

## **The Silent Adjective and the Silenced Generation: Toward a Childist Homiletic**

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### ABSTRACT

The art of preaching has often been adult-centric in how it is discussed among academic homileticians and how it is practiced by frontline preachers, leaving children silent at the sidelines. In this article the author moves children to the center and asks what happens when the voices of the youngest in the faith community are prioritized in homiletical discourse and practice. Relying on the results of qualitative research into how children make theological meaning, this article builds a “childist” homiletic—an understanding of preaching and the practice thereof that emerges by foregrounding the experiences of children. After describing the broader study and the results therein, two major contributions are addressed: a focus on the processes by which children generate theological meaning and a recognition of the communal nature of such meaning-making. These ideas are then placed into conversation with theories and practices from the field of homiletics, particularly those surrounding the recent advancement of homiletical theology and approaches to conversational preaching that have been proposed in the last few decades. Out of such discussions emerge suggestions for rethinking and revitalizing the practice of preaching.

In a recent article about preaching and migration, HyeRan Kim-Cragg argued that “the dominant pattern of adult-centered preaching has persisted because until recently preachers had not paid sufficient attention to the importance of the congregation, including children, as active participants in sermon-making and delivery.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the tremendous changes ushered in by the New Homiletic, which shifted preaching in the past half-century from expository, preacher-centered approaches to those that actively and carefully consider the congregation and the lived realities of those who listen to sermons, contemporary preaching continues to be adult-centric.

The sight lines may have widened to include those who speak *and* those who listen during the preaching moment, but in the vast majority of cases children remain out of sight. Speaking figuratively, they are out of sight due to the lack of consideration by preachers and congregants alike. Yet children are—in a literal way—beyond the gaze of preachers when routinely excluded from the sermon or homily for the sake of “age-appropriate” educational practices. Discussions about preaching for children and resources for writing children’s sermons continue to emerge, but predominant discourses surrounding preaching are carried out with adults in mind, leaving children on the sidelines. Assumptions, norms, and practices of preaching assume *adult* as a silent adjective, an unnamed term modifying and describing theories and practices of preaching.<sup>2</sup>

What happens, however, when we shift our gaze and offer attention to children as active participants in preaching? What results when we listen to the voices of those who have been silenced, the ones whom Jesus told us are the true citizens of God’s kingdom? This article responds to these questions by seeking a “childist”<sup>3</sup> homiletic, that is, an understanding of preaching and the practice thereof that comes to life through the experiences of children. In a vein similar to Richard Voelz’s “advocacy theology” that relies on the homiletical voices of adolescents,<sup>4</sup> I draw from research into the theological meaning-making of children to consider what these young theologians can contribute to discourse surrounding Christian preaching in contemporary faith communities. I begin by briefly describing the larger qualitative study that I appropriate in this article. I then unpack two core qualities of children’s theological meaning-making that I witnessed in this study.<sup>5</sup> Building on these qualities, I draw from theories and practices from the field of homiletics. Finally, I offer suggestions for the practice of preaching in light of wisdom gleaned by the process.

It is my hope that this method will bring children into homiletical discourse not only by considering them as participants in congregational preaching practices, but also by allowing their voices to speak to the field. To this end I appropriate qualitative research into children’s theological meaning-making. I identify key characteristics that I observed among children’s practices of generating theological meaning and place them in conversation with relevant ideas within homiletics. Out of this discussion—one founded on and guided by children’s thoughts and experiences—those who are often silenced within the field of homiletics (and theology as a whole) offer advice for the practice of Christian preaching.

## ***LISTENING TO CHILDREN***

How do children make theological meaning in different cultural contexts? It was this question to which I sought a response through qualitative research. Throughout 2013 and 2014, I built relationships with four United Church of Canada congregations. Each of these faith communities self-identified in distinct ways, blending together social location, geography, ethnicity, nationality, liturgy, theology—among many other characteristics—into a culture all its own. Some were two centuries old and others were founded only a few decades ago. One was urban, one was rural, and two were suburban. Some could easily balance the books and others were struggling with limited financial resources. Sunday attendance ranged from no more than a dozen at one congregation and approximately 200 at another. And when it came to ethnicity and race, Burke Street United Church was predominantly white, Colkirk United Church was Aboriginal, Messiah Methodist United Church was made up of immigrants from Ghana, and Parkdale United Church was intentionally intercultural.

