kerygmatic, pedagogical, prophetic, and pastoral homiletic models and images of the preacher by claiming that the purpose of preaching can be of and for the building of relationship, community, and *koinonia*.⁶⁰ For many, traditional, kerygmatic, and authoritative

⁵⁹ For example, weekly monologue sermons prepared by a single person might stand at odds with a message of welcome and inclusion that claims to value all persons in the life and leadership of the church.

⁶⁰ Tom Long famously articulated four major images of the preacher: herald, pastor, storyteller/poet, and witness in Thomas G. Long, *Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). While it is possible to envision and articulate a relational model alongside these images, my proposal would probably sit more naturally among the entries in Jana Childers's *Purposes of Preaching*, which is a collection of different ways to conceive of the question, "What is preaching meant to do?" (Jana Childers, "Seeing Jesus: Preaching as Incarnational Act," in *Purposes of Preaching*, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 39). Notably, in that volume Christine Smith claims that "one of the most profound purposes of preaching is to create, protect, and nurture right relationship," including "embodying gestures of profound

understandings of preaching and preachers are such esteemed and indelible realities within the church that critiques of their relational deficiencies are insufficient to alter practices. However, my proposal for a relational homiletic begins from the claim that the relationships we manifest as members of the body of Christ are a primary means by which we understand who we are and how we live out our discipleship and faithfulness to a profoundly relational God—none of which should be set aside in the pulpit.

humility; 'de-centering' the powerful from unearned advantage and privilege; inviting the voiceless and those who have been silenced to proclaim their religious truth and witness; re-membering the wholeness of God's body and the body of the community; proclaiming words that nourish and sustain life; the grace of hospitality and invitation; [and] the commitment never to forget injustices done, violence perpetrated" (Christine M. Smith, "Preaching: Hospitality, De-Centering, Re-Membering, and Right Relations," in *Purposes of Preaching*, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 109).

Chapter 5

A Relational Homiletic

In chapter 1, I outlined the relational challenges preachers face when approaching controversial issues in their preaching, and the limitations of pastoral and prophetic homiletic models in addressing situations of conflict. I suggested the need for a *relational homiletic* in which the nature and quality of relationships were prioritized in preaching practices, especially in situations of conflict. To build a relational homiletic, in chapter 2 I outlined conflict transformation as a conversation partner specifically because as a theory and practice for conflict, transformation emphasizes the importance and centrality of relationship itself in processes and outcomes. In chapter 2.5, I gave an overview of theological claims behind conflict transformation as articulated by Christian conflict transformation practitioners and scholars. I noted some theological areas that are underdeveloped, and expressed the need for a more comprehensive “theology for conflict” that could be the foundation for a relational approach to homiletics. In chapters 3 and 4, I developed a theology for conflict to address issues of particular interest for a relational approach to homiletics, including difference and diversity; conflict, tension and other suffering; sin and evil; and the nature of human relationship. In chapter 4.5, I reviewed existing homiletical approaches that emphasize relationality through conversation and collaboration. In this chapter, I bring these pieces together to form a relational homiletic for conflict.

I. Relationality, Front and Center

Throughout this work, I have intertwined relationship, conflict, theology, and homiletics to try to respond to several interconnected questions: How might preaching best attend to the complexities

of conflict and controversy? What could homiletics learn from conflict theory and transformation? How might theology help undergird a Christian understanding of conflict? What are the relational dynamics of conflict, and might they be they addressed in preaching? The result of these queries is a relational homiletic for conflict that envisions the preaching moment embedded in the story of redemption, which is centered on the interconnectedness of humans and the reconciling telos of God with the created world. In brief, this relational homiletic:

- seeks to awaken encounter, curiosity, understanding, and interrelatedness, and to demonstrate in homiletic content and delivery the kinds of relationships that are God’s intention;
- is an ethically-oriented approach that sees preaching as having the capacity to model and shape belief and practice, and specifically to embody and foster relationality in its means and ends;
- is attentive to what is communicated not just by the words used, but by all the elements that surround the sermon’s content, including tone, form, medium, and space, and how a relational message aligns or is at odds with its delivery; and
- puts at center stage a theology and ethic of relationality—or in biblical language, *koinonia*—that regards *the ways in which we relate together* as interconnected beings created by God as a primary expression of who and what God intends us to be, including in situations of conflict.

My methodological process has been an exercise of practical theology that falls somewhere between the “mutual critical correlation” models of David Tracy and Don Browning, and the “interpreting situations” model proposed by Ed Farley.¹ It is not surprising that I would find

¹ Mutual critical correlation involves dialogue between interpretations of Christian theology and interpretations of contemporary experiences and practices in which each shapes the other. Interpreting situations is the theological hermeneutic of assessing a particular situation in its historical and contextual

myself aligning with practical theological models that give particular credence to the interpretation of experience, especially since that is a primary orientation of the theologians and practitioners I have tapped. Whether I chose a methodology that aligned with these sources or my methodology led me to these works, this is the reality of practical theology: it is often circular, moving from a presenting, practical problem or question to theology and back to practice. As practical theology is “the process of placing theology and cultural wisdom into a mutually critical and mutually enhancing conversation with one another for the purpose of evoking and probing depth questions,”² this project is a manifestation of practical theology.

I begin my description of a relational homiletic by returning to theology. This is in part to distinguish my theological foundations from those of other relationally-oriented homiletic theories. But starting with theology here should not suggest that my overall understanding of a relational homiletic *requires* starting from theology. As a practical theologian, my questions and assessments are continually cyclical, revisiting practices, theories, cultural wisdom, context, and theology over again, in and through each other. Any of these entry points could begin the conversation and lead into the other elements...but I have to start somewhere!

II. Relational Homiletics, in Theory

All homiletic theories start from particular premises—theological and biblical convictions, claims about the nature and purpose of preaching, understandings of authority and interpretation, etc.—which in turn lead to various implications for practice. In that sense, different homiletic theories

realities to discern the demand the situation places on us, particularly in terms of faithful, theological response to that situation. See Don Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); David Tracy, “The Foundations of Practical Theology,” in *Practical Theology*, ed. Don Browning (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1982); Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church’s Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 37–40).

² Carol Lakey Hess, “Religious Education,” in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

emphasize and privilege different “essential tenets” in order to define the nature and purpose of preaching. What follows are the “essential tenets” of a relational homiletic that emerge from the theological and ethical claims I have made in previous chapters.

My relational homiletic begins from a *theological anthropology of relationality*, in which interhuman connection is understood as fundamental to the human person, and human identity and meaning are formed in relationship with others and the creation. Christian faith expresses this relationality in the idea of mutual belonging in the body of Christ, in which as differentiated individuals we belong to one another and open ourselves to each other in love, as God has done for us. This embrace of the “other” is extended to the whole creation. In a relational homiletic, *the very reality of our interrelatedness* is an orienting principle, a normative framework, and a way of conceiving practice and method, as well as a guard against totality and individualism.

Because relationality is intrinsic to the human person, *sin and redemption are intertwined with relationship*. Sin is demonstrated in the denial of relational interconnectedness and interdependence, including violations of others through abuse, violence, and oppression, as well as small, everyday indignities that reject the full humanity of others. Redemption, by contrast, is expressed in the restoration and deepening of relationships of mutuality, vulnerability, and agapic love, often exhibited through practices of compassion, humility, repentance, reparation, courage, and openness to the other.

In a relational homiletic, *the diverse creation is affirmed as a gift of God and a truth of reality*. Simultaneously, *tension and conflict are often the result of differences and incompatibilities that occur naturally in creation*. Each person is individual and intersubjective at once, and exists in varied contexts and systems that are also interconnected. Relationality is not demonstrated by constant unity or harmony, but in the recognition of the existence and reality of others, and of our interdependence together. To that end, diversity and particularity cannot be subsumed into an

illusion of false uniformity, especially if the impulse toward “oneness” is motivated by avoidance of the tensions and complexity of plurality, or in order to disregard differences.

One critical element of a relational homiletic is the theological category of *tragedy*, in which the differences and incompatibilities that we encounter as part of the finite human condition are considered tragic rather than resulting from sin or evil. This means that we do not need to respond to such conflicts with knee-jerk efforts to fix, control, or end them, because they do not necessarily demonstrate something “gone wrong.” Instead, we are freed to acknowledge and even lament the real suffering of tragedy and conflict, and to discern possible constructive responses, without misconstruing difference or its consequences. Incompatibilities and differences can cause anxiety, discomfort, and tension, and but we can develop capacities for responding to conflict with grace, reflection, curiosity, and a lack of defensiveness. To that end, a relational homiletic professes that *faithfulness is not measured by the presence or absence of such conflict in our relationships, but by the quality of our relational interaction and by the ways we choose to be in conflict together.*

Because it is focused on the interconnectedness of human beings and how we relate to each other, *a relational homiletic has particular relevance in situations of conflict and controversy.* In alignment with Christian conflict transformation, a relational homiletic resists the assumption that the presence of conflict indicates sin, or that conflict should be minimized or sidestepped. Yet discernment about the nature and purpose of conflict is essential, because not all forms of conflict are tragic: some *are* caused by human sinfulness, and sin can also infiltrate unavoidable conflict through our responses to it. In situations of conflict humans are prone to retreat to destructive postures of defense, hostility, and rigidity, and to become polarized and entrenched in their positions.

Conflict can also indicate the presence of injustice or oppression, and the need for social change to address the root causes. Paying attention to the reasons for conflict, who is involved (or excluded), the dynamics of power, and the contextual and historical foundations of the conflict are critical to responding constructively and toward transformational ends. Just, compassionate, equitable, mutual, and right relationships need to be manifested in *how* the conflict itself is addressed, not just in the intended goals. A relational homiletic affirms that the processes by which we engage conflict cannot subvert or contradict the desired ends: unjust means cannot produce justice, just as violence cannot produce peace.

By engaging constructively with and in conflict—rather than avoiding or suppressing it—conflict can become a catalyst for social and personal change and restitution. Following the theorists and practitioners of conflict transformation, a relational homiletic prioritizes wide participation and leadership in identifying and articulating the conflict situation, and in creating processes and trajectories for responding to it. A relational orientation envisions conflict as an opportunity to develop relationally-based spiritual gifts such as openness, curiosity, compassion, vulnerability, repentance, and communal reflection. Further, because conflict is a natural and ongoing part of human life together in communities of difference, a relational homiletic seeks to develop a culture of “comfort” with conflict, in which a rush to resolve conflict is replaced with a recognition of the nonlinearity, unpredictability, and open-endedness of conflict processes and transformation. In broad strokes, within a relational homiletic *the realities of conflict are a regular part of the life of discipleship*. Conflict requires discernment, wisdom, and courage as it taps into anxieties and fears that can drive us apart, while simultaneously having the potential to change us, our relationships, and the systems around us toward more just and faithful ways of interconnectedness.

Finally—and most significantly—a relational homiletic affirms that these commitments and orientations about relationality and its consequences for conflict *can be lived out in specific ways through preaching*. In its methods and practices, preaching can affirm and reinforce—or deny or contradict—these relational commitments. It is not that homiletical events are the *only* way in which theological expressions of relationality are made manifest in Christian life or in the ecclesial community, or that conflict should be dealt with exclusively—or even primarily—through the pulpit. But the theological and ethical questions of preachers who are dealing with situations of conflict are uniquely addressed by a relational homiletic.

