

Moved to Mercy: A Practical Theological Examination of Sight and Sound in Motivating Merciful Action

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ABSTRACT

In a time of ongoing global crises, the re-prioritizing of mercy as a core exercise of Christian identity takes on new urgency. Questions of how to love our neighbors concretely, consistently, and in ways that embody justice have become topics of everyday conversation, with people around the globe wrestling with what it means to care for and support those within and beyond their communities. At the same time, intentions to show mercy towards one's neighbors do not always lead to its expression. This paper engages the question of "how" people become moved to merciful action by examining the roles sight and sound play in cultivating compassion for those who suffer. Drawing on Basil of Caesarea's sermons and research from the cognitive sciences, I claim that seeing and hearing play fundamental roles in fostering compassion and that prioritizing and developing practices of physical and psychological encounter with those who are suffering can move religious communities towards merciful practice towards others.

In a time of ongoing global crises—devastating weather changes, racial terror, government repression and political polarization, and public health crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, and the inequities it has exposed and entrenched—the re-prioritizing of mercy as a core exercise of Christian identity takes on new urgency. Indeed, questions of how to stand with, support, and care for our neighbors concretely, consistently, and in ways that embody justice and the righting of relations, activities Christian

have historically called mercy, have become topics of everyday conversation. People across the globe are wrestling with what it looks like to assist and support people they know and love, as well as those they do not.

At the same time, while public knowledge of communities' suffering may be high, practical questions about whether, who and how to assist are not always clear. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, especially within the United States, has only sharpened such questions. Struggles over the "who" and "how" of mercy have become a subject of public and political debate across increasingly partisan lines, exacerbating the country's existing polarization and obscuring, rather than clarifying, social obligations and concern. Even where desires to respond compassionately and materially to others' sufferings are strong, such intentions do not always find expression. In fact, in times of crisis and uncertainty such as these, the potential for fear, insularity, apathy, or even antagonism towards others are just as likely as their counterpart.

For Christians, the practice of mercy is a first fruit of faith. To care for the least, Jesus says, is to welcome him, and to show mercy without distinction is to reflect his image in the world. By mercy, I mean dynamic, integral demonstration of empathy, compassion and justice expressed through acts of socio-political and material support, solidarity, and structural redress of inequity and unjust suffering. Such mercy, significantly, is central to God's identity and a core way that humans imitate the divine. The question, of course, is how people move from good intentions and theological ideas about mercy to experiencing the compassion and personal connection essential for enacting it. In other words, by what processes does one translate contemplation of care for "the vulnerable" into concrete acts of support, compassion and advocacy?

Karl Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics*, offers clues into the process by which we find ourselves moved to support others. The key to moving from self-preoccupation and indifference to care and compassion for others, he writes, is to "look one another in the eye"¹ and to engage in "mutual speech and hearing."² Only when these two have been practiced are we moved to show "mutual assistance,"³ and to do so with gladness. This is because we are "beings-in-encounter:" namely, beings who depend on intimate relationships with God and others to be most fully human.⁴ For Barth, then, the movement from being indifferent and ultimately "inhuman" to mercy-full occurs through personal encounter. Such encounter includes speaking with and listening to God, as well as turning to look and converse with others.

Building on Barth's insights about the significance of looking and listening for encouraging glad, mutual assistance, this paper engages the question of "how" people become moved to mercy by examining the roles physical and imaginative sight and sound play in cultivating emotional connection with and compassion for those who suffer. In developing my argument, I draw on biblical texts, a selection of sermons from Basil of Caesarea, and cognitive science research on looking and listening in an effort to create a rich and nuanced understanding of how acts of literal and imaginative seeing and hearing nourish our emotional concern and care for others. I ultimately claim that seeing and hearing—whether real or imagined—play fundamental roles in fostering compassion and that such compassion and emotional connection play a vital role in inspiring and sustaining merciful action. Developing and prioritizing practices of physical and psychological encounter with those who are suffering can help religious communities move from *careless-*

ness to *care-fullness* and from musings about mercy to its practice.

The paper proceeds in four parts. I begin by briefly considering the biblical foundations of mercy and its connection to seeing and listening in Scripture, arguing that both looking and listening are deeply intertwined with God's way of exercising mercy towards humanity. I then turn to the fourth century, engaging one of Basil of Caesarea's sermons as translated in a short collection, *Sermons on Social Justice*, as a case study for thinking about "how" to move people to mercy by engaging them in imaginative forms of seeing and hearing.⁵ I show how the logic of the bishop's argument in his sermon, "To The Rich," as well as his use of rhetorical devices to bring the faces and cries of the poor into his parishioners' purviews, reflects Basil's convictions that seeing and hearing God and others rightly are intrinsically related to mercy and the compassion that undergirds it. While I provide a fuller rationale for turning to Basil below, drawing on early historical sources for insight into mercy serves a wider aim of situating current conversations in practical theology about mercy and solidarity in a broader history of Christian reflection on and engagement with these central activities of the faith. More generally, historical inquiry can provide practical theologians with sightlines into performances of faith not readily visible from our twenty-first century vantage point, providing fresh ideas for thinking about and responding to current dilemmas that, while particular to our times, share resonances with situations faced by earlier generations.⁶

After examining Basil's sermons, I bring cognitive science research on the relationship between seeing, hearing, and compassion into conversation with Basil's ideas, parsing out how his attempts to move people toward mercy by rhetorically appealing to the eyes and ears align with insights from cognitive science research on literal and imagined forms of looking and listening. Cognitive science, like the historical sources above, can enrich practical theological reflection by providing complementary readings of human relationality, serving as a particularly important conversation partner for reflecting on the relationship between emotions, cognition, and action central to the question of how people become moved to mercy. Importantly, cognitive science research, in conjunction with cognitive and social neuroscience research, indicates that literal seeing and hearing engage the same processes as imaginative forms of seeing and hearing, with the latter thus producing equally strong emotional responses and actions in the imager as literal seeing and hearing.

I conclude by reflecting on some tensions that arise with Basil's approach and scientific accounts and point to a few implications for Christian leaders and communities seeking to make the practice of mercy more central to their lives—both in this time of crisis and the years to come. Above all, I underscore the importance of helping religious communities cultivate an ongoing physical and psychological connection with those who suffer by actively engaging their literal and imaginative capacities for seeing and hearing others in ways that enable them to recognize suffering others as their "kin."

