

Sweating, Spitting, and Cursing: Intimations of the Sacred

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Abstract

Holiness does not always manifest itself in pristine ways. Sometimes profane vehicles open us to the holy. This essay explores three such occasions that surface in preaching. First, I consider the sweating preacher. Drawing on Christian spirituality, African-American preaching traditions, and performance studies, I reflect on the phenomenon of “holy sweat.” Then, I reflect on the way passion might increase a preacher’s speech rate and result in inadvertent spitting. I link this unconscious spitting with ecstasy and with the unmanageability of the gospel. I give more attention to cursing. After reflecting briefly on the history of cursing, I discuss a few ways cursing might serve the ends of preaching. Cursing presents special discernment issues for the preacher so I comment on key steps in this discernment process. I conclude that sweating, spitting and cursing work in different ways to unsettle and expand tidy understandings of holiness.

Glimpses of the sacred come in unexpected ways. Sometimes our understandings of holiness only emerge as superficial notions are interrupted and peeled back. This essay examines three such moments that arise during sermons when the word seems to come from another realm, one that is not bound by contemporary Western notions of propriety. On these occasions, the congregation witnesses the “sounding of a deep holiness that cuts below our usual management of truth and speaks from a holiness that stands outside our management.”¹

This strange holiness appears when a preacher sweats, spits, or curses in an effort to reveal the extravagance of the gospel. In distinct ways, each of these moments carries a solemnity that helps listeners re-imagine the character of holy speech.

When a Preacher Sweats

A sacred moment sometimes arises in the midst of a sermon when a preacher is so connected to listeners and deep in thought that beads of sweat form on the preacher's brow. This kind of sweat cannot be easily attributed to nervousness, hot lights, or heavy vestments. Instead, this sweat is prompted by the intensity of the moment. The gravity of the moment presses on the preacher and draws a truth out of the preacher's body.

This "holy sweat" has been read as a material sign of grace in Christian spirituality. Catherine of Siena alludes to holy sweat in *The Dialogue*:

Bring, then, your tears and your sweat, you and my other servants. Draw them from the fountain of my divine love and use them to wash the face of my bride. I promise you that thus her beauty will be restored. Not by the sword or by war or by violence will she regain her beauty, but through peace and through the constant and humble prayers and sweat and tears poured out by my servants with eager desire.²

Catherine explains that sweat is a sign of desire as well as union. Perspiration seems to authenticate her yearning for God: "As she felt her emotions so renewed in the eternal Godhead, the force of her spirit made her body break into a sweat. For her union with God was more intimate than was the union between her soul and her body."³ Perhaps Catherine intends to elicit an image of Jesus sweating in Gethsemane.⁴ Either way, sweat serves as a material sign of intense spiritual longing.

Similarly, American Pentecostals demonstrate a high regard for holy sweat during the early twentieth century. According to R. Marie Griffith, Pentecostal evangelists would commonly receive letters from Christians who were seeking healing. After reading a letter, the evangelist would pray passionately over a handkerchief, perhaps until sweat formed on the forehead. Then the evangelist would wipe his or her brow with the handkerchief and send it to the petitioner as a material sign of prayer. This "prayer cloth" served as a tangible reminder of the intercessions that were made on behalf of the recipient. Further, prayer cloths were understood to be "saturated with a kind of power through these signs of intensive prayer."⁵

The sweaty handkerchief also appears in some African-American preaching traditions. The intensity of the delivery of the sermon can leave a preacher soaked with sweat. A handkerchief is a fixture for preachers who "hoop" or move into an impassioned chant. Hooping has both linguistic and performative elements. Teresa Fry Brown explains:

There may be vocal gymnastics that require gasping for air, panting, long pauses, or rapid speech; or in some cases, the voice quality becomes so harsh that the natural voice is just a memory. The voice runs the entire tonic scale. . . . Hooping is physical, and the preacher, at times, is drenched in perspiration. There is a curious ritual of immediately wrapping one's neck with a large handkerchief or towel or putting on a coat "to keep the heat."⁶

Here, sweat functions as a nonverbal cue in the pattern of call and response, and underscores the preacher's exertion.⁷ The grand struggle between human finitude and the extravagance of the gospel shows up in the preacher's sweat. The congregation gets a visible, tangible, and even odoriferous sign that something is at stake in this moment of proclamation.