In the next section in which I delineate the practical contours of a relational homiletic for conflict, I suggest concrete ways to embody the premises and convictions I have asserted as essential tenets. But as I conclude this initial overview of the theology of a relational homiletic, I reiterate a critical point: Christian practices and liturgical life have a formational impact on ecclesial communities. As I mentioned earlier, Christian practices enact the values of Christian faith and shape practitioners toward those beliefs and values. In recent decades, ecumenical studies in ecclesiology and ethics have likewise suggested that processes and practices in congregational life have an effect on individual *and corporate* formation:

Moral-spiritual formation in the church is of a distinctive kind. Effectively or not, with better or worse outcomes, Christian congregations engender certain ways of seeing life just by being the kinds of communities they are. Indeed, it is evident that ecclesiastical polities play out certain forms of life, certain ways of living which shape the way church members comport themselves in the world. There is no way of talking about “Christian ethics” without asking how the congregation functions in moral formation. We are asking about the actual thinking that goes on in these worshipping communities and about their capacity to shape people’s patterns of action. We are “formed” in specific ways in the community of faith, by its liturgy, its teaching the texture of its common life.³

³ Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra, eds., *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 56. In recent decades the World Council of Churches worked bring more fully into dialogue the “distinctive language and thought-forms” of ecclesiology (including koinonia, hope and memory, and liturgical and sacramental expression) and Christian ethics (Ibid., ix). Koinonia became key in these dialogues, in that it bridged the nature and being of the church with the church’s mission and action, leading to a desire to “recover the fundamental relationship between ethics and koinonia, between moral life and community” (Ibid., 9). An emerging

This statement points out the connection between how congregational life takes place and how we come to understand discipleship together as members of the body of Christ. The document from which this quotation comes goes on to suggest that liturgy itself can “*mal-form* the church as readily as it can form it in faith. Liturgy and worship may well perpetuate or legitimate unjust arrangements both within and outside ecclesial boundaries.”⁴ As a result, the document continues, “Serious attention must be given to the broader social context in which liturgy functions and to which the church belongs.”⁵ The analysis behind calls for conversational, collaborative, and otherwise preaching point to detrimental aspects of relationship and formation that preaching might be knowingly or unknowingly perpetuating. In the same vein, at the heart of a relational homiletic is the commitment to put, front and center, the question, “*What kinds of relationships are we to be about as diverse but interrelated beings, made in the image of God?*”

III. Relational Homiletics, in Practice

In *Speaking Together and with God*, John McClure names three ethical approaches to liturgical practices: strategic, which is success-oriented; instrumental, which is ends-oriented; and communicative, which is understanding-oriented. McClure focuses on the third, a communicative ethic, in which liturgical practices can “contribute to sincere, multiperspectival, empathic, and truth-seeking conversations regarding moral norms in an increasingly pluralistic world.”⁶ Following Jürgen Habermas’s ideas of ethically-rooted, consensus-seeking communication, McClure claims that liturgical communication “does not see others as means to an end, but as

conviction of these conversations became: “The church not only has, but is a social ethic, a *koinonia* ethic” (Ibid., 5).

⁴ Best and Robra, *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, 68. Author’s emphasis.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John S. McClure, *Speaking Together and with God: Liturgy and Communicative Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2018), xv.

companions involved in shared learning and commitment apart from any possible instrumental significance to strategic goals.”⁷

Like what McClure proposes for liturgics, a relational homiletic for conflict begins from an alternative ethical foundation. Rather than possible strategic or instrumental goals in preaching—transmitting a message, for instance, or persuading an audience—a relational homiletic is rooted in a *relational* ethic. This ethic follows conflict transformation, in which our responses to conflict (and indeed our encounters with others generally) are assessed by how we move together “toward more justice, and the people involved toward right and equal relationships.”⁸ A relational homiletic for conflict focuses the entire homiletic process around the kind of relationships that we see as characteristic of the body of Christ, and considers how preaching might develop those relationships within the whole of Christian life.

In the previous “theory” section, I distinguished between a relational homiletic in general, and how it might specifically be useful for situations of conflict. This distinction is somewhat misleading, however, and here I bring these streams fully into partnership. Because a relational homiletic is focused on the nature and quality of relational interaction as a primary expression of Christian faith and discipleship, conflict will always be part of the equation. Conflict is unavoidable in human life and encounters. A relational homiletic necessarily encompasses conflict because it embraces the whole of our interconnectedness and how we relate to each other as fellow human beings, including when we are in conflict. Conversely, attending to conflict is imperative in a relational homiletic because it is conflict itself that divides us—not only from each other, but from the belief that we are interrelated at all.

⁷ Ibid., xviii–xix.

⁸ Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 31.

One of the lessons from conflict transformation scholars is that conflict transformation “is more than learning new skills and techniques; it is a way of life. Peacebuilding comes from a deep place in the heart. It grows from genuine concern, love, and acceptance of other people.”⁹ As I wrote at the end of chapter 2, conflict transformation emerges from a relational orientation to all of life’s experiences: people with a relational orientation see themselves as immersed webs of interconnectedness, they prioritize quality interaction with others, and they intentionally cultivate those processes in their lives and foster the same in others. Similarly, a relational homiletic comprises deliberate actions and practices that foster intentional relational sensibilities, awareness, and responsiveness. First, preachers who operate from a relational homiletic affirm particular *convictions* about relationality and seek to align their preaching with these commitments. Second, relational preachers engage in formational *practices* that cultivate an awareness of relationality, comfort with the discomfort of difference and alterity, and moral imagination in the face of conflict. Third, relational preachers discern the implications of these commitments for sermons themselves—in the processes and methods of construction, in the words that are spoken, and in the dynamics of the ecclesiological and liturgical context in which preaching takes place.

A. Courage of Convictions

A relational homiletic emerges from four major convictions toward which homiletic practice is oriented. These convictions are intertwined and flow in and through each other, and together reflect the primary priorities and values of relational preaching.

Conviction 1: *Plurality and interconnectedness are fundamental realities of creation, and neither should be circumvented or dismissed by other truth claims.*

⁹ Kraybill, *Peace Skills*, 13–14.

The fundamental assertion that creation is diverse and interrelated is continually contested by totalizing arguments that elevate one way of being above all others, or that demand a false uniformity for the sake of an imposed illusion of unity and peace. Most of us are familiar with extreme claims to truth that ignore or reject diversity, such as expressions of white supremacy, as well as more subtle forms, like calls for “assimilation” of immigrants, or the failure to accommodate persons with disabilities in public spaces. But truth claims can also deny that we are interconnected, particularly in religious contexts. Lederach writes, “Religious faith and beliefs about the sacred amplify the search for and portrayal of truth. Religious truth emerges from and interacts with frames of reference that describe (or lend themselves to descriptions of) right and wrong, evil and threat.”¹⁰ When either-or claims of religious truth become intertwined with fear that other perspectives will dilute or threaten those claims, not only are we prone to elevate one concept of truth over all others, we can use such conflicts to deny our need for or connection to those who hold other beliefs. The history of Christian disunity and division—not to mention the horrors of slavery, apartheid, and martyrdom at the hands of other Christians—attest to this.

However, the claim that the fundamental reality of plurality and interconnectedness must not be superseded by other “truths” is not an acquiescence to relativity. Nor does it dismiss calls for justice and social change in the face of oppression and abuse. Plurality as a fact of life affirms the agency and individuality of each human person as unique, beautiful, and worthy of well-being. Simultaneously, interconnectedness signifies that we are responsible for one another, and that our well-being is tied to the well-being of others. Affirming plurality and affirming interconnectedness are *means by which* we call out injustice and oppression. They are also the

¹⁰ John Paul Lederach, “Spirituality and Religious Peacebuilding,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Atalia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 548.

measures by which we assess how and when we call for repentance, restitution, reparation, and reconciliation.

Conviction 2: Conflict is a natural and unavoidable dynamic in a world of plurality and interconnectedness, but our attitudes and responses to it are choices we make, and they have an impact on the outcomes.

In a world of diversity, proximity, and relationship, there is no escaping conflict. Theologically, we can understand conflict as tragic rather than evil, but this does not lessen its existence. Conflict just *is*. This means that we who live in a world of plurality and interconnectedness do not get to choose whether we experience conflict. But we do have a choice about what we believe about what conflict is and does, and what to do with those experiences.

Conflict transformation theorists affirm again and again that our orientation to conflict determines how we will respond to it, and what constructive possibilities it will contain. Bush and Folger offer a robust assertion of this claim in their book, and Thomas Porter confirms, “The truth is, conflict can be negative....The question we face is whether we can see conflict as potentially positive. I believe such an attitude will lead to less destructive and more constructive outcomes.”¹¹

Carolyn Schrock-Shenk is similarly direct:

Our basic understanding of conflict is critical because it determines how we will respond. If we believe conflict with spouse, coworker, or church family is unnatural, inappropriate, or wrong, then we become ashamed or embarrassed when we find ourselves in conflict situations. And when something is shameful or embarrassing, we generally try to avoid it, deny its presence, or do whatever we need to do to get through it fast. As a consequence,

¹¹ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 12. In a manual on engaging conflict well, Porter and co-writer Stephanie Hixon say, “Attitudes to conflict determine whether our response to conflict is destructive or constructive....The usual attitude is that conflict is bad, wrong or inevitably destructive. This attitude leads to defensiveness, fear and anxiety, and to the fight-or-flight response to the perceived threat. ...To transform conflict in a positive way, we must be prepared with a constructive attitude, working to break the cycle of negative reactions and violence and being on the healing-edge” (Thomas W. Porter and Stephanie Hixon, “Engage Conflict Well: A Guide to Prepare Yourself and Engage Others in Conflict Transformation” (JustPeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, 2011), 1, accessed April 4, 2017, <https://justpeaceumc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Engage-Conflict-Well.pdf>).

there is little motivation to learn healthy skills and processes for dealing with conflict. Why learn to deal constructively with something that shouldn't be happening in the first place?¹²

In church settings, the unspoken theological belief persists that conflict itself, rather than our responses to it, is the sign of things gone wrong. In his book *Reconcile*, Lederach offers a tongue-in-cheek list of “unspoken commandments” for churches in conflict. It includes items like “Thou shalt be nice,” “Thou shalt not listen to thine enemy but shalt prepare thy defense while the enemy is still speaking,” and “Dear Christian sisters and brothers, in a holy nutshell I say unto ye all, though shalt not have conflict in the church.”¹³ The list pokes fun, but it reflects real dynamics of church behavior in situations of conflict, including creative forms of denial, avoidance, and theological self-justification. The messiness and pain of conflict trigger our desire to escape it.¹⁴ But in a complicated and diverse world, it is theologically and ethically untenable to assess what is faithful based on what we hope to avoid, or what makes us uncomfortable. Nor is it acceptable to “adjust our theology to match what we actually do.”¹⁵

Thus this conviction asserts more than the importance of learning and practicing skills to respond to conflict constructively; in a deeper sense, constructive responses require certain beliefs about conflict and its potential for good. One Christian conflict transformation practitioner put it in terms of belief itself: “It is an *act of faith* to believe that conflict can be generative, that it can be the raw material for growth, a catalyst for positive change.”¹⁶ This is what is meant by conflict transformation theorists who articulate the importance of the *orientation* one takes toward conflict.

¹² Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 29.

¹³ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 144–146.

¹⁴ Theologian Michele Saracino notes that “In order to follow the gospel mandate to live with others, one has no other option but to negotiate complicated emotional situations” (Saracino, *Being about Borders*, 9). This is affirmed by Schrock-Shenk, who writes that the first step toward making constructive choices in conflict is to separate feelings from actions. It is not that feelings are unimportant or should be dismissed, but that “The actions we choose, not our spontaneous feelings, determine whether conflict will be constructive or destructive” (Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict,” 30).

¹⁵ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 146.

¹⁶ Jean E Greenwood, “‘We Touched Grace’: Spiritual Dimensions of Conflict Transformation,” *Congregations* 32, no. 3 (2006): 34. Emphasis mine.

Just as relational homiletics reflects a deliberate choice to prioritize relational connection and processes, relational homiletics also affirms the positive and transformational possibilities that can emerge from conflict. In both conflict transformation and relational homiletics, what we believe has a bearing on whether or not transformational relational outcomes are possible.