IMITATING GOD THROUGH COMPASSION: BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SEEING, HEARING AND MERCY-MAKING

Christian history is rife with stories that reflect the inconsistency between proclamations about the

importance of mercy and our disinclination to actually practice it,⁷ yet the mandate to show it remains clear. In this section, I briefly examine the biblical basis for prioritizing mercy in the Christian life and its connections to seeing and hearing before turning to Basil of Caesarea's efforts to persuade his listeners to practice it.

One need not look long in the biblical texts before encountering commands to show mercy. German Cardinal Walter Kasper, in his *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and Key to Christian Life*, traces mercy's genealogy in the Hebrew bible and New Testament, arguing that mercy is a multifaceted concept intimately intertwined with "compassion," "pity," "sympathy," and "justice." This joining of mercy with compassion and justice, moreover, is tied to claims about God's faithfulness, *hesed* (loving kindness), and relational "womb love,"⁸ underscoring the way God's mercy ultimately arises from compassion.⁹ In other words, God does not offer mercy out of obligation, but out of a relational commitment to and compassion for the creatures God created. Kasper points to God's revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai, in which God reveals God's name as "the LORD, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding with steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty," as a central manifestation of what is meant by mercy, as well as God's identity (Ex 35:5–7 NRSV). For Kasper, God's identity is performed and known through acts of mercy marked by compassion, love and justice.¹⁰ He thus defines mercy as "God's creative and fertile justice," a justice, importantly, that cannot be separated from compassion and love.¹¹

Kasper's conceptualization of mercy as God's creative, life-giving and sustaining justice, energized by compassion and love, is echoed in both the Torah and prophetic literature, and developed with special reference to humanity's *imitatio Dei*. The Levitical codes, for instance, seeking to explain and codify what it means to "be holy as the Lord God is holy" in practical life, make practicing the mercy, graciousness, and slowness to anger that mark God's identity in Exodus 34 central to what it means for Israel to live as a sanctified and holy people. Kenneth Seeskin specifically argues that the call for Israel's holiness in Leviticus in 11:44, one of the book's key concerns, is ultimately a call to the task of mercy and graciousness expressed in loving the "stranger, orphan, and widow," just as God has protected, cared for, and delivered Israel when they were strangers and slaves in Egypt.¹² Significantly, Seeskin underscores that such mercy and graciousness always bring us into contact with other people, making holiness an interpersonal activity in which humans love, provide for, and protect others who are oppressed or in need.¹³

This emphasis in Leviticus on imitation of God's holiness through the practice of mercy is furthered developed in the prophets. Micah proclaims to the Israelite community YHWH's true desires: "I have shown you, O human, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8, NIV). Hosea similarly communicates to his hearers what God truly demands from God's people: "I desire mercy not sacrifice . . ." (Hos 6:6, NRSV). Most of the prophets pick up mercy as a theme, stressing its significance by pointing out its absence. Jeremiah laments gluttonous priests and deceptive leaders who fail to use their power to deliver the poor (Jer 5:23–31 NRSV). Isaiah berates the Israelite nation both for their stinginess towards God and callousness towards vulnerable

persons in the community (Is 56:1–11 NRSV).¹⁴ Amos pronounces judgment on Israel for “trampling the poor and pushing the afflicted out the way (Am 2:6–9, NRSV). The centrality of mercy to God’s identity and the *imitatio Dei* then continues into the New Testament, where Christ is portrayed as the epitome of mercy. Mary Farrell identifies two aspects to Christ’s merciful character: compassion and steadfast love, which are themselves married to the exercise of justice.¹⁵ She writes, “Gospel parables integrate a love-mercy-justice continuum explicitly developed in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and reiterated by Jesus when questioned about ‘the greatest commandment’ (Mt 22:34–40).”¹⁶

Importantly, seeing and hearing occupy a pivotal place in the biblical texts as it relates to knowing and loving God and the practice of mercy. To see and hear God rightly is to identify God as merciful and attentive, a God whose “eyes are on the righteous and ears attentive to their cry.”¹⁷ True knowledge of the merciful God then leads to loving God in return. Further, loving the God “who desires mercy and not sacrifice” ultimately entails “love one’s neighbor as oneself.”¹⁸ Indeed, both that the Hebrew prophets’ rebukes of priests whose eyes are oriented only towards themselves,¹⁹ as well as Jesus’ censures of Pharisees concerned only with how they are perceived by others,²⁰ underscores a vital connection between the knowledge of God, the orientation of one’s eyes, and the loving of one’s neighbor by means of mercy. By repeatedly refusing to see, hear and attend—in other words, recognize and respond to—the needs of others, these groups reveal their lack of understanding of and love for God.²¹

This connection between seeing, loving, and mercy reaches a climax in the words of Christ to those who refused to care for those in distress during their lifetimes. Describing a scene in which the Son of Man returns to judge the living, Jesus announces the condemnation of those who did not see and hear the cries of the needy.²² When the punished protest, “When was it that we *saw* you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and we did not take care of you?”²³ the Son of Man replies that, “just as they did not do it to the least of these, they did not do it to me.”²⁴ The people’s failure to see and hear—to recognize and respond—the poor testifies against them that they did not truly know or love God. Like the Israelite community Isaiah addresses and the hearers of Jesus’ parables, they have been “seeing but not perceiving,” and “hearing but not able to understand.”²⁵ Indeed, if they had seen and heard—that is, recognized—God’s compassionate mercy towards them, “they might [have turned] and been forgiven.”²⁶

In sum, mercy is definitive of God’s character and central to the Christian life. To respond to God’s mercy by practicing it oneself is to both imitate God’s identity in the showing of mercy and share God’s compassion,²⁷ a compassion that emerges from seeing others as God does: as God’s own people²⁸ and our fellow kin.²⁹ Building on these biblical foundations, I thus use “compassion” and “mercy” interchangeably for the remainder of this paper to mean the expression of God’s and humanity’s active care for and co-suffering with those in need, a category that includes the economically poor, the poor in health, and the oppressed.³⁰

At the same time, to identify mercy as definitive of God’s character, central to the Christian life and energized by the activities of seeing and hearing does not explain how one goes about cultivating it within practical life. The following section seeks to address this issue by examining how the sermonic efforts of

the socially concerned fourth century bishop, Basil of Caesarea, sought to engage people's capacities for literal and imaginative forms of seeing and hearing as a strategy for nurturing compassion and merciful action. Specifically, I explore the relationship between mercy, sound, and sight in Scripture, late antiquity, and Basil's sermon, "*To the Rich*,"³¹ as a case study for thinking about how people might become moved from the "fact" of God's mercy to a desire to show it.