Yet, the "sweat of the 'heart'" has the most weight in the pulpit.⁸ Sweat can speak just as powerfully in the meeker, more soft-spoken preacher for whom a grand gesture or booming voice would seem inauthentic. With these preachers, sweat is not a strictly physical phenomenon. As one scholar explains:

Sweat is not only the 20 percent physical, but encompasses the 80 percent mental that lies behind the obvious physical. The 80 percent mental dimension of sweat is the subtle domain of inner activation, i.e., the flame of an active, inner, vibratory perceptivity and engagement.⁹

Of course, if the preacher is not sufficiently tied to his or her message, "vibratory perceptivity and engagement" are likely out of reach. If the message makes no claim on Christian life and offers no alternative to a normative view of reality, it will be hard for the preacher to break into a holy sweat. Holy sweat is the fruit of passionate engagement with God, listeners, and the moment. Holy sweat plays a signifying role for listeners and points to divine encounter.

When a Preacher Spits

One might easily conclude that spitting can only serve a pejorative purpose in Christian liturgy. On the rare occasion when spitting appears, it usually carries derogatory meaning. For example, in some Greek Orthodox baptismal rites, godparents spit upon Satan at the invitation of the officiating priest.¹⁰ This spitting serves as a renunciation of evil and a symbol of fidelity to Christ. In contrast, spitting that is not deliberate and happens spontaneously in the natural course of conversation is more of a nuisance than an offense.

John Wesley frowns on the nuisance of spitting in his penny tract, *Directions Concerning Pronunciation and Gesture*.¹¹ Wesley cautions preachers against "the odious custom" of spitting during sermons and urges preachers to minimize the distraction for listeners if spitting cannot be avoided entirely.¹² In his zeal to ensure listeners' comfort, Wesley closes off the possibility that spitting might disclose the holy. Yet, when spontaneous sprays occur during preaching, listeners get a reminder of the relationship between preaching and ecstasy: "The origins of prophecy are in ecstasy. The root meaning of *to prophesy* may be 'to slaver,' 'to foam at the mouth,' hence the utterances of one whose sensibilities the spirit has completely alienated from civilized life and discourse."¹³

As speech speeds up and passion is stirred, the preacher spits and pierces a social boundary. The utter lack of self-consciousness that usually accompanies the spittle is telling. This lack of self-consciousness suggests the preacher has somehow become lost in the Word or captivated by its transformative power. Social propriety is dethroned for a moment and gives way to a greater

power. Further, the invisible bonds that buckle the sermon genre are revealed. The sermon is loosed from the mores of polite and respectable speech, and begins to serve a higher call.

The urgency of this call is vividly reflected in the pulpit architecture at Saints Peter and Paul Church in Duszniki Zdrój, Poland. One of the pulpits is shaped like the giant fish that swallowed Jonah. Dark green and rather ominous, the fish appears to writhe and its tail curls up in a grand loop against the marble wall of the church. The preacher stands inside the fish's open mouth surrounded by teeth and a giant pink tongue. Symbolically, the listeners are faced with a message



*Saints Peter and Paul Church, Duszniki Zdroj, Poland.
Photograph courtesy of The Right Reverend John Harrower, Bishop,
Anglican Diocese of Tasmania, Australia.*

and a messenger that are being spat out of the fish's mouth. If a preacher is bent on proclaiming a domesticated word, the architecture intervenes and screams about the gospel's tendency to shock and disorient listeners. Holiness is imagined as a wild and strange thing, defying any force that would dare attempt to confine it.

This wild notion of holiness is elicited when a preacher spits. The gospel proves scandalously unmanageable. A key part of the outrage rests in the idea that God's holy word rides through a human mouth. Human teeth, tongues, and

saliva play a central role in gospel proclamation. Spittle reminds listeners of this scandal and points to the strange ways of God.

The incarnational aspect of preaching might be more palatable if the human body were more easily tamed. Yet as Judith Butler explains, the body always adds layers of meaning to a speaker's words and exceeds a speaker's intent.¹⁴ Butler calls this unpredictable quality the "excess" of speech.¹⁵ When a preacher spits, this "excess" of speech materializes and listeners encounter a God made known through weak and profane human flesh. In other words, the weak and foolish things of the world make God known rather than human perfection.¹⁶

When a Preacher Curses

The veil of the sacred is also pierced on a linguistic level when a preacher curses. Cursing and foul words are broadly considered taboo in preaching despite the fact that the Bible is a "storehouse of curses and strong language."¹⁷ In the strict sense, cursing is synonymous with malediction and is an appeal to a higher power to damn or harm another person.¹⁸ This "formal cursing" was

originally the purview of priests and prophets.¹⁹ Over time, however, cursing was understood more broadly to describe the “unsayable,” whether dirty or religious.²⁰ The dirty usually entails the sexual and the excremental, or those things that are concealed by clothing, privacy or through disposal.²¹ In contrast, religious swearing usually involves using God’s name as part of an effort to convey shock, frustration, or outrage.