Conviction 3: *Because conflict carries the potential to divide us, our responses to conflict bear significant theological and ethical weight.*

The more conflict escalates and becomes destructive, the more relational connections are threatened. As parties involved feel questioned or become defensive, they shift from seeing the conflict as a shared responsibility to seeing the other party as the problem itself. Lederach writes, “If we primarily or exclusively operate with the idea that the other person is the problem, the solutions are to change the person, to get away from the person, or in the worst scenario, to get rid of the person.”¹⁷ As tensions rise, “we tend to move away from discussion of controversial issues and away from those who do not agree with us.”¹⁸ The original issues become less specific, and parties in conflict resort to stereotypes and generalizations to make defensive points. The parties become polarized and interact primarily with people like them. Middle ground between the sides disappears, and oppositional parties restrict their interactions to those in their “in-group.”¹⁹ Eventually, even the idea of engaging with people on the “other side” becomes suspect or a sign of disloyalty, making the possibility of bridgebuilding across the polarized divide nearly impossible. The narratives that each side tells itself become simplistic and dualistic, justifying “our” side and

¹⁷ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 147.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁹ Lederach, “Spirituality and Religious Peacebuilding,” 547.

denigrating the enemy, and eventually leading to a complete dismissal of the worth and even the humanity of other people and perspectives.²⁰

Destructive conflict as described above works against both the pluralism and interconnectedness of creation. As conflict interaction deteriorates between the parties, they deny their interconnectedness and internally validate and uphold only their own perspectives. This becomes a reason to justify segregation and isolation from others; increasingly, others are seen as dangerous and depraved, which in turn confirms their unworthiness. Pluralism is likewise abandoned by the various factions as the opinions and narratives of each group narrow and are perceived as more ideologically pure and virtuous than others. As groups remain antagonistic, polarized, and cut off from each other, they begin to believe that the only solution to the conflict is the elimination of the other side. However, as theologians and conflict transformation scholars alike assert, "I am not independent, but interdependent. If my opponent is eliminated, something of my self is lost. Lost as well is the possibility of repentance in the pursuit of justice, the hope of achieving reconciliation, the transformation of right social relationships, and the gift of undeserved forgiveness from God."²¹

Wholesale avoidance of conflict does not offer a much of an alternative. While there are reasons why we might avoid particular conflicts in certain settings or situations, to consistently

²⁰ Complexity and accuracy are casualties of protracted conflict: "To sustain [ingroup] cohesion, ambiguity must be minimized if not eliminated. Thus, in periods of sharp polarization, little room exists for internal disagreement within an identity group, and very little interaction with alternative views of complex histories and events is sought or socially sanctioned. Sustained over time, and reinforced by periods of violence, this social polarization can create a shift in goals. Rather than focus on addressing originating issues in order to arrive at an understanding with an adversary, people in settings of protracted conflicts often conclude they must separate completely from the other community or eliminate them in order to survive and find safety. ...Deep suspicion bordering on paranoia is not the outcome of twisted perceptions produced by irrational emotions. Rather, sustained and deeply held suspicion functions as a method of survival in a context with a great deal of unpredictability" (Ibid., 548).

²¹ Larry A. Dunn, "Transforming Identity in Conflict," in *Making Peace With Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation*, ed. Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 44.

pretend conflict does not exist or is not important is a losing strategy.²² When the constant response to conflict is avoidance, it will “eventually result in the death of the relationship or in pressure which builds to the point of explosion.”²³ Moreover, as conflict transformation scholars make clear, tamping down or minimizing conflict tends to benefit the status quo and the maintenance of systems and structures of power, which thwarts efforts toward social change and justice, and silences voices of those who suffer under the inequities of those power systems.²⁴

Relational homiletics asserts that conflict requires deliberate and thoughtful responses that prioritize retaining our connection to others, and attending to the multiplicity and complexity of the situation and of those involved.²⁵ But this is not merely a pragmatic choice based on conflict transformation theory. It is a theological and ethical conviction that gives central place to Christian affirmations of our interconnectedness to and formation in relationship with other human beings, the whole of creation, and God—resisting that which claims, “I have no need of you.”²⁶ It likewise affirms the ethical responsibilities of care and obligation toward others in their particularity and

²² People avoid conflict for many reasons, including that the presenting conflict is not of particular importance, or we might be “picking our battles” and declining to get involved in one conflict because we are saving energy for other fights (Littlejohn and Domenici, *Communication, Conflict, and the Management of Difference*, 78). I am arguing, however, that *always* avoiding conflict—because it is uncomfortable, or seen as sin, for example—is problematic. Similarly, Marshall also notes while that there are good reasons to avoid conflict at times, one poor one is the “fear of the risk that [conflict] entails. I see in conflict something that is disruptive and beyond my control; engaging conflict thus requires a willingness to risk” (Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 40).

²³ Lawrence Ressler, “Keys to Problem Solving,” in *Making Peace With Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation*, ed. Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 102.

²⁴ As Marshall puts it, “Conflict plays a crucial role in the work of justice, and Christians must neither avoid it nor respond to it violently. Like reconciliation, resistance is a ministry for Christians concerned with the least of these” (Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 23).

²⁵ Saracino argues that our emotional responses to encountering others must not be merely tolerated, but encouraged. She continues, “When one tolerates the disruptive gestures, tones, and changes in affect of another, one merely waits and hopes someone passively for the uncomfortable moment to cease. More than likely, unless dealt with or at least admitted, negative feelings, regardless of where they originate, will reappear. So instead of merely tolerating borders [between ourselves and others] and the emotional dissonance they bring, we need to seek these uncomfortable places out—encourage them—in an effort to meet the other in all their difference and similarity” (Saracino, *Being about Borders*, 36).

²⁶ 1 Cor 12:21.

uniqueness—opposing hierarchies of worthiness or dignity, or any totalizing vision that seeks to erase differences.

Conviction 4: *Practices can shape our responses to the challenges of encountering others in a world of difference and conflict.*

This fourth conviction affirms two important principles: first, Christian practices have the capacity to shape us toward particular ways of being in the world as disciples of Christ. For Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, Christian practices are deeply intertwined with a way of life that corresponds to God’s desire for abundant life for all. When engaging in such practices, Christians take part in “God’s work of creation and new creation,” and grow into a “deeper knowledge of God and of creation.”²⁷ Christian practices form us in ways that are “commensurate with that practice”; the practice of healing, for instance, develops attention to physical needs, symptoms, and remedies, as well as compassion and concern for the pain and suffering of others.

The second principle affirmed by this conviction is that because Christian practices reflect God’s life-giving intentions for creation and cooperate with God in addressing the needs of others and creation, they are also important ways we prepare ourselves to resist and counteract that which is not in alignment with God’s will. Christian practices instill patterns and *habitus* that can shape us to respond to complicated and difficult life situations with thoughtfulness and deliberation.²⁸ These naturally will be at odds with conventional wisdom or societal norms when those norms are, for instance, strictly self-serving or competitive rather than collaborative and

²⁷ Dykstra and Bass, “A Theological Understanding,” 21.

²⁸ *Habitus* refers to “a person’s basically stable ‘dispositions’—beliefs, recurrent and unconscious scripts for behaviour, body movements and postures that are likely to guide that person’s choices of action in any given situation....One’s habitus is not a form of behaviour that can be switched on or off by the person, nor is it entirely unique to each individual since it represents inherited structures of thought and action.” But these are also behaviors and orientations that can be shaped by practices, such as in the church, which can “inculcate aspects of a person’s habitus” (Helen Cameron et al., eds., *Studying Local Churches* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 49.

focused on abundant life for all. Christian practices not only have the power to shape us toward God's purposes, they also help us discern God's intentions amid temptations and impulses that would have us do otherwise.²⁹

B. Transforming Practices

Given the assertion that practices can help cultivate a relational orientation in conflict situations, which practices might be important in a relational homiletic? I suggest four formational practices for preachers to help develop and deepen understanding and expression of relationality and interconnectedness, which in turn will impact homiletic thinking and processes.³⁰

1. Learning to be Other-Wise

In a sense, the entirety of a relational homiletic rests on the ability of preachers and listeners to see ourselves as interconnected with others, as part of a web of relationship even with our enemies.³¹

Therefore, *the first practice of a relational homiletic is to build relationships with whomever we consider "others."*³² If most of those we come into contact with are Christian, we should get to

²⁹ In light of the assessments of Christian conflict transformation specialists, it also seems apropos for conflict transformation *itself* to be considered a Christian practice, because it not only theologically attends to real issues of life, it is transformational for those who practice it. Marshall quotes several practitioners describing conflict transformation processes as bringing people to deeper recognition of the presence of God in themselves and one another, a "divine spark," which in turn makes it possible for them to "risk the work of healing and restoration," including that "God's loving presence in these tense and risky places gives these Christian practitioners faith that conflict can be generative" (Marshall, "Conflict, God and Constructive Change," 13).

³⁰ These practices, of course, could also be pursued as communal exercises within congregations, as well.

³¹ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 34.

³² I want to make clear that I am not suggesting that persons who have been abused or victimized need to rebuild relationships with their abusers. I am focused in this particular practice on *engaging with people who are different than we are* for the purpose of learning about them, decentering our own perspectives and privilege, and training ourselves not to respond to others out of fear or suspicion. I am also convinced that in order to eliminate the possibility of dehumanizing others we have to strongly assert that no one is beyond redemption, and no one is deserving of being treated without dignity and respect—even those who have wronged us. Put another way, the solution to being made to feel less than human can never be to return the same to the other, because we have then lost any sense of the face of the other. Deeper questions of

know folks at a local synagogue or mosque. If our friends are primarily of the same racial/ethnic background, we need to invest in learning about the lives and cultures of people who come from a different context. If police violence is plaguing our community, we need to hear from both people in the communities who feel victimized and police officers who feel justified in their actions. The broad intent across these situations is to remain open to understanding more fully the experiences of people whose lives are different from ours.

Building relationships with others in this way is not merely an exercise in making friends across difference (though it is that). Having diverse connections increases our awareness of the *kinds of difference* that we encounter, from communication and language to power dynamics to cultural and social customs to epistemological orientations. The more difference we encounter, the more we are reminded of that which we do not know, which cultivates in us a sense of humility and, in Wendy Farley's words, an awareness of the "exteriority of others" in which we recognize that which is beyond our own self and experience.³³ Such acknowledgement de-centers our reality—not to repress or purge our own self, but to make room in the self to open to the reality of the other.³⁴ Coupled with this acknowledgment is an increased capacity to be comfortable with discomfort. Repeated and continual openness to the diversity of others helps us acclimate to feelings of anxiety or tension that can accompany encountering something new and unfamiliar.³⁵

forgiveness, punishment, repentance, and restoration are beyond the scope of what I can attend to in full, though I am aware that they lurk in the shadows.

³³ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 190.

³⁴ Wendy Farley uses the word "attention," saying it "describes the exteriorizing quality present in any practice that moves beyond simply 'opening one's eyes' and relocates consciousness away from oneself and toward others....Attentiveness to others in their distinctive reality and concrete needs enables one to understand them better, with greater complexity and profundity, and to become more adequately responsive" (Ibid., 191–192).

³⁵ Saracino claims that attention to how difference makes us feel is another key element of responding to difference constructively. She writes, "As long as we ignore our feelings toward difference—the positive or the negative ones and even the ones somewhere in the middle—we cannot engage those who are different in life-giving ways. It is not enough to say we are all different and as a result have nothing to talk about, or that we are all the same and thus have everything to celebrate. Instead, we must honor the reality that we are hybrid individuals and groups with a plurality of stories that overlap and intertwine with one another,

Further, encountering and being in relationship with others can cultivate curiosity about and delight in the newness and mystery of others, rather than fear and suspicion. When we have engaged with people of diverse backgrounds, we are less likely to buy into cultural and social stereotyping because we know people who do not fit those stereotypes. We are more likely to give people the benefit of the doubt if we are aware of multiple ways in which people interact and communicate, because we can imagine that their intent is not what we perceived from our own constructs. Encountering people who exhibit beauty, creativity, and artistry we had not previously known can awaken in us a desire to learn about them and their ways of seeing the world. Experiences like these help develop to an “eros” orientation toward others, in which unfamiliarity and difference are seen as potentially wonderful and enticing rather than dangerous, and which sets aside apprehension and distrust of what is unknown in favor of anticipating “the wonderfulness of something’s existence.”³⁶

Compassion grows from this delight in the other. Because we have seen that the other is a human being and we are intertwined in relationship with that human being who is both like us and different, we cannot turn away when the other with whom we are interrelated is suffering. Further, when we see ourselves in webs of relationship with all people and all of creation, even when we have been victimized, abused, or rejected we refuse to return evil for evil and instead choose to overcome wrongdoing rather than punish it.³⁷ The practice of building relationships with others thus frees us from fear, opens our minds to possibilities beyond what is familiar, cultivates humility, awakens delight and enjoyment of the richness others bring to our lives, and leads us to compassion with and for the other in times of suffering.

leading to operatic moments that need to be embraced in order for genuine and life-giving relationships to develop” (Saracino, *Being about Borders*, 3).

³⁶ Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 80.

³⁷ This idea emerges in Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 85. I find Farley’s articulation helpful, because she neither excuses sin and wrongdoing nor allows our response to include a perpetuation or escalation of the evil already done.

2. Imagining Things

A second practice of a relational homiletic builds from two aspects of the moral imagination articulated by Lederach, namely that of paradoxical curiosity, which values the possibility of newness embedded in seemingly dichotomous and contradictory elements, and making space for the creative act, which is rooted in a fundamental belief that creativity is possible. These two elements emerge from the idea that the forces of conflict push toward toward dualism and simplicity, but that more is possible than meets the eye. Building the capacity to live with ambiguity, respecting (rather than diminishing) complexity, and sustaining a creative inquisitiveness about unseen alternatives are critical skills for the transformation of conflict. Using this trajectory for a relational homiletic, I suggest the practice of *anticipating another way*.