FROM SEEING AND HEARING TO FEELING: APPEALING TO THE SENSES IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Like the writers of Christian Scriptures, Basil, fourth century Christian bishop of Caesarea, identifies mercy as an *imitatio Dei*.³² In seeking to persuade his audience to extend such mercy, moreover, Basil employs a specific strategy: appealing to his congregants' capacities for imaginative seeing and hearing. I argue that this is because Basil understands seeing and hearing as crucial conditions for cultivating the knowledge and love that undergird the practice of mercy. Specifically, the bishop's arguments and repeated use of evocative imagery appealing to imaginative forms of seeing and hearing suggest that right seeing and hearing lead to insight—accurate knowledge of God, self, and other—which bears fruit in merciful action. For Basil, to see God rightly is to possess "in-sight:"³³ namely, the intimate, personal knowledge of God's identity as benevolent giver.³⁴ Such insight into who God is invariably helps us see who we are, and it is in seeing oneself and others—namely, as paupers in need of mercy and yet rich recipients and stewards of God's grace – that enables us to live in such a way as to show God's benefaction to others.³⁵

It is important to underscore, as a preliminary point, that the clear connection Basil draws between cognitive understanding, sense perception—in this case, seeing and hearing—and the compassion that drives merciful action is not necessarily unique. Indeed, other church writers similarly emphasize the eyes and ears as implicated in the practice of mercy. John Chrysostom, in his *Homily on Eutropius*, draws his audience's attention to the asylee's "deadened countenance," "chattering teeth," "the quaking and quivering of his whole body," and "his faltering speech and stammering tongue,"³⁶ so as to "soften [their] minds towards him, and to induce [them] to compassion,"³⁷ in a way that words alone cannot. Gregory of Nazianzen, likewise, calls his listeners to see and hear the suffering and the sick, so that they might return from the "senselessness" that characterizes those who doubt their kinship with these fellow image bearers,³⁸ as well as the sufficiency of God's providence.³⁹ While the bishops here do not attempt to engage their congregations' eyes and ears through direct appeals—e.g. "turn and look!"—they successfully generate word images of sights and sounds that evoke their congregants' imaginations and help them re-cognize those of whom the bishops speak.

These bishops' attentiveness to the role of imaginative seeing and hearing through their use of evocative imagery likely has roots in ancient understandings of how seeing, as well as the other senses, relates to rational thought and emotional connection to others. Michael Squires, editor of *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, underscores that ancient understandings of vision involved an intimate interaction with the subject of sight. He writes, "'If you look at me, I also look at you:' within the Graeco- Roman imaginary, and across a remarkably long time-span, to see was to enter upon a dynamic, reciprocal and mutually implicative relationship with the thing seen."⁴⁰ This interaction between one's eyes and the subject of

sight was thought to supply knowledge, though this knowledge was not considered complete, accurate, or objective.⁴¹ Moreover, as Andrea Nightingale's research highlights, seeing was an emotional event, such that where a person chose to actively direct her gaze revealed her "passion and desire."⁴²

A selection of Basil's homilies, translated and collected in a small book entitled *Sermons on Social Justice*, build on some of these assumptions about vision while simultaneously re-formulating them in terms of the Christian person's divine mandate to care for vulnerable persons and communities. For Christians contemplating the connection between compassion and merciful action, they provide an especially excellent case for studying how seeing and hearing relate knowledge, social emotions, and the practice of mercy. The reasons for drawing on Basil specifically are two-fold. First, and more generally, the bishop was well known among his contemporaries for his social ethics: particularly his commitment to caring for the needy and poor in Caesarea; voluntarily selling his possessions; economic critique of wealth accumulation, hoarding, and extractive debt; and passionate preaching on mercy and "redemptive almsgiving" as primary forms of love for God and neighbor, to whom we are joined in the reign of God.⁴³ In a time of severe drought, starvation, and a rise in the destitute poor,⁴⁴ Basil founded an astonishing number of charitable institutions, including charitable homes and hospitals for the poor, hospices for travelers and pilgrims, leprosariums, asylums, schools for girls, and orphanages, all of which were supported by Basil's church and Basil himself.⁴⁵ So comprehensive were the bishop's practical efforts to create a culture of solidarity and sharing within Caesarea, that Gregory Nazianzus, one of the three Cappadocian fathers, described the complex of charitable organizations Basil founded, affectionately called Basiliad by his followers, "an entirely new city."⁴⁶

Significantly, Basil's compassion and concern for the poor within his community was not ancillary to his role as bishop but grew out of and nourished his understandings of mercy as the highest of Christian virtues. Specifically, Basil's teachings on the right use of wealth and relentless, twice-daily homiletic admonishments to his congregations to share their possessions with those in need, which he practiced in his own life, along with his city-wide charitable work, helped to develop his reputation as a "protector and patron of the poor."⁴⁷ Basil's sermons offer a special window into the bishop's understanding of and commitment to mercy, as he reflects practically and theologically on the basis for solidarity with and extreme generosity to those who were suffering.⁴⁸ As we will see in "To the Rich," Basil's sermons reveal a practical theology of mercy as the imitation of God, who mercifully provides all that we have, and a practice of *theosis* in which people, through acts of economic generosity and just distribution of resources, participate in God's generosity and thus God's nature.⁴⁹ Mercy, in this way, serves as a practical pursuit and embodiment of the ideal *koinonia*, namely a Christian polis in which those who have resources share with those who do not on the basis of kinship relations rooted in the body of Christ.⁵⁰

The second reason for drawing on Basil relates more specifically to the way he creatively appeals to his congregations' faculties for seeing and hearing to help them imagine and reimagine their relationship to their neighbors in need. In particular, the bishop's repeated use of vivid imagery and references related to the acts of looking and listening forefront the connection between seeing, hearing and compassion in direct and compelling ways. Importantly, Basil's commitment to creating imaginative encounters that challenge and reform his hearers' abstract ideas about and emotional responses towards the poor

demonstrates an intentionality that cannot be credited to rhetorical prowess alone. Rather, Basil's use of imagery reflects his fundamental convictions about how seeing—and ultimately the hearing that often accompanies it—inform knowledge, desire, and action in relation to mercy.⁵¹ While the bishop's rhetorical training likely informs his strategies,⁵² Basil's imaginative scene constructions and the general flow of his arguments establish a direct connection between recognition, re-cognition, and the conception of the compassion crucial for mercy. Indeed, as the bishop repeatedly asks in a variety of ways, "How can I bring the sufferings of the poor to your attention?"⁵³ His answer? Crafting rhetorical scenes in which his hearers imaginatively see themselves, God, and others rightly.⁵⁴ In the following, I examine one such sermon in which Basil explicitly links seeing and hearing to deeper understanding and the care for others that might shift them towards mercy. While hardly a comprehensive analysis, it shall suffice to demonstrate the wedding of sight, sound, and mercy in Basil's thoughts.