Both forms of cursing have tremendous plasticity because profanity is an unstable linguistic category.²² Words like “sh*t” and “f*ck” are generally considered profane in contemporary American English. These words were similarly profane for the Romans, but had fairly mundane meanings in medieval England.²³ A heron was innocently called a “shiterow,” and a kestrel was matter-of-factly named a “windfucker.”²⁴ Other wildlife, plants, and city streets were similarly named with terms that would be profane in contemporary American English. These terms would not register as obscene or amount to cursing again until the end of the 19th century.²⁵ Instead, coarse language in medieval England included oaths or forms of language that inspired people to sin.²⁶ The most taboo phrases involved religious swearing because there was such high regard for the holy. Exclaiming, “By God’s bones!” or “Christ’s nails!” were understood to have a literal power to physically harm God.²⁷ Whether religious or dirty, cursing continues to play a critical role in American speech. As one scholar puts it, curse words “do what no other English words can.”²⁸ In the toolbox of language, curse words are the “hammer.”²⁹

Preachers often try to mine the power of foul language while negotiating taboos at the same time. Many resort to light swearing (“dang,” “darn,” “heck,” and “jeez”). Others turn to euphemism.³⁰ The euphemists can thank Thomas Bowdler and his daughter Elizabeth for paving the way. They “bowdlerized” major works to make them more palatable for polite society.³¹ For example, the frank sexual imagery of the Song of Songs is softened in Elizabeth’s commentary. She refers to a “bridal chariot” in lieu of the “bed.”³² The Bowdlers might contend that euphemism is employed in biblical texts as well. Abraham, for instance, requires his servant to swear on his “thigh” rather than make direct reference to male genitals.³³ The author of Job repeatedly uses the word “bless” as a euphemism for “curse” in order to heighten the tension of one of the most blasphemous lines in the Bible, “Curse God and die.”³⁴ Euphemism clearly has its place.

Yet, in many cases euphemism can obscure the holy rather than reveal it. As one scholar explains, euphemism is the “opposite of swearing.”³⁵ Profane language carries “an emotional charge derived from direct reference to taboo objects, orifices, and actions.”³⁶ Euphemisms tend to soften this charge and prevent a strong emotional response.³⁷ These “anti-obscurities” can result from the use of “indirection, Latinization, or employing French.”³⁸ Whatever the form, euphemism can easily undermine a preacher’s attempt to disclose God’s action in the world. Unless a preacher is employing a euphemism as litotes (ironic understatement) or incorporating another rhetorical strategy, a limp vision of the holy is likely to follow. When a preacher resists the urge to self-censor, a curious thing can happen. A curse word can actually function as a husk for the sacred. Typically, there are three dimensions that work together when this happens.

First, the preacher taps into a different spiritual realm. Curse words have power because they consist of words that have been “driven underground.”³⁹ Part of this power stems from the fact that curse words are iterations of the spell and the charm— words that “invoke a higher power to change the world, or support the truthfulness of a claim.”⁴⁰ Preachers break open this hidden arena when they use language that carries a “curious convergence of the high and the low, the sacred and the profane.”⁴¹ The sermon proves to be a container that can bear this breadth and depth of content. Aspects of truth that were deemed too hardcore for formal worship are suddenly brought in and put in conversation with the gospel. No longer is the sermon simply a polite speech about God’s action in the world. Cursing, then, disrupts tidy religious ritual and facilitates an experience of the gospel.

One could think of this experience of the gospel as an “epistemological crisis, a crisis in the way one sees and perceives.”⁴² J. Louis Martyn links epistemological crisis with a Pauline experience of the gospel. For an exemplar, Martyn turns to Flannery O’Connor. Her “apocalyptic fiction” works by revealing false perception and following it with “an irruption that radically alters vision.”⁴³ The “invading power of grace” emerges with this altered vision and the audience witnesses the “action of grace in territory held largely by the devil.”⁴⁴ In other words, a new spiritual realm is opened for the audience.