Anticipating another way is the spiritual discipline of remaining open to the possibility that other options exist besides those that are presented, especially in the dualistic patterns of conflict. Rather than immediately choosing to take a side, anticipating another way suggests that creative solutions can be possible that can encompass the concerns of all involved, especially by looking for possibility in the complexities themselves. This reflects a resistance to the dualistic trajectories *and* to the idea that conflict requires taking a side instead of prioritizing the continuation and quality of the relational interaction itself. Here, again, rises the importance of *belief*; believing that another way is possible is key to making space for it to appear. Anticipating another way is a mode of approaching difficult realities that takes them seriously while not being narrowly bound to the parameters they offer.

In a relational homiletic, this practice also reflects a posture of non-resignation in the face of conflict. Instead of acquiescing to a conflict as it is presented, anticipating another way opens up other avenues of inquiry and understanding, seeks new ways to conceive of the issues at hand, and digs more deeply into history or context for rich resources of contemplation, all with the

intention of enhancing the quality of relational interaction among the parties.³⁸ In homiletics, anticipating another way also means not being bound by traditional sermon models that might be stuck in unhelpful modes of communication when, for instance, artistic or aesthetic approaches might open the conversation in toward new and unexplored horizons. Anticipating another way not only uses but values the gifts of imagination and innovation. As Lederach puts it, “The challenge for invoking the moral imagination as a peacebuilder is not found in perfecting or applying the techniques or skills of a process. My feeling is that we have overemphasized the technical aspects...to the detriment of the art of giving birth to and keeping a process creatively alive.”³⁹ Relational homiletics similarly seeks ways to keep processes of spiritual reflection and engagement with the other creatively alive.

3. Empowering Humility

The third practice of a relational homiletic is the *cultivation of vulnerability and humility*. Humility and its corollary vulnerability are not often perceived as positions of strength or power. They don’t *feel* strong, because they appear hesitant or indecisive rather than clear and tough. By definition, vulnerability seems to suggest helplessness and weakness. In a relational homiletic, however, the practices of humility and vulnerability are postures of conviction and courage. They are deliberate choices to remain open to the other, while also telling the truth and refusing to be drawn into that which would diminish the self or the other.

³⁸ Lederach also suggests seeing the immediate conflict as a “window” through which to see more deeply into the situation, focusing on what lies behind it. He writes, “The key to this practice requires three disciplines: 1) the ability to look and see beyond the presenting issues; 2) an empathy that allows one to understand the situation of another (person or group) but not be drawn into the spin of their anxieties and fears; and 3) a capacity to create avenues of response that take seriously the presenting issues but are not driven by the need for quick solutions” (Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 48–49).

³⁹ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 70.

An example of this practice comes from St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, who wrote that Christians must be ready to “save the proposition of the other.”⁴⁰ This means that, in conversation or conflict with others, we adopt postures of wanting to learn and understand rather than wanting to win. When the other makes a statement or proposition with which we disagree, our goal is not immediately to defeat it, but to instead recognize that it must be something truly important to the other, and to be more willing to come to a good interpretation together than to condemn it as false.⁴¹ In essence, this is the practice of giving the other the benefit of the doubt, and “if you’re not sure what the person means, you should, says Ignatius, ‘ask how the other means it.’”⁴² Each begins from the assumption that the other is trying to do his or her best. In so doing, we try to discover the good of what is conveyed in the other’s proposition, and thus to “save” it.

Similarly, Lederach argues for a “spiritual discipline of vulnerability” that holds together transparent honesty and sincerity about one’s convictions, and a humility that “remains permanently open to learning and insight, and regards the other as holding potential for sharing wisdom.”⁴³ We do not relinquish speaking our own truth, but neither do we assume the other has no truth to offer. This spiritual discipline of vulnerability recognizes that truth can be fully expressed within a relational construct that also affirms diversity and interconnectedness, and that these elements do not necessarily have to be placed in opposition or hierarchy. In the context of conflict, a valuable but less visible element is the possibility of *compromise*, specifically that a person involved in conflict might decide “to hold back deeply held convictions that might be

⁴⁰ This explanation of the Presupposition from St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* is retold by Thomas Porter (Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 49–50).

⁴¹ This orientation does not mean that false statements should go uncorrected; instead, the person making the statement should be asked how they understand it, and if it is incorrect, the truth should be discussed “with love,” and efforts made to come to an interpretation that can be “saved” (Ibid., 49).

⁴² James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012), 234.

⁴³ Lederach, “Spirituality and Religious Peacebuilding,” 558.

experienced as offensive for the other *in order to open and sustain a relationship*.”⁴⁴ In other words, is possible *and even faithful* to choose to set aside particular expressions of truth for relational purposes, such as to protect common ground between people or achieve immediate goals like reducing tensions or keeping the conversation going.

These kinds of choices emerge from practices of humility and vulnerability, but are rooted in the powerful dynamic of *choice*. As Bush and Folger point out, in conflict situations people feel disempowered, weak, and disconnected from the other, while what they desire is to end that cycle and restore their own strength and responsiveness to the other. Feeling empowered to make choices about how to respond to the other—rather than feeling compelled into defensive postures or destructive escalation of conflict—makes possible “outcomes that are just and reasonable *in the parties’ own eyes* and therefore will bring real satisfaction and closure, and stand up over time.”⁴⁵ Choosing to practice vulnerability and humility and to approach others from these postures can be centered and empowering choices that set in motion constructive and life-giving interactions, even in conflict.

4. Listening Well

The first sentence of the first chapter of the first book published from the *Listening to Listeners* study reads, “Many preachers long to understand the dynamics of thought, feeling, and behavior at work in their congregations.”⁴⁶ What is striking about this sentence—and even the title *Listening to Listeners* itself—is that it reveals how little the idea of *listening* is integrated into the practice of preaching. As they prepare sermons, preachers are, of course, supposed to listen for God’s word and keep in mind the needs of the congregation. But with a few exceptions, the idea of *listening* in

⁴⁴ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁵ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 250.

⁴⁶ Allen et al., *Listening to Listeners*, 5.

homiletics tends to be related to best practices for composition and delivery of a sermon so that it will be best received.⁴⁷

Listening as a practice of relational homiletics, is somewhat different. Nearly every book on conflict transformation describes the importance of listening in order to understand the other, always coupled with the possibility that the listener will be changed by the encounter. Following conflict transformation, the practice of listening in relational homiletics is not aimed toward the goal of preaching a better, more effective sermon. Instead, preachers *practice listening well because it shapes us as people who want to understand others with whom we are interconnected but who are different from us*. Listening well helps us “acknowledge that God speaks to us through the other” and “creates the possibility of learning and being changed, enriching our lives.”⁴⁸ One peacebuilder uses the phrase “prophetic listening” to describe “listening to others in such a way that we draw out of them the seeds of their own highest understanding, their own obedience, their own vision—seeds that they themselves may not have known were there.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ One example of this phenomenon is the approach of Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, who focuses on preaching that is intentionally contextual. She rightly asserts the need for pastors to have greater contextual attentiveness and be able to “interpret” their congregation’s sociocultural realities. But this engagement with the experiences and perspectives of the congregation is still for the purpose of a more easily-received sermon. She writes, “While many homileticians do recognize that congregations ‘matter’ in the preaching event, they usually fall short of providing the pastor with either a workable model for identifying and analyzing congregational subcultural differences, or with an adequate discussion of the import of congregational particularity for the theological construction and artistic design of the sermon” (Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 18–19).

⁴⁸ Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 41. Wesley Allen comes close to offering this kind of orientation to listening from the perspective of homiletics. He frames the preacher’s work of listening as “reciprocal,” as in, “if [the preacher] wishes to be heard, she listens to others proclaim their experience and interpretation of God, self, and the world, just like everyone else who participates in the sacred conversation of meaning making in the church.” But, he says, reciprocal listening is “risky, open-minded, willing-and-wanting-to-be-converted listening. The preacher actively participates in the conversations not only as (or even primarily as) a professional clergyperson charged with the vocational task of leading a congregation in its ministries but as a Christian struggling to make meaning of God, self, and the world....Indeed, [the preacher] must existentially embrace other voices in the congregation as proclamation offered to him” (O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 41–42).

⁴⁹ Elise Boulding, *One Small Plot of Heaven: Reflections on Family Life by a Quaker Sociologist* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1989), 172; quoted in Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 41.

Listening in conflict transformation is also a means by which to come to new collective understanding and insight. Lederach describes the experience of being with people in conflict who are struggling with violence, grief, trauma, and loss, and who talk around and around about the same things, jumping through words and images, emotion and misunderstanding. But sometimes, an insightful synthesis can cut through to the core. “When a participant or mediator captures the complexity of the experience in a few words,” he writes, “it is as if a haiku has been written, a small canvas painted, the notes of a melody floated. And there is an organic sense of ‘ah-ha. That is it.’”⁵⁰ The group is able to come together in recognizing what they have been describing, and they feel heard and recognized. “Listening,” Lederach continues, “is the discipline and art of capturing the complexity of history in the simplicity of deep intuition. It is attending to a sharp sense of what things mean.”⁵¹

Lederach suggests that listening should be understood as a spiritual discipline because it is more than mere “technique” that can be used simply to get information. Instead, listening as a spiritual discipline “bubbles up from genuine love” and care for the other.⁵² Deep listening, he writes, “involves personal risk. In actively caring and seeking to truly interact with you, my experience and journey will be affected, shaped, and molded. I will learn something of you and something of me.”⁵³ In this way, listening is like prayer, which is less about a formula of words and more about attentive awareness and discipline based on relationship and love, which can then open up an ongoing space for interaction, transparency, and understanding.⁵⁴ Within a relational

⁵⁰ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 70.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* From his experiences, Lederach offers ideas about how to capture these complexities. One suggestion he makes is to capture the heart of what is going on in fewer than eight words, or to literally write a haiku to capture the essence. Rather than this being a reduction, he sees these as *synthesis* that can hold complexity and simplicity together and to capture both in an ah-ha image. Lederach also suggests listening for poetry, images, and metaphors in conversation, especially those related to conflict, and writing them down as expressions of how people create, shape, and make sense of their realities (*Ibid.*, 71–72).

⁵² Lederach, *Reconcile*, 119.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

homiletic, the art of listening is a formational practice of care and of learning, and of other-orientation that seeks to discover the wisdom of God in interactions with others. As with the other practices, it helps shift our thinking away from seeing others instrumentally, as objects, and toward intersubjectivity with other beings in relationship.

C. Discerning Implications

Conflicts are not isolated, discrete incidents, but are an ongoing part of life—continual and ever-changing opportunities for learning, growth, and the deepening of relationships. Conflict transformation is thus an ongoing process of discernment that attends to the content, context, and structure of relationships, and creates constructive processes for change through conflict.⁵⁵

Marshall puts it this way:

What happens...when we see conflict as a persistent feature of human life, not an episode or a circumstance to address periodically? Now the question shifts from identifying the right resources for the right moment to thinking more fully about living a good life with conflict as a constant feature. The contextual features—the particulars—about conflict vary, of course, but the experience of striking together is a constant in our lives. How do we live a good life in the midst of ongoing conflict?⁵⁶

This is how the question now shifts for a relational homiletic, as well. What does preaching look like in the midst of ongoing conflict? How does preaching address the good life with conflict as a constant feature? In this last section, I respond to these questions with concrete ways a relational homiletic can be expressed in the function, form, and content of sermons.

1. Aligning Means and Ends

Tom Long argues that the function of a sermon describes “what the preacher hopes the sermon will create or cause to happen for the hearers. Sermons make demands upon the hearers, which is

⁵⁵ Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 12.

⁵⁶ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 24.

another way of saying that they provoke change in the hearers (even if that change is a deepening of something already present).⁵⁷ The function is this hoped-for change, and it emerges from the claim the particular biblical text being exegeted makes on the preacher and the community (i.e. what the text “intends to say” in the context of the congregation in this time and place).⁵⁸

In a relational homiletic, the function of preaching is in its broadest sense *to deepen the nature and quality of our relationships*, because it begins from a guiding theological anthropology of relationality. This function is not in opposition to exegesis or biblical interpretation; Christian preaching emerges from study of and engagement with the biblical text, and that interpretation of the Bible provides content and shape to the sermon.⁵⁹ Thus a relational homiletic does not question the role of the Bible in preaching, but is instead an overarching predisposition through which biblical interpretation and proclamation take place. Because a relational homiletic emerges from a commitment to fostering interconnectedness with others, it prioritizes relational values in its process, form, and content (just as a transmissional orientation to preaching would prioritize that which best gets a message across to the hearer).