THE MAKING OF MERCY: THE ROLE OF SIGHT AND SOUND IN BASIL'S "TO THE RICH"

Basil begins his sermon, "To the Rich," by reminding his congregants of the wealthy young man in Luke's gospel who walks away from "what is truly good," because he "looks to what pleases most people."⁵⁵ The bishop, however, does not linger long in mere exegesis; rather, within two paragraphs, he has moved from the biblical story to the sea of people sitting before him. "Do you say 'teacher' and not carry out the duties of the disciple?"⁵⁶ Basil implores. "Do you call him good, yet decline to accept what he offers?"⁵⁷ Clearly, the bishop is concerned not with promoting orthodox beliefs without addressing the orthopraxy—or lack thereof—of his congregants. Indeed, his repeated use of first and second-person pronouns put his listeners front and center in direct and frequently uncomfortable ways, and his sharp rebukes and contextual examples of "mal-practice" highlight Basil's most pressing concern. Indeed, rather than a mere exercise in exegesis, Basil's sermon is most fundamentally about "moving" people to new ways of acting, particularly those of showing mercy.⁵⁸

While Basil weaves images, metaphors and analogies through his entire sermon, one of the most startling and clearly demonstrative examples of the links between seeing, hearing, insight, and mercy is when Basil employs vivid imagery to bring his listeners imaginatively to the judgment day.⁵⁹ He sets the stage for this imaginative encounter by explicitly naming what have been his objectives through the sermon: "It was my intention to give you a respite from the works of injustice and to grant some leisure to you thoughts, so that you might carefully consider to what end your pursuit of material things has led you."⁶⁰ In other words, the images Basil uses, as well as the logic of his argument, have all been directed towards helping his hearers "carefully consider" the results of their running after riches. Such careful consideration is essential, particularly as Basil claims they have nearly lost their minds: "Will you not rouse yourself from this stupor? Will you never regain consciousness? Will you never come to your senses?"⁶¹ The bishop is highly alarmed and, as his following efforts show, eager to help them snap back to reality and live the lives to which God, their Benefactor,⁶² has called them.

Indeed, Basil's very next question moves his hearers to consider their death by imagining it. The bishop inquires: "Will you not bring before your eyes the Judgment Seat of Christ? What will you say,

in your own defense, when all around you stand those whom you have treated unjustly, denouncing you before the righteous Judge?”⁶³ Basil’s focus here and throughout the rest of the scene is on seeing and hearing—seeing and hearing God, others and oneself—with the goal of helping his hearers acquire right knowledge and reform their desires.

As concerns the first, the bishop invites his listeners to see and hear God specifically as judge. While this is not the only image Basil uses—he also describes God as Benefactor,⁶⁴ Creator of all things,⁶⁵ Teacher of Truth,⁶⁶ Lawgiver,⁶⁷ and Good Counselor⁶⁸—the use of “judge” escalates the problematic nature of his hearers’ actions and reminds them of a key characteristic of God’s identity they have clearly forgotten. Honing in on God’s activities as judge, moreover, allows Basil to move his hearers in a particular way. Specifically, he aims to “sadden them”⁶⁹ and induce an element of fear.⁷⁰ While we may recoil from such strategies, Basil is, as we saw above, operating from a conviction that his hearers are at risk of losing consciousness of Christ. It is only appropriate that he would employ the most shocking sights and sounds—that of judgment being pronounced—to raise his congregants from what he views as a deadened state. His hope in bringing this frightening scene into his hearers’ field of vision, then, is to “move” and “compel” them to change their courses of action.⁷¹ In this way, Basil makes a direct connection between what one sees and hears, the desires of one’s heart and the actions one takes based on both. If this fearful scene fails to move his hearers, it is ultimate because they have hardened their hearts and thus failed to *truly* listen and look: “If these fearful visages do not move you, if these dazzling images do not compel you, then surely we are dealing with a heart of stone.”⁷²

Basil, however, is not simply concerned with helping his hearers see God aright or mobilizing them to merciful action based on the perception of God as judge. Rather, by placing the poor within the judgment scene, Basil attempts to help his hearers perceive others rightly, and he does so especially by evoking the experiences of sight and sound. To begin, the bishop has his congregants imagine themselves surrounded by the poor, whose testimonies and faces bear witness against them.⁷³ “Wherever you turn your gaze,” Basil declares, “you will clearly behold the apparitions of your evil acts.”⁷⁴ This beholding includes both sights and sounds: the “tears of the orphan . . . the groaning of the widow . . . the poor whom you have trampled down, the servants whom you have brutalized, the neighbors you have treated treacherously.”⁷⁵ All of these poor and needy, the bishop continues, are “denouncing you before the righteous Judge,” and the hearers’ works rise up and testify against them, “like a wicked chorus.”⁷⁶ Basil’s depiction of the poor, whom his hearers have treated with disregard and outright hostility, as testifying is significant in helping the rich to recognize their true identities. Indeed, rather than unimportant and irrelevant bystanders, the bishop presents the disenfranchised as legal witnesses, an especially provocative move in a society where the poor could not testify in court.⁷⁷ Together, both Basil’s recasting of the poor’s identities and use of visual imagery to bring the faces and groans of the needy into his hearer’s visual landscape, aim to help his hearers re-cognize who they think the poor are and activate their desires to treat them in ways that reflect both their powerful position in Christ’s new society, as well as their co-status as heirs of eternal life.