Each of these four congregations graciously welcomed me into their community. I came to know them by joining them for Sunday worship, conducting a focus group with their minister(s) and key children's ministry leaders, helping to lead Sunday school and vacation Bible camp programs, and—most crucially for this research—interviewing approximately five children from each congregation. These efforts allowed me to learn about the religious lives of these children and how their theological meaning-making intersects with the broader cultural ethos of their congregation. Speaking generally, these children engaged in theological meaning-making in ways that reflected the broader ethos of their congregation. Not only did the content of their theologies often align with that of the congregation, but so too did they sources from which they drew and the processes by which they generated theology. However, it's important to note that such reflection did not equate to exact mirroring; rather, the children put their own unique touches on theology by creating it in ways that were particular to their perceptions and experiences, as well as the additional cultures in which they participated.

I learned more from these young friends than I can possibly share in one piece of writing. Even with the publication of a book about this research,<sup>6</sup> new insights and ideas remain buried in the knowledge it generated, waiting to take root and sprout. This article is proof of this, for by relying on what I learned about how these children generate theological meaning, I can propose ideas toward a childist homiletic. Two such insights proved particularly noteworthy for this endeavor: the prominence of the processes by which children make theological meaning and the communal nature of their theological meaning-making.

## ***THE PROCESS OF THEOLOGICAL MEANING-MAKING***

Many studies into the religious and spiritual lives of human beings—children, adolescents, and adults alike—focus on *what* people believe. Beliefs about God, heaven, good and evil, particular doctrines, and

other cognitive matters often feature in both qualitative and quantitative inquiry. And researchers are not alone in underlining the beliefs of individuals. Countless books, curricula, and other resources for ministry practitioners hold to assumptions regarding the primacy of what one believes in the development of a well-grounded faith.

Beliefs as artefacts of personal faith were certainly prominent in my research into children's theological meaning-making. In fact, I began each interview by asking the children to draw a picture of God, a practice that opened a window into their inner lives through which we could speak about their faith. Through our conversations launched by their drawings, I learned that Marion believes that God is actively involved in her life, Stephen conceives of God as an abstract omnipresent being, and Enoch thinks that God and angels speak with one another.

Beliefs like these are the “stuff” of theology, the concrete tenets and ideas that, regardless of provability, we perceive as carrying truth.<sup>7</sup> Yet beliefs are the *products* of faith. As such, it stands to reason that they are *produced*. Indeed, my research highlighted the importance of the *production* of theological knowledge alongside the *products* that result from meaning-making processes. In fact, there were moments when I observed that the beliefs to which children ascribed—the products of their theological meaning-making—were quite distinct from the processes by which they generated meaning.

The clearest instance of this phenomenon occurred at Burke Street United Church, a suburban congregation consisting largely of white, middle-class members. I interviewed five children who participated in the different children's ministry programs offered by this congregation. The first two children I interviewed, Stephen and Rebecca, were both quite capable of speaking about their experiences at their congregation and the beliefs they held. They were the Sunday school superstars, the ones whom their teacher could count on to provide the correct answers to the questions she asked on Sunday mornings. Both had no trouble talking about their views, and twelve-year-old Stephen was particularly eloquent in articulating his beliefs, speaking openly and clearly about the ideas he learned from his congregation and from a church-based camp he attended the previous summer. However, when I asked these children questions that dug deeper and went beyond what they learned at church, they both struggled to speak about their own beliefs and understandings. The *products* of their theological meaning-making displayed a degree of complexity and maturity, but the *processes* by which they generated their own theology were underdeveloped.

Conversely, other children at this congregation had difficulty speaking about their theological ideas. This was especially true with Nicholas, an eight-year-old boy who didn't like attending Sunday school. I found it challenging to engage him in conversation about his beliefs for more than a few seconds before he changed topics to the Winter Olympics or the hockey game he was going to watch with his father after the interview. But as my conversation with him passed the half-way mark, he started to tell me about how he didn't think he believed some of the things he heard about at Sunday school and in worship services at

Burke Street. I invited him to say more and witnessed him move to a deeper level of theological meaning-making as he spoke about why he suspects some things he hears are true, but others are not. He articulated self-made parameters for discerning reliability and truthfulness within biblical stories and, going further, he demonstrated a view of scripture that was multi-layered and complex. The content of his theology may have been tenuous, but the processes by which he created meaning showcased intentional discernment and a willingness to wrestle with uncertainty.