Ushering listeners into this experience demands a full spectrum of language forms, including curse words. Curse words have a visceral quality that is critical to truth-telling. Toni Morrison alludes to this revelatory aspect of language. When asked what was distinctive about her fiction and what made it good, Morrison responds:

The language, only the language. The language must be careful and must appear effortless. It must not sweat. It must suggest and be provocative at the same time. It is the thing that black people love so much- the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting, with them, playing with them. It’s a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher’s: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language.”⁴⁵

Morrison underscores the value of pure language. Here, the term “pure” is synonymous with “undiluted” rather than “chaste.” The Apostle Paul seems to search for this kind of purity when he speaks of regarding his former achievements as “rubbish” or “dung” in order to gain Christ.⁴⁶ The disciples also seek this kind of linguistic purity when they first hear the Good News of the resurrection. The resurrection is unbelievable to them and they call the message *leiros* or “nonsense.” Anna Carter Florence suggests that translators have softened the meaning of *leiros* in Luke 24:11 with translations like “an idle tale” when it “means ‘nonsense,’ ‘drivel,’ ‘trash,’ ‘garbage,’ ‘crap,’ ‘bull,’ or in its more vulgar form, ‘~!@#?%^&!*.’”⁴⁷ She adds that *leiros* is not used anywhere else in the New Testament, amplifying its effect.⁴⁸ When the purity of the Greek is not censored by the preacher, this text reveals a striking paradox:

The gospel has always met with ridicule, right from the very first time it was preached. It has always sounded like a lot of *leiros*. It has always been more than the church can handle, even when it is the very thing the church prays for; not even the disciples, as much as they loved Jesus, could take the good news.⁴⁹

Put to the purpose of clarifying scripture, a curse word takes on a new role. A curse word has the potential to disclose a divine message.

This emphasis on linguistic purity leads to the second way a curse word can reveal the sacred. The preacher's usage underscores the idea that the power of the gospel message supersedes the power of the curse word. This kind of usage can crack brittle understandings of what constitutes sacred speech and reveal the sacred as a sphere that is not bound by social propriety. Anthony "Tony" Campolo illustrates this phenomenon when he says:

First, while you were sleeping last night 30,000 kids died of starvation or diseases related to malnutrition. Second, most of you don't give a shit. What's worse is that you are more upset with the fact that I said shit than the fact that 30,000 kids died last night.⁵⁰

Campolo uses the affront of a curse word to reveal an even greater outrage: the church's disregard for poor people. In addition to effectively inviting listeners to care for people in need, Campolo's language challenges listeners to deepen their understandings of sacred speech. His approach may justifiably heighten expectations for the preaching event.

Campolo's stance leads to a third issue. With careful usage, curse words root the preaching event in the tradition of biblical prophets. The jarring language of prophetic speech is an essential aspect of its poetry. John the Baptist calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers" because the label stings.⁵¹ Jesus' takes on a comparably sharp tone when he says of Herod, "Go tell that fox. . ." ⁵² He directs the same edginess at lawyers and Pharisees with a battery of "Woe unto you's."⁵³ The damning effect of this diatribe is only outmatched by his inflammatory parables. Invectives are critical tools for Jesus as he exposes and resists the powers and principalities. In the hands of a skilled preacher, a curse word reorients listeners to the church's legacy of vigorously decrying evil.

Issues for Discernment

In light of the foregoing, one might ask whether there are words that ought to be off limits. Are there, for example, words that are so loaded with contempt that they ought not to be spoken? Are there words that cannot be put to holy purposes without actually harming listeners? Several words would likely fall in this category for preachers. There is clearly a role for discernment when it comes to word choice. Tone, context, and occasion will have an impact on a word's tendency to distract rather than clarify. Yet, a paternalistic posture toward listeners is not the answer. Faithful discernment entails resisting the limited range of expression that is generally considered acceptable for preachers. Sometimes faithful discernment will lead a preacher to speak in a tone that is "one octave too high" for comfort.⁵⁴

The nature of the audience is critical in the preacher's discernment process. For example, the intended audience of Jeremiah Wright's 2003 sermon, "Confusing God and Government" was generally able to receive his message about the evils of war. His inclusion of the phrase, "God damn America" did not overshadow the core message for these listeners. The general public's response, however, made it clear that this ability to contextualize cannot be assumed.⁵⁵ Preachers may expect a clause that includes a curse word to be extracted and quoted repeatedly. Accordingly, careful discernment should include the full phrase at issue rather than the curse word alone.

As another step in discernment, preachers might ask themselves why a given set of listeners need to be protected from stronger language. For instance, light swearing is generally more appropriate for listeners who are easily excitable or lack impulse control. Patients in a mental health facility or nursing home may fit within this category. Similarly, light swearing may better suit worship in a transitional housing community if formal language will engender self-respect. If no comparable parallel exists and listener comfort still takes priority, preachers might ask whether this entitlement to comfort is warranted. What end will the preacher's self-censoring serve?