Finally, Basil seeks, via sights and sounds, to make his listeners aware of who they have become, and what it is that God expects of those who call themselves followers of Christ. As we saw above, he opens the scene with the hearers standing before Christ’s judgment seat, hailed on every side by the

poor's denunciations.⁷⁸ Rather than receive the commendation they sought in life, Basil depicts the rich experiencing condemnation and utter shame.⁷⁹ "How will you sway the Judge who cannot be deceived?" he asks. "No fine speakers are there to defend you, no persuasiveness of speech to hoodwink the Judge."⁸⁰ As if the lack of speakers or advocates wasn't enough, Basil lists others who will not be present at this trial: no flatterers or friends, no helpers or supporters.⁸¹ In fact, any glory the rich enjoyed in their earthly lives will not make it past the courtroom's gates. The scene at this point is eerily quiet; with no witnesses to make Basil's hearers' case and the testimonies of the poor rising in the silence, they appear to have even lost the capacity to speak.⁸² It is here, in the deadening silence, that the bishop invites his hearers to witness a most horrifying possibility: "without even a word in your own defense, you will be led forth in disgrace, with bowed head and downcast eyes, utterly forsaken and ashamed."⁸³

Basil's aims in rousing his hearers' "senses"—particularly those of their eyes and ears—are to rid the rich in his community of the misconception that they are righteous and urge them to pursue a truly honorable life, namely a life characterized by mercy. By drawing their eyes and ears to those evil works and acts of "injustice" that have brought Christ's judgment upon them—greed, indifference towards the poor—Basil shows them who they, at present, truly are. Rather than well-off as they imagine, his hearers are woefully needy. Rather than privileged, they are paupers in need of grace. Rather than saints blessed by God, they are sinners on the way to their judgment. Rather than honorable citizens of heaven, they belong within Satan's fiery gates.

Yet, why does Basil draw on these images and sounds to move his hearers to right perceptions of who they, others and God are? Put simply, for Basil, where one focuses one's eyes impacts how one thinks and feels. While this scene does not demonstrate in full how Basil connects these senses to right knowledge and reformed desires, earlier images in the sermon reveal how the bishop's underlying assumptions that seeing and hearing impact knowledge and desire. For example, at the beginning of the sermon, Basil stresses the connection between the rich young ruler's emotional, distraught, foolish interpretation of the Lord's invitation and his "looking" in the wrong direction. By looking to "what pleases most people,"⁸⁴ the man misperceives Christ's words, and his resulting actions reveal how his misguided sight deforms his desires and perception of sensible action. Indeed, "darkened by the passion of avarice,"⁸⁵ he goes away grieving. Basil likens the man's passionate greed to that of a, "traveler who hastens to arrive at a famous city, but then stops short and lodges in one of the inns just outside the city walls."⁸⁶ Both fail to "possess sound judgment,"⁸⁷ for they do not recognize that they have received wealth as a stewardship, and not for their own enjoyment.⁸⁸ By seeking wealth, the man alters his perception of what is "sound," deforms his desires, and pursues a lifestyle that arrogantly scorns "true life."⁸⁹

The eyes, however, are not the only organs with which Basil is concerned. He is equally attuned to how the act of hearing informs reasoning and desires. An excellent example of this connection between the ears, understanding and passion is a scene in the middle of the sermon. Basil paints a picture where the poor are begging at the door of the wealthy,⁹⁰ obviously in great need. The wealthy, however, fail to respond with compassion: "Yet for their sake, the rich do not respond to the poor, not though thousands should come to their door crying with piteous voices."⁹¹ What is more, they "refuse to give anything, insisting that it is impossible to satisfy the needs of those who beg. . ."⁹²—a claim that Basil proclaims is an outright lie.

Far from lacking sufficient resources to feed the needy, the rich possess enough wealth to “cover an entire town shivering from cold,” and a “single ring from [their] finger” has power to deliver countless people from “want.”⁹³ What precisely is the source of this seeming deafness to the poor?

Basil goes on to describe the rich as group of people whose ears are tuned into opportunities to magnify themselves in the present: “When you hear, “Sell what you have and give it to the poor . . . you go away sad; but when you hear, “give what you have to a woman in luxury”—that is, to stonecutters, woodworkers, mosaicists, painter—you rejoice as though gaining for yourself something money cannot buy.”⁹⁴ Their passions for status and the wealth that accompanies it have ultimately made them unable to perceive their abundance: “They have every reason to be happy and rejoice in their prosperity, but instead they weep and wail because they fail one or two degrees short of some other wealthy individual.”⁹⁵

When it comes to the judgment scene, then, it is Basil’s final questions that clearly bring the connection between seeing, hearing, knowing and desiring and the actions that result from these to the fore: “How can I move you? What can I say? Do you not desire the Kingdom? Do you not fear hell? Where will healing be found for your soul?”⁹⁶ Basil’s reliance on imagery that re-directs his hearer’s eyes and ears betrays his assumptions that looking and listening can change people’s ideas and reorient and shape their desires. Indeed, in the event that “these fearful visages do not move” his listeners, it is because they are, in a sense, too “far gone:” their hearts have turned to stone.⁹⁷

Basil’s evocative imagery, by which he seeks to reorient his listeners’ eyes and ears and so reform their thoughts and desire, may alarm us. Indeed, preaching by means of scare tactics is not currently *en vogue*. Yet this judgment scene, however disturbing, points to a vital connection between the senses of seeing and hearing and our conceptions of and desires to serve God and neighbor. For Basil, helping his congregants see and hear God and others—in this case through imagery, metaphor, and evocative language—is an avenue for helping them recognize “reality” and thus reconceive what it means to be “rich.” In this way, Basil himself enacts mercy: by redirecting his congregants’ ears and eyes, Basil seeks to bring them the healing for their souls he believes they need.

In sum, Basil creates “encounters” by means of imaginative language and scenes in order to help his listeners see and hear God, self, and the poor rightly. This right seeing and hearing ultimately nourish insight and compassion, for when one knows God, self and other rightly, one can no longer remain detached and “unmoved.” On the contrary, by reminding his hearers that each human depends on God’s benefaction and mercy as a client does a patron, and, moreover, that each human belongs to God’s family, Basil shrinks the psychological distance between the rich and poor. This reduced distance creates opportunities for his listeners to reform their “concepts” of the needy such that they are more nuanced and accurate, and this truer and deeper knowing nourishes the care and concern that can move them towards mercy. By incorporating imagery—especially shocking and emotionally stimulating imagery—into his sermons and preaching them in rhetorically persuasively ways, Basil helps his hearers more accurately recognize the poor and re-cognize their ideas, emotions, and responses to them.