### *TOWARD A HOMILETIC FOR THEOLOGICAL MEANING-MAKING*

The children from Burke Street speak to the importance of considering not simply the products of theology—the beliefs and ideas about which we preach from the pulpit—but also the processes by which theological meaning is made. Preaching, like many disciplines related to practical theology, has for generations been perceived as derivative rather than generative and reduced to “a delivery system for the insights of other disciplines.”<sup>8</sup> Consistent with many resources for ministry with children, homiletics has been perceived to be more concerned with depositing the “stuff” of theology into the hearts and minds of listeners, overlooking how it can serve as a means for producing this stuff in the first place. Such a reality is deeply resonant with what Paulo Freire famously named the “banking” concept of education.<sup>9</sup>

The tide has been turning for the past few decades and a growing number of scholars and preachers are recognizing the nature of preaching as a means for generating theology. David Schnasa Jacobsen spearheaded a recent surge in this movement through the Homiletical Theology Project. In the introduction to the most recent of four books produced through this project, he writes, “the practice of preaching is not just where theology is franchised from the systematicians. Instead, the sermon is where theology is done rhetorically and fostered conversationally.”<sup>10</sup> By placing text and context into conversation and then making the results of that dialogue audible in the preaching moment, the sermon becomes more than a vehicle for transmitting theological products—ideas and beliefs—generated by systematic theologians from the halls of the academy to the ears of listeners in congregations. Rather, the entire process of sermon preparation and delivery is a particular method for producing theology. In Jacobsen’s words, “preaching the gospel is a profoundly theological activity.”<sup>11</sup>

Jacobsen and other homileticians who are part of the movement to recognize the theological work that happens in preaching offer a theoretical framework for the process of theological meaning-making. Like the children who were part of my research, they underscore that the generation of theology (or *theologies*) is not reserved for a certain set-apart group of individuals. Instead, it is carried out as a preacher prepares and delivers a sermon or as a child ruminates on the historical veracity of the Resurrection.

A problem plaguing recent discourse in homiletical theology is the propensity to perceive the process of theological meaning making as an occurrence exclusively within the domain of the preacher. With few

exceptions, analysis of preaching as a way of doing theology overlooks the participation of listeners in the process, apart from their role as passive hearers to whom this rhetorical and conversational approach of theology is expressed. Jacobsen joins David Buttrick in inverting Karl Barth's assertion that all theology is "nothing other than sermon preparation"<sup>12</sup> to argue that "sermon preparation after all is nothing other than theology."<sup>13</sup> Elaborating on this revolutionary proposition, Jacobsen writes "it is theology done in earshot of hearers, with hearers in mind, and reflects this theology through the practices, theories, and contexts that matter to it most deeply... [H]omiletical theology is something all preachers do professionally."<sup>14</sup> Yes, those who listen to sermons are identified as consequential players in homiletical theology. But the preachers are perceived to do the lion's share of the process. All of this begs the question, do members of congregations who listen to sermons play an active role in homiletical theology?

In the chapters that follow Jacobsen's introduction to *Homiletical Theology*, two homileticians indicate that listeners do more than passively receive the fruits of the preacher's constructive theological work. As she puts forward her understanding of the sapiential nature of hermeneutics, Alyce McKenzie speaks of the communal nature of this process, one that comes to life among groups of individuals.<sup>15</sup> And John McClure relies on a recent Danish study into listeners' engagement with sermons to make explicit the role of congregants in the process of theological meaning-making engendered through preaching.<sup>16</sup>

The study to which McClure points is an initiative of Marianne Gaarden to describe churchgoers' engagement with sermons in congregations within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark.<sup>17</sup> Hardly passive receptacles of the products created through the preacher's theological processes, congregants in this research "created their own meaning in dialogic iteration with the sermonic discourse interwoven in the entire service."<sup>18</sup> In fact, Gaarden argues that the act of preaching builds a "third room," a liminal space in which "the listeners in an internal dialogue create a surplus of meaning that was previously not present in either the preacher's intent or the listener's frame of reference."<sup>19</sup> It is not the sermon itself that constitutes the act of preaching, but the new ideas, insights, and meanings that are generated by the active engagement of the listeners and the supportive role of the preacher in the polyphonic space that the sermon engenders.<sup>20</sup>

### ***PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH***

The rise of homiletical theology à la Jacobsen opens a previously overlooked vista to the processes of theological meaning-making engendered through sermon preparation and delivery. McKenzie, McClure, and Gaarden traverse further over this new horizon by examining preaching as a means by which listeners generate their own theological meaning through active engagement with the sermon. Similarly, my research into children's theological meaning-making thrusts attention onto the processes by which they create meaning. As such, by placing the fruits of this study alongside the homiletical insights described above, we can learn much about what it might look like to preach with an intent to open "third rooms" in which listeners actively participate in the creation of theological meaning.