To that end, a significant question for a relational homiletic has to do with the alignment of the means and ends of preaching. Relational ends require relational means and methods—not least because strong relational processes are often the goal. In conflict transformation in particular, the means and processes by which transformation is accomplished are often in the establishment and continuation of relational processes themselves, and in the alignment of stated and practiced

⁵⁷ Long, *Witness of Preaching*, 108–109.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 108. Long continues, “The focus and function statements [that guide the sermon] should grow directly from the exegesis of the biblical text” (*Ibid.*, 109).

⁵⁹ I follow Long’s definition of biblical preaching, in which “preaching is biblical whenever the preacher allows a text from the bible to serve as the leading force in shaping the content and purpose of the sermon,” (Long, *Witness of Preaching*, 52ff). McClure suggests that biblical hermeneutics, the “art of placing the biblical text into conversation with contemporary theology and life,” includes five primary approaches for preaching—three that are text centered, one that is theology-centered, and one that is context-centered (McClure, *Preaching Words*, 47–48). Any of these approaches to biblical hermeneutics can be used within a relational homiletic.

values, methods, and goals. Similarly, relational preaching for conflict transformation assesses the dynamics of the conflict it seeks to address, which then suggests ways to orient processes and outcomes to respond to those conflict dynamics.

Conflict Dynamic 1: Conflict Culture

A relational homiletic sees preaching as a means by which conflict can be normalized (rather than avoided) and come to be seen as constructive within the life of a congregation. Sermons alone cannot change congregational culture, nor can conflict be dealt with solely through preaching. A comprehensive strategy is necessary to transform a congregation's understanding of and approach to conflict away from "conflict is sin." However, preaching *can* be an orienting force for congregational norms and practices. As such, sermons play a role in changing congregational understandings of conflict toward seeing it as normal and potentially constructive, and sermons can model and reflect ways in which conflict can be transformational.

A first consideration for preachers is to shift their thinking away from envisioning conflict as issue-based, and toward seeing conflict as a natural result of difference. With that mindset, sermons can be crafted not to tackle controversial "issues" as such, but to address instead the question, *how do we faithfully respond to differences?* This question provides several important perspectives. First, we—as preachers and Christians—can release our need to *resolve* the presenting issue, or to make a case for our opinion, and can instead consider the conflict as part of larger relational and social systems in which all sides are imbedded. Second, this question helps to normalize the idea that differences cause conflict and are part of a life of faith, and that we can respond to conflict without ignoring or minimizing difference. Third, by focusing on faithful response to differences, we can consider the ethical and moral positions held by persons on various sides, which is how we understand the complexities of conflict more fully and discern a

faithful response. Fourth, each of these helps to preserve the relationality between and among us in the midst of conflict while also not avoiding the conflict itself. We are less likely to demonize the other, for instance, when we are focused on responding faithfully to differences than if we are trying to get other people to see our side of the issue.

Within this framework, rather than having to assert a position the preacher can provide the congregation with tools for discernment and response. For instance, the preacher could articulate theological understandings of power and its responsible use as a means to assess the power dynamics of a controversial situation. As an example, Marshall couches her approach to the ethics of conflict by saying:

Striking together, no matter how natural it is, is fraught with danger, and those dangers are compounded by issues of power and proximity. The costs of conflict land heaviest on those who are least powerful and closest to the dispute. When we reflect on contexts of conflict from a distance or from a position of comfort, we need to be particularly mindful of this. This is one reason why I privilege the perspective of victims of violence.⁶⁰

Marshall uses the lenses of danger and victimization when she assesses “difference,” which leads her to focus her attention on those most likely to be harmed by violence. Preachers can give congregations tools like this that help them judge the ethical or moral consequences of conflict situations without having to resolve the conflict for them. This approach does not preclude preachers from taking a stand on a moral or ethical issue, either. But the preacher considers that stand from within the construct of difference *first*, rather than starting from right and wrong, or good and evil. This helps limit the temptation to equate the opinion or motivation of another person with a judgment about their personhood, allowing for disagreement and relationality to be held together.

Sermons focused on how to respond faithfully to difference also give priority to *understanding* difference, which includes how different perspectives originate, and the real-life

⁶⁰ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 4.

consequences of different ways of responding to the world. This approach resists stereotyping others even as it names the ways in which we can be injured or damaged by how others respond to us. Moreover, we cannot respond faithfully to difference without speaking honestly about our emotions—including fear, anger, frustration, and grief. In situations of conflict, Lederach writes,

People need opportunity and space to express to and with one another the trauma of loss and their grief at that loss, and the anger that accompanies the pain and the memory of the injustices experienced. Acknowledgement is decisive in the reconciliation dynamic. It is one thing to *know*; it is yet a very different social phenomenon to *acknowledge*. Acknowledgement through hearing one another's stories validates experience and feelings and represents the first step toward restoration of the person and the relationship.⁶¹

Reconciliation requires honesty and acknowledgment of the truth of what conflict can mean; acknowledging difference and its impact, including its emotion, is part of the ongoing reality of conflict in human life.

Conflict Dynamic 2: Recognition and Empowerment

Participants in conflict frequently feel powerless, weak, uncertain, and disconnected from and hostile toward others, especially those with whom they disagree. Because relational homiletics is based in a fundamental understanding of humans as interconnected and diverse, relational preaching seeks opportunities for *empowerment* and *recognition* (as articulated by Bush and Folger), which can shift conflict from destructive to more constructive paths. Briefly, empowerment shifts are moments in which people in conflict regain a sense of their own value and strength, and recognize their capacity for decision making and problem solving. Recognition shifts are moments that evoke acknowledgment, understanding, or empathy for the situation or the other.⁶² Taken together, these shifts can help the people involved in conflict understand

⁶¹ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 26.

⁶² Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 22.

themselves and relate to one another through and within conflict interaction, rather than being driven further apart and toward deeper uncertainty and separation.⁶³

In relational preaching, the process of crafting the sermon, as well as its delivery, prioritizes empowerment and recognition. A sermon could include illustrations or stories of others experiencing empowerment and recognition, but this in some ways misses the point; empowerment and recognition are experienced by those involved in the conflict situation, which is what transforms the process. In conflict transformation, a mediator does not describe empowerment and recognition, but instead looks for places—or opportunities—to support the shifts taking place.⁶⁴ A more transformational approach in preaching, then, would consider how empowerment and recognition experiences of the congregation members themselves could be supported in and through the sermon process.

For preachers who use a roundtable approach as described by McClure, moments of empowerment and recognition could occur in the sermon roundtable discussion during the week, and then be represented in the sermon on Sunday. Similarly, Leah D. Schade describes a sermon-dialogue-sermon method in which a “deliberative dialogue” of conversation members takes place in between two (or more) sermon events, in which the later sermons incorporate aspects of the dialogue into a “Communal Prophetic Proclamation.”⁶⁵ Both of these models suggest that when congregation members hear their own ideas and thoughts reflected in the sermon, they feel more empowered in their ability to interpret and discern, which might in turn lead them to recognize the point of view of others.

⁶³ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁴ Bush and Folger are specific that a mediator’s role in conflict transformation is to help parties “make positive interactional shifts...by supporting the exercise of their capacities for strength and responsiveness, through their deliberation, decision making, communication, perspective taking, and other party activities” (Ibid., 65–66). But the mediator does not “get” the parties to make these shifts. Rather, the focus is on giving control to the parties involved so that the decisions are their own, which in turn makes empowerment and recognition possible.

⁶⁵ See Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*.

Another more dramatic means by which to engage in transformational processes in the sermon event would be to utilize conflict transformation methods *as the sermon itself*. For instance, many conflict transformation practitioners make use of the “circle” dialogue process in which participants in conversation move through stages of introduction, storytelling, problem solving, and mutual agreement. A sermon could employ a modified circle process by gathering three or four congregation members who are willing to share their perspectives on a difficult topic in conversation with each other—and have the conversation take place in front of the congregation as the sermon. Circle process elements—such as the use of a “talking” piece to ensure that everyone gets to speak—could be used to give parameters to the discussion, and the conversation could be framed and mediated by the pastor or another member. As is the case with circle processes in conflict transformation, the mediator would let the conversation proceed in whatever direction the participants decided, supporting their agency and choices even if the conversation became emotional, or heated, or otherwise difficult. This would both provide the participants the opportunity to experience empowerment and recognition shifts, as well as to demonstrate that conflict does not need to be tightly controlled. The conversation need not conclude or come to resolution, either; what is more important is engaging in (and for the congregation, bearing witness to) transformational conflict interaction.

I mentioned in chapter 2 that Lederach proposes a way to think about conflict through the lenses of truth, mercy, justice, and peace, based on a translation of Psalm 85:10: “Truth and Mercy have met together. Justice and Peace have kissed.”⁶⁶ In conflict transformation workshops, he asks participants to think about the question, “What is truth (or mercy, justice, peace) most concerned about in the midst of a conflict?” In a sermon setting, congregation members might be asked to take on the role of one of these concepts, and then to express or role play the way their concept

⁶⁶ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 84.

might respond in conflict. Each could be asked questions such as, “In the context of this conflict, what is most important to you? What do you fear? What do you hope for? What do you need in order to be in partnership with these others?” This could be done by a small group in front of the congregation, or in discussion groups throughout the congregation. In either case, after some discussion among these four concepts, the preacher might present a conflict situation confronting the congregation, and ask the congregation members to think which of these concepts feels most pressing to them in the conflict at hand. Through the lens of truth, mercy, justice or peace, what is most important to the congregation member? How might they see the conflict through one of the other lenses? While this exercise might not lead to true empowerment and recognition in the sense that Bush and Folger describe it in a mediation setting, this kind of practice might help a congregation member understand more fully what is important to them (and why) while at the same time acknowledging why someone else holds a different perspective.

Conflict Dynamic 3: Broad Participation

Conflict transformation theorists assert the importance of parties throughout all layers of society taking responsibility for responding to conflict. Negotiated, top-down peace accords can relieve immediate pressure and put an end to the most egregious violence, but without input and ownership from those throughout the webs of relationships, the conflict is unlikely to be transformed into constructive and lasting social change. As Diana Francis puts it, “To work for conflict transformation at any level...involves ensuring that those who have been the subjects of structures of domination discover and develop the power to participate in what affects them.”⁶⁷ The people affected by the conflict need to participate in its transformation.

⁶⁷ Francis, *People, Peace and Power*, 8.

As I wrote in the previous section, a relational homiletic recognizes the importance of not only including diverse voices in the sermon but of finding ways for the sermon to itself be a place where people might recognize their capacity and desire for transformed relational interaction. This takes place not because a preacher tells the congregation members what they should want or gives them the answers to tough questions, but because the sermon supports their own shifts in empowerment and recognition and their participation in conflict transformation. In one sense, this is a release for the preacher—a release from having to take sides in complex situations, from having to anticipate the responses of those who might disagree with the preacher’s verdict, from having to be the “answer-person.” But it leaves the preacher with another task: that of encouraging and lifting up unheard or marginalized voices in responsible ways—ways that empower broad participation and engagement in the conflict transformation process, and in relational interaction.

This suggests, however, a different role for the preacher in a relational homiletic than in other more traditional forms. In conflict situations, practitioner Ron Kraybill distinguishes between models of *arbitration*, in which a third party listens to both sides and pronounces a settlement or verdict, and *mediation*, in which a facilitator helps the parties themselves express to each other the nature of their conflict and make decisions about how to proceed.⁶⁸ While Kraybill acknowledges that arbitration has a place, he contends that truly transformative mediation empowers the people involved, encouraging them to take responsibility, fostering in them a greater sense of investment, and reducing their dependence on others.⁶⁹ The experience of greater clarity, confidence, openness, and understanding on their own terms is “likely to have more meaning and significance for parties than outcomes generated by mediator directiveness, however well-meant.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Kraybill, *Peace Skills*, 26.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 26–27. “Transformative mediators concentrate on empowering parties to define issues and decide settlement terms for themselves, and on helping parties to better understand one another’s perspectives,” write Bush and Folger (Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 35).

⁷⁰ Bush and Folger, *The Promise of Mediation*, 70–72.