COUNTERING INDIFFERENCE BY CULTIVATING ENCOUNTER: CURRENTS IN COGNITIVE SCIENCE

To what extent might Scripture's injunctions to see and hear, as well as Basil's use of imagery to evoke the same effect, provide a template for Christian leaders hoping to move people to mercy? Tempting though it is to simply transplant the bishops' theological claims and practices, as well as those of other theologians into modern contexts, doing so truncates the hermeneutical process⁹⁸ crucial to faithful interpretation and appropriation. More significantly, "applying" theology or transferring practices without engaging in critical reflection on how they intersect with other bodies of knowledge is not only theologically irresponsible,⁹⁹ it fails to acknowledge the interrelatedness of "knowing" in general.

Practical theology, as a field committed to examining and transforming Christian faith and practice in light of the "situated and embodied character of human life,"¹⁰⁰ protects against such uncritical transferring by engaging with non-theological dialogue partners.¹⁰¹ This is because theology and Christian tradition, while useful for nurturing faith and faithfulness, do not address every aspect of human experience directly. Non-theological disciplines and research aimed at analyzing lived experience,¹⁰² while hardly providing final answers, can help theologians and ministers nuance our understandings for the purpose of promoting more theologically faithful and critically reflective modes of praxis.¹⁰³

In our case, studying the multifaceted phenomena that is Christian mercy requires equally multifaceted methods of analysis. While Basil's theological claims and imaginative practices provide foundational support and direction for merciful action, engagement with non-theological disciplines can help Christian leaders develop practices of compassion-cultivation that are empirically rooted and critically refined. Specifically, cognitive science research on the relationship between vision and emotional connection can sharpen our efforts to shape our own congregants' theological imaginations and hearts. Bringing such research into a mutually critical dialogue with theological disciplines thus serves as a vital practice in what Don Browning calls "distanciation"—namely, "a process of critically examining our own theoretical and historically shaped assumptions" through dialoguing with alternative perspectives.¹⁰⁴ Such a practice better enables theological educators to not only nuance and reform where necessary their "inherited assumptions" and theological claims regarding mercy and compassion,¹⁰⁵ but also to develop practical methods of religious formation that grapple with the complexity of human processing, relationality, and socio-cultural situatedness. Though cognitive science, like all theological disciplines, possesses its own hermeneutical and subjective biases, it is only by bringing its insights into conversation with theological ones that religious leaders can begin to develop "thicker" descriptions of practices of mercy that, in turn, can inform our educational praxis.

In the following, I draw on cognitive scientist Wilma Koutstaal's research on the role of the senses in thinking,¹⁰⁶ as well as emotions and neuroscience scholars who stress how seeing and hearing impact our knowledge, emotional dispositions, and motivation. While practical theologians have long treated cognitive science as a conversation partner, research on how sensory knowing might intersect with and inform Christian theology and practice is limited.¹⁰⁷ I use Koutstaal and other scholars working in this area—particularly interpersonal neurobiologist Daniel Siegel and emotions scientist Richard Davidson¹⁰⁸—both because of the comprehensiveness and interdisciplinary scope of their research, and because of Siegel

and Davidson's position as co-founders of their respective fields. In doing so, I hope to point to potential "sightlines" for future reflection on the relationship between cognitive science understanding of seeing and hearing and theological practices of seeing and hearing for the purpose of cultivating the insight and compassion intrinsic to mercy.

CARVING PATHWAYS TO COMPASSION: COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND THE PRACTICE OF MERCY

One of Wilma Koustaal's central claims in her book, *The Agile Mind*, is that specific attention to the concrete world—people, objects, environments—enriches the abstract concepts and categories we use to organize that world.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, in a chapter called "Thinking with Our Senses,"¹¹⁰ Koustaal argues that cognitive processes are never detached from the physical environment.¹¹¹ On the contrary, in forming abstract ideas, we draw on, reason from, and incorporate the corporeal and material dimensions of our surroundings.¹¹² In this way, our physical environments provide source material for more complex thought: "Even thinking that appears to proceed without any overt reliance on such external aids—such as thinking that is highly abstract—nonetheless builds on foundations of mental concepts that are, at least in part, forged through an individual's interactions with the concrete world of sights and sounds, and embedded actions within it."¹¹³ Everyday phrases such as "fishing for compliments" or "opportunity knocks," as well as words like "jam-packed" or "staggering," give expression to the physicality of our concepts and betray the abstract's indebtedness to the sensory and material world.¹¹⁴

Moving beyond cognitive scientific research,¹¹⁵ interpersonal neurobiologist Daniel Siegel argues that this tendency to think with our senses stems from a basic fact of our biology as social and embodied creatures. In contrast to others that reduce the mind either to the effects of brain or to socio-cultural influences, he presents a theory of the mind as an "embodied and relational, emergent self-organizing process that regulates energy and information flow."¹¹⁶ Importantly, the sources and directional flow of such energy and information come from both internal and external sensory, emotional, and environmental cues, emphasizing how our thinking and perceptual processes interact with and depend on the senses and material world.¹¹⁷ He argues, moreover, that learning is fundamentally a process of multiplying, pruning, and forging new connections between the brain's neural pathways,¹¹⁸ and that feedback and input from the environment plays a central role in this process.¹¹⁹ In this sense, generating thoughts entails "a remarkably subtle interplay" between brain, body and environment,¹²⁰ and the work of learning involves the intentional (or unintentional) engagement with and re-construction of our thoughts and concepts in relation to new and prior environmental inputs.

Significantly, internal stimuli, including feelings and thoughts generated through the use of our imagination, can produce similar effects as external ones, altering both our thoughts and actions. In terms of our exploration of Basil's sermons, rhetorical arguments and evocative imagery that help us imaginatively see and hear others such as Basil's, while not precise equivalents of physical seeing and hearing, nevertheless mimic in profound ways the effects of physically seeing and conversing with another. Social neuroscientist Christian Keysers research on mirror neurons and their connection to individuals' abilities to empathize

specifically suggests that a person's ability to resonate with another person's perspective and pain possesses a causal relationship to the density, quantity, and activity of their mirror neurons. Mirror neurons, which "mirror the behavior and emotions of people around us"¹²¹ and are activated via observation, translate "a sensory stimulus (an action I see) into a motor vocabulary (an action I can do)."¹²² Significantly, mirror neurons are located in the premotor cortex, which also contains the neurons active when a person *performs* an action.¹²³ fMRI studies and other laboratory tests that have evaluated brain scans of people observing, hearing, and performing an action demonstrate that the same mirror neurons are active in all three activities: seeing, hearing, and doing.¹²⁴ Moreover, it is the mirror neurons that help us recognize other persons' intentions, goals, and motivations, and physically stimulate our motor systems to a corresponding response.¹²⁵