Our young theologian friends remind us that the opening of these liminal “third rooms” requires openness on the part of preachers. For one thing, preaching that ignites theological meaning-making involves an openness to diversity and disagreement. The sermon is not a venue for offering beliefs or ideas to which we want listeners to ascribe as much as a means for inviting them into conversation—internal if not external—through which they wrestle with ideas and come to their own conclusions. The children I introduced above call attention to the fact that when people make theological meaning for themselves, they do so in ways that may be beyond the bounds of official doctrine or denominationally-sanctioned tenets. As Nicholas questioned the truthfulness of the Resurrection so too will our listeners surprise us (maybe even startle us!) with the conclusions they draw. Diversity will abound. Disagreement will ensue. And it will be gloriously messy and wonderfully tenuous. McKenzie claims that trusting listeners to engage with our sermons in their own ways requires a “high tolerance for complexity and ambiguity...Out of honoring complexity and humility comes a respect for diversity.”<sup>21</sup> Such openness to diversity and disagreement acknowledges homiletical theology not as a place of consensus but as a place of contestation that “expects, accepts, and respects a diversity of interpretations.”<sup>22</sup>

A second openness needed for buttressing processes for producing theological insights among listeners is an openness to alternative ways of knowing. The cultural diversity built into my research with children among culturally-distinct congregations made it clear that my socialization as a white, heterosexual, Euro-Canadian male provided me with a particular epistemology. Moreover, the dominance of this vantage point made it difficult for me to comprehend the alternative ways of producing, holding, and expressing knowledge that arose in my conversations with children. The children at Colkirk United Church, a First Nations congregation, for example, expressed narrative approaches to meaning-making, often telling stories—those passed down to them, those recounting their experiences, and those made up in the moment—without want or need of explanation.<sup>23</sup> Other children, like those who were influenced by a Godly Play program at Burke Street United Church, were more inclined to make theological meaning by asking questions and making “wonder statements” reminiscent of those that are so central to this approach to religious education.<sup>24</sup> Preachers do well, then, to invite not only a diversity of ideas but also a diversity of ways of holding and expressing such ideas. Going further, we can model alternative ways of knowing to our faith communities. We can, for example, share stories not as descriptions, examples, or sermon helps, but as both sources for and methods of theological meaning-making. Or we might preach not based on a particular theme sentence or proposition,<sup>25</sup> but on an open-ended question that we offer without answer in order to instigate deep engagement among listeners.

Finally, preaching that encourages listeners to actively produce theological meaning calls for an openness to many ways in which that meaning becomes enacted in the world. In describing the need for a homiletical approach to theology, Jacobsen repeatedly identifies what preachers do as “articulating” and “speaking” gospel,<sup>26</sup> two manifestations of what appears to be the broader, more fundamental homiletical task: “naming gospel in this moment and in this context.”<sup>27</sup> If listeners are involved in the act of preaching

by making theological meaning, then surely they share in naming gospel. A childist homiletic dares us to broaden our visions and push the boundaries of our imaginations far enough to include countless ways that we, preacher and listener alike, might name gospel in this time and place. Yes, we might speak and articulate gospel, remembering that some among us convey the profundity of the gospel with limited vocabulary.<sup>28</sup> But as I reflect on the tremendous depth conveyed in the drawings that the children made during my interviews with them, I cannot help but think of the many ways we can name gospel without using words. Children remind us that we can draw, sketch, and paint gospel. But this is just the beginning. We can also laugh gospel, weep gospel, shout gospel, share gospel, skip gospel, give gospel, receive gospel, and hug gospel “in this moment and in this context.” If the gospel has no bounds, then neither do the ways we can name it.

### COMMUNAL THEOLOGY

The processes by which children generate theology matters. How then, did these young people make theological meaning? While I could write pages and pages in response to this question (and, indeed, I have), one of the most salient ways was through collaboration. These children, regardless of their congregation, demonstrated that theology is not simply something made and held individually.

Creating theology is a communal and collaborative act. This reality was particularly evident during the interviews with children at Parkdale United Church. The minister of this diverse and intentionally intercultural congregation grounds her leadership in a theology of community. As such, she required that I meet with children in pairs or small groups instead of through the individual interviews I originally imagined. Since, as she informed me, nothing at Parkdale is done individually, it only made sense that the community-driven nature of this congregation guide their participation in my research.

During these small group interviews, I noticed that rather than simply talk about what they believed—as if they came to the interview with their ready-made theology in their backpacks—the children created theology as they conversed with one another. Here is one instance of this phenomenon:

Dave: What are the kinds of things that make you think of, that make you know that that’s Jesus?

Grace: Um, he looks kind of old.

Dave: Kind of old?

Angela: He wears robes.

Dave: Yeah?

Angela: In many pictures he wears robes.

Grace: A beard.