In a basic sense, arbitration reflects traditional forms of preaching in which the preacher is an authoritative third party who pronounces a verdict for the congregation. Mediation aligns with relational preaching, in which the preacher empowers the participants to engage in defining and coming to mutual understanding in conflict.⁷¹ The attention is not on the mediator but is focused on the parties in conflict as the primary problem solvers, as well as the problem describers. To that end, the preacher might craft a sermon that reflects back to the congregation members the ways in which they themselves have articulated the conflict at hand, what is most important to them, and what truth they see in the viewpoints of others.⁷² The parallels between these models of conflict resolution and homiletic approaches are not perfect, but they reflect the tenor of distinctions I am making about relational preaching.

Another way to consider relational preaching and participation is through the images that are used around solutions to conflict. Lederach points out that the idea of an “agreement” to bring violence to an end (like a peace accord) does not fully represent the dynamics of social and human change. In situations of violent conflict, priority is (rightly) given to coming to high-level agreement that ends episodic killing and destruction; immediate intervention is required because people are being harmed. But exclusive focus on reaching an agreement can lead to neglect of the

⁷¹ It may appear that a preacher in either of these models is somehow “outside” the conflict because the mediator is expected to be neutral. Bush and Folger argue that neutrality is not possible and that the mediator’s values and goals, no matter how objectively intended, will have an effect on the process. Kraybill also rejects the idea of a neutral mediator, writing that neutrality is an illusion because “there is no such thing as a detached or objective observer” (Kraybill, *Peace Skills*, 20). In that case, how do we understand the role of a mediator? While mediators might not advocate for a particular point of view in a conflict, Kraybill writes, “We can and often must advocate particular processes for making decisions. We advocate processes that uphold dignity and equality of the people involved, involve all people affected by a decision in the decision-making process itself, give all participants equal access to information...and hold parties accountable for their commitments.” (Ibid.). Mediators advocate for just processes that address, for instance, power imbalances and other biased dynamics so that participants are truly able to discover and respond to their conflicts with honesty and integrity.

⁷² In this approach, preachers need not omit their own perspectives within and among the viewpoints of the congregation. Creating distance between the preacher and the congregation by setting the preacher apart as a “mediator” does not resolve the relational distance issues named by Rose and McClure. Here, the preacher has a role to play in bringing the conversation to the congregation, but this does not mean that the preacher must be absent from that conversation.

broader context in which the conflict exists, including that deeper issues have not really been dealt with just because shooting stops. Part of what is needed, writes Lederach, is a change in metaphors and images toward a long-term view that focuses “as much on the people in the setting of conflict building durable and flexible processes as it does on specific solutions.”⁷³ Lederach suggests the image of a *transformative platform*: ongoing social and relational spaces where people in relationship come together to generate responsive initiatives for constructive change. Such a platform would be “responsive to day-to-day issues that arise in the ebb and flow of conflict while it sustains a clear vision of the longer-term change needed in the destructive relational patterns.”⁷⁴ Platforms, rather than discrete solutions, become both the process and the goal in conflict and social change because they are the means by which pressing problems can be addressed, and they are also the solution themselves: they sustain relationship and engagement in the presence of continued conflict, historic differences, experienced pain, and perceptions of injustice.⁷⁵ As Lederach puts it, “Sustained dialogue is hard work and does not end with a ceasefire or the signing of a paper. Authentic engagement recognizes that conflict remains. Dialogue is permanent and requires platforms that make such engagement at multiple levels of the affected society possible and continuous....Genuine constructive change requires engagement of the other.”⁷⁶

This shift in images can be renewing for preaching, as well. As an image for relational preaching, a transformative platform suggests an ongoing meeting place of people and ideas. Rather than focusing on immediate solutions or answers in preaching, a continuing platform

⁷³ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 47. “People in settings of violence must shift from a temporary effort to negotiate an agreement that ends the violent expression of conflict to a context-based, permanent, and dynamic platform capable of nonviolently generating solutions to ongoing episodes of conflict, which they will experience in the ebb and flow of their social, political, and economic lives.”

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 48. “Relational platforms to produce change,” Lederach writes, “are more important than the solutions they create.”

⁷⁶ Ibid., 49.

implies a *place* and a *way of interacting over time*. Dynamic platforms welcome and in fact depend upon a plurality of voices, and are a space where those voices are invited in. In the midst of conflict, the idea of a platform bears an equalizing power that can redress some inequalities and disparities. Platforms cannot function if only one party is present; to be relational platforms, they have to include “the constructive engagement of people who have been historically divided and who are or may remain in significant levels of conflict.”⁷⁷ Preaching as a dynamic platform indicates the presence and engagement of people who are different but who together constitute the sermon. In their interactions with each other, they express and are reminded of the face of the other, which is the heart of redemption.

2. Lead Us not into Temptation

In this last section, I describe temptations preachers face that, when indulged, work against a relational homiletic. These are primarily content based, meaning they refer to the kinds of things preachers might say in a sermon but which, from the perspective of a relational homiletic, should be resisted. As with most temptations in human life, these preaching temptations are based in desires. In this case, the desires I describe—for clarity, authority, control, unity, and peace—are not bad. These are, in fact, things that can be useful and good in preaching—and in life. In the construct of a relational homiletic, however, desire for these things can lead to problematic temptations. So I offer honesty, vulnerability, trust, interconnectedness, and compassion as alternatives that help lead relational preaching out of temptation.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 48.

a. *The Desire for Clarity*

Most teachers of preaching try to help their students learn how to write sermons that offer clarity to the hearer. For Tom Long, for instance, the creation of “focus” and “function” statements help guide preachers in the “creation of sermons that possess unity, clarity, and a firm connection to the biblical text.”⁷⁸ But the desire for clarity to which I refer here is not about making sure the sermon can be summarized in a sentence or that the point is clear to the hearer at the final “Amen.” Instead, this desire for clarity is the impulse to want to make things simple for the hearer to understand by erasing complexity and gray areas and asserting absolutes in their place. Some of the temptations of this desire include:

- *Oppositional dichotomies.* One side is described as absolutely good, right, and moral, and the other is wholly wrong, corrupt, depraved. This kind of “clarity” not only obscures the complexities of a situation, but eliminates the possibility of finding any common ground between the people who hold opposing positions. Moreover, it releases the hearer from the need to participate in assessing the situation any further because the judgments have already been made for them.
- *Generalizations and abstractions that supersede the concrete.* In this mode, particular experiences that contradict the general understanding are seen as suspect rather than prompting a reassessment of the accepted wisdom. Abstractions and generalizations tend to favor the status quo, which means people with power benefit from sweeping assumptions that dismiss the experiences of those without. A flip side of this is categorizing an individual in relationship to an abstracted whole such that they cannot be seen in any other light—not just as a stereotype, but as a symbol or token. Tokenism, like inviting a

⁷⁸ Long, *Witness of Preaching*, 109.

person from another culture to read scripture on World Communion Sunday (but only then), is a common manifestation.

- *Either/or propositions.* This is a particular temptation in prophetic preaching that wants to be clear about the moral and ethical choices faced by a congregation. It sets up a choice for the hearer that implies not just a moral decision but a *relational division* depending on what choice is made.

Each of these temptations emerging from a desire for clarity stands against the convictions of a relational homiletic because they propose affirming a premise over relating to another actual person. An alternative to the temptation of clarity is a commitment to *honesty*. Honesty allows for straightforward and direct expression of opinions and beliefs without requiring assent or agreement, and can be clear without rejecting complexity or different perspectives and experiences.⁷⁹ Honesty can also deescalate conflict by inviting the other to respond in honesty, as well, rather than in defense.

b. The Desire for Authority

The nature of authority in preaching is itself fraught and divisive, and it is not my intention to dive into those debates.⁸⁰ Instead, what I mean by “desire for authority” is actually a *pastoral* impulse arising from the hope of being helpful in situations of pain and confusion. This is the impulse that causes pastors (and others) to offer platitudes like “everything happens for a reason” in response to grief and loss. Essentially, it is the hope that by *pronouncing* something as so, it will *be* so. In

⁷⁹ As Lederach puts it, “Art and reconciliation may share this guideline: Be honest early. Be honest often. In healing, there is no replacement for straight honesty, even when it hurts” (Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 160).

⁸⁰ For an overview, see McClure, *Preaching Words*, 7–10.

addition to offering platitudes in response to complexity and challenge, the desire for authority leads to these temptations for the preacher:

- *Venerating a moment from the past.* This is the “those were the days” temptation, in which some experience or historical moment is seen as ideal, and its challenges and complexities erased. Coupled with this temptation is a call to go back to that perfected or “simpler” time, when the church was respected, when morality was clear, when people did an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay. An alternative temptation is to elevate the *present* moment as the apex of, for instance, scholarly understanding, perfected reasoning, or embodiment of the “true” church. This is frequently expressed as “back then, *those* people didn’t understand, but now we have it figured out.”
- *Simplifying in order to provide an answer.* The challenges of biblical interpretation often lead to this temptation, especially if the text is confusing or off-putting to a contemporary audience. In sermons, this can manifest in a flat dismissal of the contextual or cultural realities of the Bible, as in “People in the Bible thought that way, but now we know better”—which leaves the congregation unsure of which texts are “dismissable” and which are not. Another expression of this temptation is to assert unanimity in the Bible that isn’t there, such as saying, “The Bible is clear that...” when asserting that clarity means ignoring texts that would disagree.

The desire for authority works against a relational homiletic because, in its attempts to meet human needs, it disregards the realities of those needs. A relational homiletic pays attention to the particularity of situations and sees complexity as full of potential for change. An alternative to the desire for authority is a commitment to *vulnerability*. Instead of imposing well-meaning but disempowering solutions in situations of difficulty, vulnerability invites the other to empowerment and recognition by stepping back to make room for the other in their complexity. Vulnerability

opens us to *power with* rather than *power over* (even when that “power over” is meant to be helpful and answer-giving). In acknowledging that the past and present are full of the good, the bad, and the ambiguous, vulnerability allows space for the truth of reality in which we all find ourselves, and we can be together in the mess.

c. The Desire for Control

While it is certainly true that some preachers are loath to give up the pulpit or to consider nontraditional models of preaching, it would be unjustified to claim that this hesitation is the result of a need for control alone. For many preachers, theologies of proclamation or ordination make it difficult to see preaching in other forms than as a monologue given by a designated and called individual for the purpose of pronouncing and interpreting God’s word.

That said, many people in positions of leadership—both within the church and outside of it—find it hard to give up control and power, even if they believe in shared governance or the priesthood of all believers. In preaching, the desire for control tends to center around both a sense of responsibility for the words that are offered in worship, and a reluctance to cede the microphone to someone else *because of what they might do or say*. Temptations related to control include:

- *Tempering powerful emotions and passions.* This temptation can vary culturally and from congregation to congregation—some communities are more open to public displays of emotion than others. Generally speaking, in white congregations dramatic displays of emotion or passion are uncomfortable and thus discouraged. Even in situations where open emotion is more common, there tend to be limits around what *kinds* of emotion are acceptable. Sadness and tears, for instance, are more tolerable than demonstrable anger or frustration.

- *Limiting public speech to those whose words can be anticipated.* Here the question is, who is allowed to speak and how tightly controlled is that speech? No matter the style of the service, most words spoken publicly during worship are highly predictable to those who are regular participants. The temptation, then, is to restrict participation in worship leadership, especially in preaching, to those who can be expected to follow the norms. This tends to eliminate the participation of children and youth, people from other cultures and backgrounds, people with varying mental and physical capacities, and any others who do not quite “fit in.”

As with all the desires, the desire for control has some good reasons behind it. However, it can be contrary to a relational homiletic because control can mean that the voices of many who are also children of God are absent in the worship space—often largely because they are unpredictable, and that makes people uncomfortable. At the heart of conflict transformation is a willingness to be uncomfortable in order to be in full relationship with others who are different from us. The alternative to the desire for control is a commitment to *trust*—to trust first of all that discomfort is okay, especially when it provides the opportunity to hear from voices that are often silent or marginalized. But this commitment to trust is also trust in the body of Christ—that it truly does include everyone and makes space for them, and that the body as a whole can find ways to accommodate even the unpredictability of human encounters and passions. In conflict transformation, participants are given power over their own choices and trusted with the capacity for problem solving. The release of control on the part of the mediator is what allows the participants to take responsibility for coming to mutual understanding and improving their relational interaction, even if the processes are emotional, volatile, or difficult. In relational

preaching, the pastor and congregation together express their trust in one another because the other, the stranger, is “the potential bearer of wisdom and insight,” rather than something to fear.⁸¹

d. The Desire for Unity

The irony of the desire for unity is that there is often disagreement about what is meant by unity itself. In the ecumenical movement(s) of the past century, the definition of what constituted unity among the churches and communions has varied over time, including models of “organic unity,” “conciliar fellowship,” “full communion,” and “unity in reconciled diversity.”⁸² In congregations, unity often suggests agreement about or assent to something in common, or commitment to a common purpose or mission. Unity can also mean uniformity, in which such agreement is reflected in homogeneous ways of behaving, dressing, acting, or speaking, and departure from such uniformity is discouraged.