Curse words work best in sermons when they serve the sermon's core message. The same logic a preacher uses when considering whether to include a sermon illustration helps in this regard. Will the illustration (or curse word) propel the message, distract from it, or take on a life of its own? How might inclusion contribute to a better understanding of the Good News? In a sermon on Mark 1:29-39, Roger Wikeley describes the Gospel of Mark as "just one damn thing after another."⁵⁶ After crediting British historian Arnold Toynbee for this phrase, Wikeley goes on to narrate the frenetic pace of Mark and of contemporary Western life. "One damn thing after another" becomes both a proxy for freneticism and a refrain magnifying the need for prayer. As the sermon progresses, listeners see "one damn thing after another" yield to the power of God's presence. In this sermon, then, cursing helps unveil the sublime. Similar effects are achievable when preachers attend to motive, context, and tone, and embrace the power of language rather than fear it.

Sweating, spitting, and cursing are usually deemed profane. Yet in distinct ways each provides sermon listeners with a reminder that God is not subject to social norms. The preacher's sweaty brow speaks to the gravity of the moment of proclamation. The spitting preacher testifies to a truth that pushes social propriety aside. The cursing preacher uses volatile words for sacred purposes. Each medium shows that holiness manifests in shocking ways, upending antiseptic notions of the sacred. Even that which is taboo can glorify God.

Notes

- 1 Walter Brueggemann, "Prophetic Leadership: Engagement in Counter-Imagination," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10, No. 1 (2011): 13.
- 2 Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, ed., Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 54.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 4 Luke 22:44.
- 5 R. Marie Griffith, "Material Devotion: Pentecostal Prayer Cloths," *Material History of American Religion Project Newsletter* (Spring 1997) <http://www.materialreligion.org/journal/handkerchief.html>.
- 6 Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 171-172.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 166.
- 8 Phillip B. Zarrilli, et. al., *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach After Stanislavski* (London: Routledge, 2008), 143.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 10 Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, *The Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Chrismation [Printable with Rubrics]* (Englewood, NJ: Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, 2008), 6.
- 11 John Wesley, *Directions Concerning Pronunciation and Gesture* (Bristol: William Pine, 1770), 5.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and The Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press), 177.
- 14 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 155.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 1 Corinthians 1:27 NRSV.
- 17 Geoffrey Hughes, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing: The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the English-Speaking World* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 21.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 114; Melissa Mohr, *Holy Sh*t: A Brief History of Swearing* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), 10; Hughes, *Encyclopedia*, 118.
- 19 Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing: a Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in England* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 11. Hughes speaks of priests outside the Christian and Jewish traditions.
- 20 Mohr, 3.
- 21 Mohr, 6-7.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 18, 90-91.

24 Ibid., 93.

25 Mohr, 12, 185-186.

26 Mohr, 86-87, 90. The inducement to sin seems to have grown out of an interpretation of Ephesians 5:3, which cautions against vulgar or silly talk or coarse joking. Another key scripture on the issue was Matthew 12:36-37, which warns of the need to give account for every idle word that is spoken.

27 Mohr, 9, 90.

28 Ibid., 13.

29 Ibid., 14.

30 Geoffrey Hughes asks whether light swearing actually has a net effect of undermining the “language of vehemence and urgency.” Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing: a Social History*, 253.

31 Hughes, *Encyclopedia*, 44.

32 Ibid.

33 “Loins” is used in Genesis 46:26 and Exodus 1:5 instead of “thigh.” This pattern is repeated with Jacob and Joseph in Genesis 47:29.

34 Job 2:9 NRSV.

35 Mohr, 197.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 197-198.

39 Hughes, *Swearing: a Social History*, 4.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 284.

43 Ibid., 293, 297.

44 Ibid., 291.

45 Thomas LeClair, “The Language Must Not Sweat” in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille K. Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 123.

46 Philippians 3:8 NRSV.

47 Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 118.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Larry L. McSwain and William Loyd Allen, eds., *Twentieth-century Shapers of Baptist Social Ethics* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 275-276.

51 Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7 NRSV.

52 Luke 13:32 NRSV.

53 Luke 11:42-52.

54 Lischer, 177, citing Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 10.

55 Kelefa Sanneh, "Project Trinity: The Perilous Mission of Obama's Church," *New Yorker*, April 7, 2008. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/04/07/project-trinity>.

56 The sermon was preached at All Souls Memorial Episcopal Church, Washington, DC on Feb. 8, 2015.