Dave: ...So why do you think that Jesus wears robes?

Angela: (*pause*) Um...I don’t know.

Dave: Do you think if Jesus came back, like, if he was here today, would he wear robes?

Grace: Maybe.

Angela: Yeah. Or if he wants to wear like a suit.

Grace: Yeah.

Dave: So maybe, maybe not. What makes you think he would or wouldn't [wear a suit]?

Grace: Because it's, like, more modern times.

Angela: So he'd wear more modern clothes.

Dave: So the robes are because that's what he wore back in the day? (*Angela and Grace nod in agreement.*)

This exchange is one of many that provides evidence of the communal nature of theological meaning-making among these children. As they responded to my questions and explored theological thoughts with one another, they took their thinking to deeper levels and came up with ideas that would not have been possible without the prompts and musings they offered each other.

One of the most fascinating instances of the collaborative nature of theological meaning-making occurred when I met with Jacob and Enoch, two boys at Parkdale. At one point Enoch said, "whenever you lie a lightning bolt hits you that God throws at you which you can't really see." Jacob wasn't quite sure what to make of this statement, for the literal meaning he took from it did not align with his experiences. He admitted to us that he has lied. And yet he has never been hit by lightning. He could have simply disagreed with Enoch, but instead Jacob continued to ruminate on this idea, eventually generating new insight in that moment. As our conversation continued, Jacob thought aloud that perhaps he had never been struck by lightning when he lied because he was aware that he lied. The lightning bolt of which Enoch spoke, instead of a punishment from on high, was in his mind a divine warning to raise one's awareness of a wrongful act. Jacob came to a new interpretation of the saying that Enoch offered, thus demonstrating a willingness to expand the boundaries of his theological imagination and allow new insights to spring up in the midst of our conversation.

Theology as a collaborative enterprise was clearly evident in the processes for making meaning and in the products that resulted. My analysis of pages and pages of transcripts led me to see instances in which the insights generated by common theologizing among the children were actually shared meaning, ideas not held by one child alone, but by all those who played a role in manufacturing it. As these young theologians riffed off each other, finished one another's thoughts, and responded to questions posed by others in the group, they were demonstrating that theological meaning-making can be a shared practice that unfolds with one another and leads to insights that are held communally.

The generation of theological insight through communal means was not evident only in those instances when I interviewed children in pairs or small groups. It was also perceptible as the children with whom I met individually made theology with me and my research assistants. Despite the vast cultural differences among children and the faith communities in which they were involved, the communal means by which they generated theological meaning was one of the most frequent and conspicuous characteristics of

theology shared among these children.

### *TOWARD A HOMILETIC FOR COMMUNAL THEOLOGY*

Acknowledging the communal nature of theology to which these children call attention pushes the boundaries of preaching from an act centered on the preacher to one expansive enough to envelop the whole of the faith community. It moves from what Doug Pagitt calls “speaching”<sup>29</sup>—a unidirectional speech written and offered by the preacher alone—to styles of preaching that cast their nets on the side of community wisdom.

Collaborative approaches to preaching are not completely new, even if they remain under-utilized. In *The Homiletic of All Believers*, O. Wesley Allen names three approaches to what he calls conversational preaching: conversation before the sermon, conversation during the sermon, and sermons that place tradition and contemporary life in conversation with one another.<sup>30</sup> The first two of these approaches lend themselves toward preaching in light of the communal nature of theology.

Near the end of the twentieth century John McClure proposed a conversational method of sermon preparation that involves the efforts of multiple people within a faith community. While explicitly stating that he is not advocating that preachers facilitate conversations *during* sermons, he proposes that preachers host weekly roundtable conversations about the upcoming biblical readings with small groups of congregants. This collaborative process of interpretation can then be used as a significant source of insight for the preacher as she harvests from this greenhouse of communal wisdom in preparing and delivering her message the following Sunday. In this way, McClure argues, preaching can empower the church to become “a community of both ecclesial and public memory.”<sup>31</sup>

At around the same time that McClure made his proposal for roundtable preaching, Lucy Atkinson Rose put forward her own approach to conversational preaching. Like McClure, she made plain her view that “conversational sermons are not ‘dialogue sermons’ or ‘interactive sermons,’”<sup>32</sup> even though these sermon forms might reflect her approach. Rather, she advocated for a broader view of conversational preaching that centers on the gathering of a community around the Word of God.<sup>33</sup> Instead of McClure’s literal conversations that feed into sermon preparation and delivery, Rose named the act of preaching as conversational when the entire community—preacher and listeners alike—come together as equal partners on a common exploration to better understand and live out their faith. The sermon, then, instead of offering expository and propositional truths, is “about tentative interpretations, proposals that invite counterproposals, and the preacher’s wagers as genuine convictions played in conversation with the wagers of others.”<sup>34</sup>