Of special importance, however, is that mirror neurons are activated not only when we see or hear an action,¹²⁶ but also when we simulate them imaginatively. In other words, imagining others and their actions has the same effect as viewing actions. The only difference is that the stimulus for the activating the mirror neurons involved is internal rather than external.¹²⁷ Thus, according to Keysers, ". . . during both observation and imagination, our brain uses the premotor cortex to mentally re-enact an action without actually moving the body. We can imagine doing something very accurately and understand what other individuals do because we use the very same machinery then as when we perform an action."¹²⁸ What this means is that hearing and seeing profoundly influence one's ability to perform an action, even if such seeing and hearing are only imaginative.¹²⁹ In short, by linking the "sight of an action with the motor program involved in executing it,"¹³⁰ mirror neurons play a vital role in helping us to understand other people's goals and intentions, as well as provoking in the observer "an inner feeling of relating to others and a sharing of wish to act."¹³¹

That words and ideas rely on concrete materials for their construction and, moreover, that both literal and imaginative forms of seeing and hearing help us to recognize, empathize, and respond to others' actions ultimately means that where we look or don't look, and what we hear or don't hear, shapes how we construe reality and relate to other people. There are clear parallels here to what Basil claims is occurring in his congregations. "Do you not know the timeworn remnants of walls that dot the city like so many watchtowers? How many poor people were there in the city, who were ignored by the rich of that day on account of their efforts to construct these walls?"¹³² Rather than orient their gaze towards the eyes of those seeking bread, the bishop's hearers have set their eyes on gold. Rather than view God as benefactor, they perceive him as a cruel master. Rather than hear the sharp shrills of the poor, the wealthy "plug their ears with "avarice"¹³³ or interpret their requests as threats.¹³⁴ Some of them have even physically blocked the needy from sight and earshot.¹³⁵ These failures to see and hear—physically and imaginatively—have altered their perceptions such that they have become "senseless;"¹³⁶ like those who "who are out of their mind do not see reality, but rather imagine things out of the malady," Basil contends, "thus also your soul, being seized with avarice, sees everything as gold or silver."¹³⁷ In other words, ignoring the poor and refusing to hear their pleas for mercy has radically informed the frames of reference they use to interpret the world. In the case above, the losing sight of reality manifests in a homeowner perceiving desperate parents hoping to retain all their children as an opportunity to make money. "They come offering their

very heart in exchange for food. And yet not only is your hand not stricken with paralysis for taking profits from such misfortune, but you haggle for even more!”¹³⁸ It seems that both Basil and cognitive science find truth in the cliché, “out of sight, out of mind.”

Yet, how precisely can right seeing and hearing contribute to richer and reformed understandings of God, self, and other, as well as the psychological and emotional connections to the poor essential for cultivating compassion and moving people to mercy? The following further examines recent research from cognitive science for preliminary answers to these questions, with a view towards the implications for Christian ministers seeking to help their congregants “see” aright and “feel” aright towards God, self, and other.

Gists. First, seeing and hearing, when practiced with attentiveness, can people help to correct their concepts and ideas.¹³⁹ This is because paying attention to material and environmental inputs via our eyes and ears forces us to halt automatic processing¹⁴⁰ and revisit previously established assumptions and conceptions. Such processing “pauses,” in which people are forced to slow down to attentively look, listen, and reflect are especially vital given our tendencies to be “sensory-perceptual misers:” namely, overly reliant on abstract and sparse verbal information in the construal of an idea or concept.¹⁴¹ Such sensory-perceptual miserliness, as fuzzy trace theory suggests, results from our voluntary and involuntary attempts to minimize the cognitive load we experience at any given time. Rather than consult a range of relevant material in constructing ideas and concepts, we tend to draw on fragments of information to generate “minimal representations”—called “gists”¹⁴²—that explain enough to enable successful behavior.¹⁴³ This capacity to rapidly generate simplified pictures of reality can be incredibly useful: it allows us to quickly assess our circumstances and environment,¹⁴⁴ identify potential threats, classify what is occurring based on previous information and categories, and form a response.¹⁴⁵ In creating these gists, however, we often “gravitate to the lowest, least precise level in this ‘hierarchy of gist’ that the task will allow.”¹⁴⁶ In other words, we spend as little time as possible interpreting a given scene so as to not waste time or cognitive energy on seemingly irrelevant details.¹⁴⁷ In short, gists function like fuzzy snapshots; they capture a scene’s global dimensions. Rather than nuance, they convey generalities.

Unfortunately, our ability to quickly generate gists means that our snapshots are often inaccurate. Because we do not need to look extendedly at a scene or dialogue with those in it to create a gist, we frequently misperceive what and who is present.¹⁴⁸ These inaccurate snapshots ultimately lead to reduced accuracy in our semantic interpretations, categories and language.¹⁴⁹ Social psychologist Christina Cleveland describes the how these inaccurate pictures of reality often translate into our conceptual categories for people and contribute to stereotyping and biases.¹⁵⁰ She writes,

“... in our haste to conserve mental energy we often erect divisions out of thin air by grouping people into smaller homogenous categories. These are typically based on less significant but easily distinguishable features like physical characteristics, language, and theology that indicate membership specific homogenous groups rather than less obvious but more important features that indicate membership in larger, diverse groups.”¹⁵¹

These categories and grouping, in turn, shape how we interact with people in the future and often move from “mere descriptive labels” to “value labels” that prioritize “our group” and keep other groups “at bay.”¹⁵²

Category creation, of course, is not intrinsically positive or negative. On the contrary, categorization, beyond saving us mental energy,¹⁵³ serves an essential role in establishing group identity and allows us to create cultural connections.¹⁵⁴ By creating categories, we bring “order” to reality and are thus able to forge webs of shared meaning with other persons and communities, as well as develop habits and routines that automatize certain aspects of life.¹⁵⁵ Eliminating categories, including those for others,¹⁵⁶ would not only make daily tasks and events cognitively taxing, since we would have to reinterpret normal occurrences as new events, it would also make relating to others difficult, since we could assume nothing about them or their worlds. Categories, by both reducing cognitive stress and providing us avenues to create shared meaning, actually help us to connect with people.¹⁵⁷

That said, our tendencies to conceptualize others based on previously established categories,¹⁵⁸ as Cleveland points out, create problems for cultivating the kind of right knowing and compassion crucial for mercy. Basil’s listeners might be understood as prime examples of people who have developed simplistic categories based on limited interaction with and intentional disregard for the poor. Specifically, by refusing to look and listen to the faces and cries of those in need, the congregants have created categories for people that permit them to simply discount them altogether.¹⁵⁹

Attentive practices of seeing and listening, on the other hand, though certainly more time consuming, can allow us to create more nuanced, specific, and accurate categorizes of God, self and other. Whether such seeing and listening occurs by means of dialogue, physical interaction, or imaginative engagement and reflection, they bring us closer to the details of reality and thus allow us to gain in-sight into the “truth:” the truth about God, ourselves and the other whom God has also made. Basil’s intentional use of imagery is a good example of how looking and listening more attentively can help enrich our knowing. Replete with evocative images and dialogue, Basil’s imaginative scenes help his hearers use their eyes and ears to “take in” the poor, as well as see themselves and God accurately.