Where unity implies agreement and uniformity in response to that agreement, the temptations that arise tend to overemphasize what is held in common to the exclusion of both diversity and dissent. Examples include:

- *Generic sermons for generic humanity.* This “error” of preaching is one of several noted by Tisdale, who argues that sermons that can be preached “to any congregation anywhere” tend to never truly become “enfleshed in the real-life situations” of actual people and congregations.⁸³ In other words, in the temptation to present a unified interpretation of Christian faith, the interpretation becomes so distanced from the particulars of lived experience as to be nearly meaningless.

⁸¹ McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, 18.

⁸² Günther Gassmann, “Unity,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicholas Lossky et al., 2nd ed. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2002), 1170–1173.

⁸³ Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, 23.

- *The use of “straw men” characters.* This is the temptation to paint overly simplistic figures in preaching, one-dimensional “straw men” that do not reflect the ambiguities of actual experiences and beliefs. Tisdale notes that such figures are often applied to members of the congregation, attributing to them “attitudes, beliefs, or values that they do not actually hold.”⁸⁴ This temptation is also extended to biblical figures: disciples who are flatly depicted as power hungry, out to lunch, or whiny; Pharisees who are merely greedy, fastidious, and rule-bound; Martha the workaholic, and Mary the believer. These characteristics are then applied to the congregation, as in “Aren’t we *all* like the disciples who can’t stay awake? Aren’t we *all* ready to betray Jesus whenever things get hard?”
- *Reinforcement of the dominant narrative.* This can be a particular temptation in contexts where Christianity is tied to national or social norms. This manifests itself plainly when preachers, in an effort to demonstrate the relationship between Christian faith and a contemporary context, directly identify the gospel with one side of a social issue, or with a single political party. This temptation is often much more subtle, however. Preachers might choose *not* to challenge erroneous but commonly held beliefs because it would “rock the boat.” For instance, preachers affirm tithing to the church as a measure of faithfulness but rarely ask members to consider whether their wealth was acquired by just and equitable means. When concerns or problems go unnamed, the dominant narrative is reinforced by default, and alternative experiences or perspectives are effectively erased.

Biblical passages focused on unity and calling for an end to factiousness focus on the need for cohesion in the community, and this itself is not an unworthy goal.⁸⁵ But when the desire for unity supersedes attention to justice or gives tacit approval to questionable cultural norms, it works

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 73–74.

against a relational homiletic that sees conflict as a necessary part of social change. An alternative to the temptations of unity is a commitment to *interconnectedness*. Relational preaching affirms that we remain interconnected and interdependent even when we do not agree, which allows for honest raising of dissent and affirmation of particularity without the threat of separation.

e. The Desire for Peace

Of all the desires named here, the desire for peace is perhaps most supported by scripture. Peace is a good thing. Jesus himself tells the disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27a), and “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). Peace—especially when it means the absence or cessation of violence—is absolutely essential to an understanding of God’s desire for the creation. However, when our desire for peace becomes a rush to resolution or a ready acceptance of false or superficial peace, we succumb to temptations, such as:

- *Avoiding conflict to begin with.* Because conflict is distressing, messy, and fear-producing, people do not often relish the opportunity to engage it. Preachers are tempted to minimize or ignore conflict or controversy from the pulpit, not least because of the legitimate fear that the congregation will react poorly to what they hear.
- *Resolving conflict prematurely and/or unilaterally.* The belief that peace is paramount can mean opting to minimize, manage, or otherwise stifle conflict. While it is tempting to want to come to agreement as quickly as possible, doing so without the buy-in of those who are affected can mean that peace is short-lived and skin-deep. Pronouncing resolution from the pulpit without attending to the systemic or interpersonal aspects of the conflict situation

can have the effect of disregarding and disempowering those in the center of the conflict, increasing resentment and division.⁸⁶

- *Neglecting tragedy.* Because Christian life is often oriented toward doing good and rejecting evil, preachers can be tempted not only to reiterate these dualistic categories (with little gray area between), but to neglect the idea of the tragedy of the human condition. When peace is associated with good, and thus conflict is evil, little room is left to understand theologically that which does not seem to fit those bifurcations. Is nonviolent but disquieting social change that leads to greater justice an indication of good, or evil? Is the discomfort we feel when we encounter an other good, or evil? Our desire to feel peaceful amid volatile emotion and change can result in assigning moral value to that which is simply part of human existence.

The desire for peace in the face of the pain and suffering of human life is both reasonable and faithful. But that desire becomes temptation when we use it to avoid realities around us, including conflict and the hard work and effort of its transformation. An alternative to the temptations of false peace is *compassion*. In the face of suffering and anguish, of injustice and inequality, of grief and death, and of simple misunderstanding and the foreignness of others, compassion helps us stay connected to the humanity of those around us and those far away. Relational preaching gives priority to that which continues to awaken us to our interconnectedness in a pluralistic world.

⁸⁶ Porter confirms, “The reality is that people can and must solve their own problems in order to own and be committed to the solution. We cannot bring about healing or reconciliation. We can only create the environment in which it can occur or the context for the Spirit to work. Trying to be a fixer is a burden that leads to frustration and even burnout” (Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*, 70–71).

IV. Concluding Thoughts

Embedded in a relational homiletic for conflict are contradictions between how things *feel* and what a faithful response to those things might be. Conflict makes us feel uncertain, defensive, fearful, and weak, and challenges deep parts of ourselves: identity, power, individuality. At precisely this moment, what we need most are virtues like vulnerability, openness, honesty, and compassion. When we want to assert our truth over against the other, we are called to cling to the idea that the other also has wisdom, and that staying in relationship is as important as being right (if not more). In the experience of feeling alienated and distant, we have to summon the conviction of our interconnectedness. These are responses that rely upon the grace and mercy of God, who, in ultimate contradiction, exchanges unity for plurality, autonomy for relationship, and perfection for the possibility of reciprocal love.

Bibliography

- Allen, Jr., O. Wesley. *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
- . *Preaching and the Human Condition: Loving God, Self, & Others*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016.
- . *Preaching in the Era of Trump*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2017.
- Allen, Jr., O. Wesley, John S. McClure, and Ronald J. Allen, eds. *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013.
- Allen, Ronald J. *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights*. Chalice Press, 2008.
- . "Preaching as Mutual Critical Correlation through Conversation." In *Purposes of Preaching*, edited by Jana Childers. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004.
- Allen, Ronald J., and O. Wesley Allen, Jr. *The Sermon without End: A Conversational Approach to Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015.
- Allen, Ronald J., and Mary Alice Mulligan. "Listening to Listeners: Five Years Later." *Homiletic* 34, no. 2 (January 1, 2009).
- Allen, Ronald, John S. McClure, Dale P. Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P. Moseley, and G. Lee Ramsey, Jr. *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004.
- Andrews, Dale P. *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology & African American Folk Religion*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- Ansberry, Clare. "Breaking Up With Your Church Over Politics." *Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2016. Accessed February 3, 2017. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/breaking-up-with-your-church-over-politics-1480866533>.
- Appelbaum, Yoni. "How One Pastor Is Bridging the Partisan Divide." *The Atlantic*. Last modified June 27, 2017. Accessed August 6, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/06/how-one-pastor-is-bridging-the-partisan-divide/531822/>.
- Augsburger, David W. *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992.
- Avram, Wes. "Stop Resolving Conflict!" *Yale University Reflections*, no. 1 (Spring 2018). Accessed September 17, 2018. <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/lets-talk-confronting-our-divisions/stop-resolving-conflict-wes-avram>.
- Barnes, M. Craig. "Lessons from the Keller Controversy." *The Christian Century*, Vol. 134, no. 17. August 16, 2017, 35.
- . "Why I Worry about the Pastors of Politically Divided Churches." *The Christian Century*, Vol. 134, no 1. Online version December 20, 2016. Accessed February 3, 2017. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/why-i-worry-about-pastors-politically-divided-churches>.

- Barrett, Lisa Feldman. "Opinion | When Is Speech Violence?" *The New York Times*, July 14, 2017. Accessed July 18, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/14/opinion/sunday/when-is-speech-violence.html>.
- Bercovitch, Jacob, Victor Kremenyuk, and I. William Zartman. *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009.
- Best, Thomas F. *Beyond Unity-in-Tension: Unity, Renewal and the Community of Women and Men*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1988.
- Best, Thomas F., and Martin Robra, eds. *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997.
- Browning, Don. *Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.
- . *The Prophetic Imagination*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Burgess, John P. "Resolving Church Conflicts and Controversies." *Journal for Preachers* 18, no. 1 (1994): 32–34.
- Burns, Robert P. "Some Ethical Issues Surrounding Mediation." *Fordham Law Review* 70, no. 3 (December 2001): 691–717.
- Bush, Robert A. Baruch, and Joseph P. Folger. *The Promise of Mediation: The Transformative Approach to Conflict*. Rev. ed. San Francisco: Wiley, 2005.
- Callahan, Sharon Henderson. *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*. 2 vols. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013.
- Cameron, Helen, Philip J. Richter, Douglas Davies, and Frances Ward, eds. *Studying Local Churches*. London: SCM Press, 2005.
- Campbell, Charles L. *Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- Canary, Daniel J., Sandra G. Lakey, and Alan L. Sillars. "Managing Conflict in a Competent Manner: A Mindful Look at Events That Matter." In *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication*, edited by Oetzel and Ting-Toomey. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013.
- Childers, Jana. "Seeing Jesus: Preaching as Incarnational Act." In *Purposes of Preaching*, edited by Jana Childers. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004.
- Cleveland, Christena. *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013.
- Coffey, Michael. "Renounce, Resist, Rejoice: Easter Preaching in the Age of Trump." *Journal for Preachers* 41, no. 3 (2018): 3–9.
- Craddock, Fred B. *Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985.
- Della Noce, Dorothy J. "Seeing Theory in Practice: An Analysis of Empathy in Mediation." *Negotiation Journal* 15, no. 3 (n.d.): 271–301.

- Deutsch, Morton. "Introduction." In *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, edited by Deutsch and Coleman. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Deutsch, Morton, and Peter T. Coleman, eds. *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*. Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Dubois, Heather M., and Janna Hunter-Bowman. "The Intersection of Christian Theology and Peacebuilding." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, edited by Omer, Appleby, and Little, 569–596. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Dunn, Larry A. "Transforming Identity in Conflict." In *Making Peace With Conflict*, edited by Schrock-Shenk and Ressler, 38–46. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999.
- Durheim, Benjamin M. "Bridging the Divide: Connecting Liturgy and Ethics in an Era of Polarization." *Worship* 91 (September 2017): 435–449.
- Dykstra, Craig, and Dorothy C. Bass. "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices." In *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, edited by Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001.
- Edmonston, Christopher. "Pastoring a Purple Church." *The Presbyterian Outlook*, January 2, 2018. Accessed January 19, 2018. <https://pres-outlook.org/2018/01/pastoring-a-purple-church/>.
- Evans, Alice F., and Robert A. Evans. *Peace Skills: Leaders' Guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- Farley, Edward. *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990.
- . *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
- Farley, Wendy. *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
- . *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.
- Farris, Stephen C. "Preaching for a Church in Conflict." In *The Folly of Preaching: Models and Methods*, edited by Michael Knowles, 140–153. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Florence, Anna Carter. *Preaching as Testimony*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.
- Folger, Joseph P., Robert A. Baruch Bush, and Dorothy J. Della Noce, eds. *Transformative Mediation: A Sourcebook*. Hempstead, NY: Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation, 2010.
- Folger, Joseph P., Robert A. Baruch Bush, and Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation. *Designing Mediation: Approaches to Training and Practice within a Transformative Framework*. New York: Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation, 2001.
- Folger, Joseph, Marshall Scott Poole, and Randall K. Stutman. *Working Through Conflict: Strategies for Relationships, Groups, and Organizations*. 8th ed. New York ; London: Routledge, 2017.