Two decades later Anna Carter Florence added to this discourse by writing about how faith communities can become “repertory churches” that make meaning of scripture through collaborative

methods inspired by theatre.<sup>35</sup> Out of her extensive background in homiletics, Florence uncovered ideas and practices for empowering members of faith communities to interpret scripture for themselves as they rehearse texts through methods like blocking the scene, changing verbs, and altering the settings. While McClure's interest in community biblical interpretation is in service of making the preaching moment more collaborative and less authoritative, Florence's priority is the generation of wisdom through community readings of scripture.<sup>36</sup> Her method may not be explicitly in service of preparing the Sunday message, but her allusions to the gifts that this approach offers to preachers demonstrates that it can imprint itself on the sermon manuscript.

Doug Pagitt advocates for transforming the preaching moment into a time in which the congregation makes theological meaning together—what Allen identifies as conversation during the sermon. His style of preaching as progressional dialogue builds collaboration into sermon preparation, but it takes full flight in the sermon itself. The preacher offers a message that invites those gathered together to participate in hearing, interpreting, and communicating the good news with one another. Through careful preparation and keen improvisation, preachers offer their ideas in order to begin a conversation among the congregation—in that very moment—one that “involves the intentional interplay of multiple viewpoints that leads to unexpected and unforeseen ideas.”<sup>37</sup> It is, in a sense, a combination of McClure's dialogical sermon preparatory groups, Rose's deep posture of conversational preaching, and Florence's improvisational repertory biblical interpretation rolled into a method that brings dialogue and collaboration to the surface in the act of preaching.

### ***PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH***

These four preachers—McClure, Rose, Florence, and Pagitt—all uphold the communal nature of theological meaning-making that was so clearly evident among the children involved my research. Yet homileticians and preachers like these four are not the only ones who offer wisdom about preaching in light of the communal generation of meaning; the children themselves provide three helpful suggestions for preachers who wish to foster communal approaches to theological reflection in the preparation and delivery of sermons.

First, my conversations with these children have a word to say—as do each of the authors cited above—about the relationship among members of the meaning-making community. While certain aspects of my role placed me in a position of power over the children (my age being one of them), I was careful to inform and remind them that I was not a teacher or a minister in that space; I was the learner and they were my teachers.<sup>38</sup> This relationship between adult learner and child teacher stands in contrast to the equality that Florence imagines among partnerships in repertory groups.<sup>39</sup> It challenges preachers to seriously consider existing and desired power dynamics within communities. Preachers need to remind their congregations regularly that they are one among the priesthood of all believers who embark together on

the quest for shared meaning. Going further, their work as hosts of meaning-making communities involves paying careful attention to their inherent power and using it to empower everyone to have a voice in the community. As I did when I met with each of the children, preachers need to remind their congregations as often as necessary that they are there to learn from the gathered community, even as they hold a particular position of authority within it.

Second, these children cast light on the need for spaces in which theological meaning is created to be free of judgment. After I conducted an interview with children it was not unusual for parents to send me emails and ministers to make comments indicating the tremendous value that the children placed on the opportunity to share their inner thoughts with me. Even though their parents and ministers wanted these children to think for themselves, the children appreciated the freedom that came with speaking with someone who made it explicit that they would not judge the validity or veracity of their views. Likewise, for preaching to open spaces in which preacher and congregants alike are free to generate and express their theological ideas, it is incumbent on us to adopt the age-old saying of educators: there are no stupid questions. But we go further in saying that there are also no stupid answers. Of course, we may hear people express theology that is damaging and harmful—to their lives and the lives of others. But we must be cautious not to explicitly “correct” such ideas, which can perpetuate shame already foisted on individuals—especially marginalized peoples—and disempower the democratic approach to collaborative meaning-making for which I am advocating.<sup>40</sup> When we hear troubling and potential destructive theology among congregants, preachers can at once affirm the process of meaning-making without affirming the product. We can go further and gently invite alternative viewpoints and options that, like the boys from Parkdale wondering about divine lightning strikes, expand the theological imaginations of the community. For example, while there were times when, like Jacob, children took initiative to engage and wrestle with differing viewpoints, there were other times when such engagement unfolded only after prompted by open-ended questions that I posed.

Finally, for theological meaning-making to be formed in community, those involved need a sense of the importance of their participation. Whenever I interviewed children, I ensured that they knew that their ideas mattered. Yes, they mattered to my research, for without their thoughts my project would have been DOA. Even more than this, their ideas mattered personally to my faith, pushing me to think deeper and harder and revitalizing my spiritual life. Preachers can let their congregants know that their ideas matter, that the thoughts erupting from robust and mutual engagement in theological reflection make a difference to our lives, to the lives of one another, and to the life of the church in the world. There are at least three simple and meaningful ways that we can do this. First, we can consistently thank others when they share their ideas, demonstrating appreciation for and giving value to their contributions. Second, we can affirm the risk involved in sharing our ideas, acknowledging the vulnerability required in making public one’s inner thoughts. And third, we can demonstrate how the process of making and sharing communal meaning has changed our own thinking and practice, both in the moment and across longer periods of time.<sup>41</sup> Most of all, however, we can remind our communities of the presence of God within the process.

Gordon Kaufman calls us to affirm that God not only appears in the moment when new ideas are created, but that that creation itself is the presence of God among us.<sup>42</sup> When preachers invite the community to make meaning together, God is incarnated in our midst.

### **TOWARD A CHILDIST HOMILETIC**

Like any emerging discourse, the move toward a childist homiletic can take many shapes. Indeed, preachers and pastors across the globe are experimenting with all sorts of preaching practices that emerge from within intergenerational congregations; such practices consider young people as messages are prepared, proclaimed, and experienced within a faith community.<sup>43</sup> Yet even as theologians and practitioners alike begin to prioritize children—a silenced generation within preaching—they need not do so at the expense of adolescents, adults, and seniors who are also part of the congregation that listens to sermons. Rather, our efforts to move children’s experiences out from the sidelines means they now share the court with people of all ages.

There is much more that can be done to build a childist homiletic. But the two foundational insights garnered through my research into children’s theological meaning-making provide first waymarkers on a journey that is only beginning. They call attention to vistas that open when all people, preacher and listeners alike, are empowered to generate theology by actively interacting with the sermon. And they direct attention to the horizons of possibility that unfold when this process of making theological meaning is perceived as collaborative and communal in nature. In a field in which children are regularly overlooked, these silenced voices have much to contribute—if we take the time to listen and learn from them.

### **Notes**

1. HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “Unfinished and Unfolding Tasks of Preaching: Interdisciplinary, Intercultural, and Interreligious Approaches in the Postcolonial Context of Migration,” *Homiletic* 44, no. 2 (2019): 9
2. Some quick online searches, for example, indicate that while there are books for preaching for children, adolescents, and even seniors, one is hard pressed to find parallel resources for preaching for adults. See, for example, Sara Covin Juengst, *Sharing Faith with Children: Rethinking the Children’s Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), Beth Edington Hewitt, *Captivating Children’s Sermons: Crafting Powerful, Practical Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Children’s Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), David L. Bartlett and Carol Bartlett, *Feasting on the Word Guide to Children’s Sermons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), Richard W. Voelz, *Youthful Preaching: Strengthening the Relationship between Youth, Adults, and Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), William J. Carl Jr., ed., *Graying Gracefully: Preaching to Older Adults* (Louisville: Westminster

John Knox, 1997).

3. Some recent authors such as Elisabeth Young-Bruehl have used childist and childism to describe prejudice against children (in a similar vein as sexism and racism). Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). However, my use aligns with those who, like John Wall, see childism as “an effort to respond to the experiences of children by transforming understanding and practices for all” (akin to feminism and womanism). John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

4. Voelz, *Youthful Preaching*.

5. David M. Csinos, “A Faith Worth Making: Understanding the Cultural Nature of Children’s Theology—and Why It Matters,” in *Story, Formation, and Culture: From Theory to Practice in Ministry with Children*, edited by Benjamin D. Espinoza, James Riley Estep, Jr., and Shirley Morgenthaler, 195–207 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018).

6. David M. Csinos, *Little Theologians: Children, Culture, and the Making of Theological Meaning* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020).

7. While many dictionaries of theological terms do not explicitly define belief, use of the word in definitions of other terms imply that it has to do with cognitive products or artefacts of faith. See, for example, Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999) and Donald K. McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

8. Alyce M. McKenzie, “The Company of Sages: Homiletical Theology as a Sapiential Hermeneutic,” in *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology*, edited by David Schnasa Jacobsen, 87–102 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 90.

9. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2007), 72.

10. David Schnasa Jacobsen, “Introduction,” in *Toward a Homiletical Theology of Promise*, edited by David Schnasa Jacobsen, 1–8 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 4.

11. David Schnasa Jacobsen, “What is Homiletical Theology?: An Invitation to Constructive Theological Dialogue in North American Homiletics,” in *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology*, edited by David Schnasa Jacobsen, 23–38 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 34. Emphasis original.

12. Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 17.

13. David G. Buttrick, Foreword to *Homiletics*, by Karl Barth, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels, 7–10 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 10.

14. David Schnasa Jacobsen, “Introduction,” in *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology*, edited by David Schnasa Jacobsen, 3–19 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 8–9. Jacobsen also names the constructive work of homiletical

theology as “the work that preachers do” in the opening paragraph of the second volume in this series. David Schnasa Jacobsen, “Introduction,” in *Homiletical Theology in Action: The Unfinished Theological Task of Preaching*, edited by David Schnasa Jacobsen, 1–14 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 1.

15. McKenzie, “The Company of Sages,” 97.

16. John S. McClure, “Preaching as Soft Heresy: Liturgy and the Communicative Dimension of Homiletical Theology,” in *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology*, edited by David Schnasa Jacobsen, 56–71 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015).

17. Marianne Gaarden and Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, “Listeners as Authors in Preaching: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives,” *Homiletic* 38, no. 1 (2013): 28–45. Marianne Gaarden, *The Third Room of Preaching: The Sermon, the Listener, and the Creation of Meaning* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

18. Gaarden and Lorensen, “Listeners as Authors in Preaching,” 29.

19. Gaarden, *The Third Room of Preaching*, loc. 2271.

20. Gaarden and Lorensen, “Listeners as Authors in Preaching,” 45.

21. McKenzie, “The Company of Sages,” 98.

22. McKenzie, “The Company of Sages,” 98.

23. Marlene Brant Castellano identifies narrativity is a key characteristic of Indigenous epistemologies. Marlene Brant Castellano, “Updating Aboriginal Traditions of Knowledge,” in *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World*, edited by George J. Sefa Dei, Budd L. Hall, and Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg, 21–36 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

24. See Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991). Gaarden also noticed a tendency for listeners to identify questions rather than answers. Gaarden, *The Third Room of Preaching*, loc. 1594.

25. See Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007) and Samuel D. Proctor, *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1994).

26. See, for example: David Schnasa Jacobsen, “The Unfinished Task of Homiletical Theology: A Practical-Constructive Vision,” in *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology*, edited by David Schnasa Jacobsen, 39–55 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 43, 46; Jacobsen, “Introduction,” in *Homiletical Theology in Action*, 13; David Schnasa Jacobsen, “Introduction,” in *Theologies of the Gospel in Context: The Crux of Homiletical Theology*, edited by David Schnasa Jacobsen, 1–14 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 1, 3.

27. Jacobsen, “The Unfinished Task,” 43.

28. See Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, “Tell Me a Story: Narrative and the Religious Imagination of Children,” in *Faith Forward, Volume 2: Re-Imagining Children’s and Youth Ministry*, edited by David M. Csinos and Melvin Bray, 99–109

(Kelowna, BC: CopperHouse, 2015).

29. Doug Pagitt, *Preaching in the Inventive Age* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014).

30. O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

31. John S. McLure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 19.

32. Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 96.

33. Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 93.

34. Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 100.

35. Anna Carter Florence, *Rehearsing Scripture: Discovering God's Word in Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

36. Florence goes so far as to say that reading scripture—individually or in community—with an eye toward sermon writing actually restricts the boundaries of one's imaginative interpretation. Florence, *Rehearsing Scripture*, 109-11.

37. Pagitt, *Preaching*, 45.

38. See Ruth Emond, "Ethnographic Research Methods with Children and Young People," in *Researching Children's Experience: Approaches and Methods*, edited by Sheila Greene and Diane Hogan, 123-39 (London: Sage, 2005), 124. This is a position that Robert Coles assumed when he conducted interviews with children: "I let the children know as clearly as possible, and as often as necessary, what it is I am trying to learn, how they can help me." Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 27.

39. See, for example, Florence, *Rehearsing Scripture*, 111.

40. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 93-103.

41. Richard Voelz notes that the models of preaching proposed by McClure, Rose, and Florence "all assume the potential for full participation in a congregation's homiletic process" it does not mean that their contributions are unquestionably affirmed as valid. In his words, "We must discern together if the theories and practices that emerge through careful listening are in need of further formation." Voelz, *Youthful Preaching*, 79, 91.

42. Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

43. My current work involves research into intergenerational approaches to preaching. For a brief and very preliminary discussion, see David M. Csinos, "Ignoring Jesus for 2000 Years: Why Our Preaching Practices Need to Change," *Flourishing Congregations*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.flourishingcongregations.org/post/2020/04/02/flourishing-update-april-6-2020>.