- Francis, Diana. *People, Peace and Power: Conflict Transformation in Action*. Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002.
- Galtung, Johan. *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*. London: SAGE Publications, 1996.
- Garrigan, Siobhán. *Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics and the End of Sectarianism*. London: Equinox Publishing, 2010.
- Gassmann, Günther. "Unity." In *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, edited by Nicholas Lossky, José Míguez Bonino, John Pobee, Tom F. Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Pauline Webb, 1170–1173. 2nd ed. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2002.
- Gersen, Jeannie Suk. "How Trump Has Stoked the Campus Debate on Speech and Violence." *The New Yorker*, June 4, 2017. Accessed July 19, 2017.
<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-trump-has-stoked-the-campus-debate-on-speech-and-violence>.
- Gilbert, Kenyatta R. *A Pursued Justice: Black Preaching from the Great Migration to Civil Rights*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016.
- . *Exodus Preaching: Crafting Sermons about Justice and Hope*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018.
- Greenwood, Jean E. "'We Touched Grace': Spiritual Dimensions of Conflict Transformation." *Congregations* 32, no. 3 (2006): 29–34.
- Halverstadt, Hugh F. *Managing Church Conflict*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991.
- Hess, Carol Lakey. "Religious Education." In *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, edited by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- Hilton, Allen. *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018.
- Hogan, Lucy Lind, and Robert Reid. *Connecting with the Congregation: Rhetoric and the Art of Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999.
- Howe, Reuel L. *Miracle of Dialogue*. New York: Seabury Press, 1963.
- Hunsinger, Deborah van Deusen, and Theresa F. Latini. *Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.
- Hunter-Bowman, Janna, and John Paul Lederach. "Building Peace: Religious Leadership in Divided Communities." In *Religious Leadership*, edited by Callahan, 2:464–473. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013.
- Jeter, Joseph R. *Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998.
- Kinnamon, Michael. *Truth and Community: Diversity and Its Limits in the Ecumenical Movement*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub., 1988.
- Kliwer, Stephen. *How to Live With Diversity in the Local Church*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1987.
- Kraybill, Ronald S. *Peace Skills: A Manual for Community Mediators*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

- Kriesberg, Louis. "The Evolution of Conflict Resolution." In *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, edited by Bercovitch, Kremenyuk, and Zartman, 15–32. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009.
- Lederach, John Paul. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1998.
- . "Journey from Resolution to Transformative Peacebuilding." In *From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacebuilding*, edited by Cynthia Sampson and John Paul Lederach, 45–55. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- . *Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation of the Guiding Principles by a Pioneer in the Field*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003.
- . *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- . *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995.
- . *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2014.
- . "Spirituality and Religious Peacebuilding." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, edited by Omer, Appleby, and Little, 541–568. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Lederach, John Paul, and R. Scott Appleby. "Strategic Peacebuilding: An Overview." In *Strategies of Peace: Transforming Conflict in a Violent World*, edited by Daniel Philpott and Gerard Powers, 19–44. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Lischer, Richard. *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005.
- . "Why I Am Not Persuasive." *Homiletic* 24, no. 2 (1999): 13–16.
- Little, David, and R. Scott Appleby. "A Moment of Opportunity? The Promise of Religious Peacebuilding in an Era of Religious and Ethnic Conflict." In *Religion and Peacebuilding*, edited by Harold G. Coward and Gordon S. Smith, 1–23. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- Littlejohn, Stephen W., and Kristen L. Cole. "Moral Conflict and Transcendent Communication." In *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication*, edited by Oetzel and Ting-Toomey. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013.
- Littlejohn, Stephen W., and Kathy Domenici. *Communication, Conflict, and the Management of Difference*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2007.
- Long, Thomas G. *Witness of Preaching*. 2nd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
- Lossky, Nicholas. *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*. 2nd ed. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2002.
- Lose, David J. "Preaching as Conversation." In *Under the Oak Tree*, edited by Allen, McClure and Allen. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013.

- Lott, David B. *Conflict Management in Congregations*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001.
- Lundblad, Barbara K. *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001.
- Lyons, Brad. "Why We're Publishing 'Preaching as Resistance.'" *Chalice Press*. Last modified October 1, 2018. Accessed October 3, 2018. <https://www.chalicepress.com/Why-Were-Publishing-Preaching-as-Resistance.aspx>.
- Marshall, Ellen Ott. "Conflict, God and Constructive Change: Exploring Prominent Christian Convictions in the Work of Conflict Transformation." *Brethren Life and Thought* 61, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 1–15.
- . ed. *Conflict Transformation and Religion: Essays on Faith, Power, and Relationship*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016.
- . "Grounding Practices of Conflict Transformation: Are Theologies of Reconciliation Sufficient?" Candler School of Theology: Unpublished, 2015.
- . ed. "Introduction: Learning Through Conflict, Working for Transformation." In *Conflict Transformation and Religion: Essays on Faith, Power, and Relationship*, 1–12. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016.
- . *Introduction to Christian Ethics: Conflict, Faith, and Human Life*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.
- Martin, James. *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012.
- McClure, John S. "Conversation and Proclamation: Resources and Issues." *Homiletic* 22, no. 1 (June 1, 1997): 1–13.
- . "From Resistance to Jubilee: Prophetic Preaching and the Testimony of Love." *Colloquium: Music, Worship, Arts* 2, no. Autumn 2005. Yale Institute of Sacred Music (2005): 78–85.
- . *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001.
- . "Preacher as Host and Guest." In *Slow of Speech and Unclean Lips: Contemporary Images of Preaching Identity*, edited by Robert Stephen Reid. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010.
- . *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.
- . *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995.
- . *Speaking Together and with God: Liturgy and Communicative Ethics*. Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2018.
- McLaughlin, Raymond W. *The Ethics of Persuasive Preaching*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979.
- Miall, Hugh. "Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task." In *Transforming Ethnopolitical Conflict: The Berghof Handbook*, edited by Alex Austin, Martina Fischer, and Norbert

- Ropers, 67–89. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2004. Accessed April 4, 2017. http://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2013/4682/pdf/miall_handbook.pdf.
- Mulligan, Mary Alice, Diane Turner-Sharazz, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen. *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003.
- Mulligan, Mary, and Ronald Allen. *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005.
- Nichols, J. Randall. *Building the Word: The Dynamics of Communication and Preaching*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1980.
- . *The Restoring Word: Preaching as Pastoral Communication*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.
- Oetzel, John G., and Stella Ting-Toomey, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication: Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006.
- Omer, Atalia. "Can a Critic Be a Caretaker Too? Religion, Conflict, and Conflict Transformation." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 2 (2011): 459–496.
- . "The Hermeneutics of Citizenship as a Peacebuilding Process: A Multiperspectival Approach to Justice." *Political Theology* 11, no. 5 (October 2010): 650–673.
- . "Religious Peacebuilding: The Exotic, the Good, and the Theatrical." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, edited by Omer, Appleby, and Little, 3–32. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Omer, Atalia, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Owens, Bernard J. "Light of the World: Writing My First Sermon for the Age of Trump." *Slate*, February 1, 2017. Accessed February 3, 2017. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/faithbased/2017/02/an_episcopal_priest_on_writing_his_first_sermon_of_the_trump_presidency.html.
- Peachey, Dean E. "Choosing a Path for Conflict Transformation." In *Making Peace With Conflict*, edited by Schrock-Shenk and Ressler, 91–100. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999.
- Pew Research Center. "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider." *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, October 5, 2017. Accessed August 6, 2018. <http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>.
- Philpott, Daniel. "Reconciliation, Politics, and Transitional Justice." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, edited by Omer, Appleby, and Little, 335–354. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Porter, Thomas W. *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture of Justpeace*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2010.
- Porter, Thomas W., and Stephanie Hixon. "Engage Conflict Well: A Guide to Prepare Yourself and Engage Others in Conflict Transformation." JustPeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, 2011. Accessed April 4, 2017. <https://justpeaceumc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Engage-Conflict-Well.pdf>.

- Pranis, Kay. *The Little Book of Circle Processes : A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005.
- Proctor, Samuel D. *Preaching about Crises in the Community*. Preaching About...Series. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988.
- Putnam, Linda L. "Definitions and Approaches to Conflict and Communication." In *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication*, edited by Oetzel and Ting-Toomey. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013.
- Queen, Edward. "Questioning Assumptions Beneath Conflict Transformation." In *Conflict Transformation and Religion*, edited by Marshall, 139–153. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016.
- Ramsey, Jr., G. Lee Ramsey. *Care-Full Preaching: From Sermon to Caring Community*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2012.
- Rancer, Andrew S. *Argumentative and Aggressive Communication: Theory, Research, and Application*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006.
- Reid, Clyde H. "Preaching and the Nature of Communication." *Pastoral Psychology* 14, no. 137 (October 1963): 40–49.
- Ressler, Lawrence. "Keys to Problem Solving." In *Making Peace With Conflict*, edited by Schrock-Shenk and Ressler, 101–111. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999.
- Rice, Chris. "'Word Made Flesh': Toward a Pedagogy of a New We." In *Conflict Transformation and Religion*, edited by Marshall, 31–49. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016.
- Rose, Lucy Atkinson. *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.
- Rupesinghe, Kumar, ed. *Conflict Transformation*. New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995.
- . "Conflict Transformation." In *Conflict Transformation*, edited by Rupesinghe. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995.
- Russell, Letty M. *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- Ryan, Stephen. *The Transformation of Violent Intercommunal Conflict*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007.
- Saracino, Michele. *Being about Borders: A Christian Anthropology of Difference*. Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2011.
- Schade, Leah D. "Anger, Fear, and Consequences of Prophetic Sermons: First Report from the Research Survey 'Preaching about Controversial Issues.'" In *Preaching and Culture*, 150–161. Academy of Homiletics, Dallas, TX: Unpublished, 2017.
- . *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018.
- Schirch, Lisa. *Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2004.
- Schreiter, Robert J. "Leadership for Reconciliation." In *Religious Leadership*, edited by Callahan, 2:390–398. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013.

- Schrock-Shenk, Carolyn. "Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation." In *Making Peace With Conflict*, edited by Schrock-Shenk and Ressler, 25–37. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999.
- Schrock-Shenk, Carolyn, and Lawrence Ressler, eds. *Making Peace with Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999.
- Simons, Herbert W. *Persuasion in Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2001.
- Sisk, Ronald D. *Preaching Ethically: Being True to the Gospel, Your Congregation, and Yourself*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.
- Smith, Christine M. "Preaching: Hospitality, De-Centering, Re-Membering, and Right Relations." In *Purposes of Preaching*, edited by Jana Childers. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004.
- . *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives*. Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1998.
- Smith, Kelly Miller. *Social Crisis Preaching*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984.
- Snider, Phil. "10 Unfortunate Myths about Preaching as Resistance." *Chalice Press*. October 1, 2018. Accessed October 3, 2018. <https://www.chalicepress.com/10-Unfortunate-Myths-about-Preaching-Resistance.aspx>.
- , ed. *Preaching as Resistance: Voices of Hope, Justice, and Solidarity*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2018.
- Stauffer, Clay. *Preaching Politics: Proclaiming Jesus in an Age of Money, Power, and Partisanship*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2016.
- Thomas, Frank A. *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018.
- Tisdale, Leonora Tubbs. *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.
- . *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
- Tracy, David. "The Foundations of Practical Theology." In *Practical Theology*, edited by Don Browning. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1982.
- Turner, Mary Donovan. "Prophetic Preaching." In *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching*, edited by Paul Scott Wilson, 101–103. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008.
- Väyrynen, Raimo, ed. *New Directions in Conflict Theory: Conflict Resolution and Conflict Transformation*. London: SAGE Publications, 1991.
- . "To Settle or Transform? Perspectives on the Resolution of National and International Conflicts." In *New Directions in Conflict Theory*, edited by Väyrynen, 1–25. London: SAGE Publications, 1991.
- Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.
- Watts, Craig M. "Proclamation and Controversy: A Study in the Ethics of Preaching." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 16, no. 6 (December 1, 1989): 435–442.

- Williams, Robert R. "Tragedy, Totality, and the Face." In *Theology and the Interhuman: Essays in Honor of Edward Farley*, edited by Robert R. Williams, 80–101. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995.
- Willimon, William H. *Fear of the Other: No Fear in Love*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016.
- . *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987.
- Wolf, Aaron T. *The Spirit of Dialogue: Lessons from Faith Traditions in Transforming Conflict*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2017.
- "Michael Gulker: Conflict and Christian Discipleship." *Faith and Leadership*. January 22, 2019. Accessed February 16, 2019. <https://www.faithandleadership.com/michael-gulker-conflict-and-christian-discipleship>.