For us who seek to move communities to mercy, helping people paying attention by reorienting their eyes and re-tuning their ears can help them develop richer conceptions of who they are and enlarge their “categories” so that the needy no longer appear as strangers but kin. Just as paying attention to the details of a map when one is lost helps a person discern other possible routes, so using our eyes and ears attend to the concrete “map” of divinely-inspired reality—specifically, the concrete people and the God who created them and us—refines our theological ideas about mercy and ultimately allows us to discern the actions we might need to take to “get home.”¹⁶⁰ Basil’s images function like such “maps:” by encouraging his hearers to look at the detailed faces and hear cries of the needy, as well as God’s face and words at the judgment day, Basil disorients and reorients his congregation. Rather than the quick glances that have allowed his hearers to create inaccurate gists, Basil’s imagery requires paying attention to the sensory details of suffering so that they recognize and re-cognize who they are, who God is, and what the life of faith entails.¹⁶¹

Koutstaal’s claims are similar: in returning to the concrete and sensory details of reality by means of

seeing and hearing allows us to construct more comprehensive and complex “gists.” By helping people look and listen more closely, we enable them to see faces, not frameworks; people, not positions; and specific communities, not categories. In turn, the “in-sight” we gain through refocusing our ears and eyes provides a framework that can sustain the compassion intrinsic to merciful actions, a claim we explore below.

Promoting Emotional Connection. I have argued above that seeing and hearing promote insight: richer, more nuanced “gists” of reality and in our case, the identities of God and the people to whom God has called us to show mercy. Yet such “insight,” while certainly involving more accurate understanding, is not simply a matter of possessing better information. On the contrary, seeing, hearing, and the insight that they provide can ultimately cultivate “kinship:”¹⁶² namely, intimacy with others and the realities that such categories and concepts attempt to portray. This is because attentive seeing and hearing—whether physically or imaginatively—requires us to get close to the reality we seek to know or the people to whom we hope to relate. This closeness to people or ideas, in turn, helps foster emotional connections.

Cognitive and emotions science research on the significance of visual and auditory experiences for fostering emotional connections is telling in this respect. Koutstaal points out how increased attention to specific content, whether through seeing, hearing, or using other senses, reduces biases and fosters “receptiveness and openness” to self and others.¹⁶³ Likewise, Richard Davidson’s research in emotions science similarly stress how visualizing people or interacting with another person face-to-face heightens both our sense of psychological connection with those others.¹⁶⁴ Specifically, his research demonstrates how compassion meditation, in which participants imagine someone suffering and either reframe the suffering or send “well wishes” to the sufferer, strengthens the brain regions that generate feelings of compassion, as well as reduces activity in the amygdala, one of brain’s emotions centers.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, the meditation practice correlated with increased motivation to act compassionately,¹⁶⁶ strengthened connections between the prefrontal cortex—where abstract ideas are created—and the brain regions involved in empathy,¹⁶⁷ and heightened resilience to negative emotion when faced with circumstances that would typically cause distress.¹⁶⁸ In short, he argues that seeing other people’s suffering and dialoging with them, when done from a posture of attentiveness and openness,¹⁶⁹ promotes the feelings of empathy and motivational drives linked to compassionate action, of which mercy is part.

The kinship that seeing and hearing help foster is crucial for Christian ministers seeking to move people to mercy, for recognizing others as members of God’s family and emotionally relating to them as kin are the founts from which empathetic and merciful action derive. Indeed, the true knowing that results from right seeing and hearing, as we saw in Basil’s sermons, goes hand in hand with right desire. For Basil, a person does not truly know God unless she *feels* her dependence on God’s benefaction. A person does not truly belong to the Christian community unless she can see the poor and needy as “kin.” In short, true competence coincides with “kinship,”¹⁷⁰ and kinship leads to a certain way of being in the world.

One of the reasons that seeing and hearing, particularly when done from a posture of attentive and non-judgmental awareness, enhance this emotional connection and “kinship” is that seeing and hearing, lead to more nuanced perceptions and thus more specific descriptions of the world, and these enhanced, specific descriptions then reduce the psychological and emotional distance we might feel from people or

ideas that feel foreign to us.¹⁷¹ Abstract concepts, on the other hand, foster psychological distance from the reality, object or person they describe, and this psychological distance affects how we perceive and interact with others. Construal level theory describes this relationship between specificity of concept and the physical or emotional proximity or distance a person feels from a concept's object.¹⁷² The more abstract the concept or generalized and non-specific our language and description, the more distant one feels to the person or thing.¹⁷³ The more specific or concrete the concept, the more physical and psychological proximity experienced.¹⁷⁴

This relationship between concepts, words, and proximity also means that the opposite can occur: namely, physical or psychological distance can produce more abstract renderings of the event or person. Citing several studies, Koutstaal underscores how persons' physical and temporal proximity to an object or event informed their subsequent construals of that event or object.¹⁷⁵ Specifically, the studies showed how the temporal or physical nearness of an event or object heightened participants' attention to the concrete details and led to the construction of more specific, concrete and nuanced verbal representations.¹⁷⁶ Conversely, when events or objects were temporally or physically distant, participants described the objects in more abstract language, and their descriptions possessed a correlation to how psychologically close people felt to the subjects of their descriptions.

These effects of time and space on concept-formation bear significant implications for how people perceive other persons and the kinds of language and categories they use to describe them. People often feel psychologically closer to those who are physically closer to them in space or whom they have interacted recently. This sense of emotional "proximity", in turn, enables people to give more specific and accurate descriptions of those people compared to persons who are temporally or physically distant.¹⁷⁷ Koutstaal explains this pattern, writing, "physical distance actually changes our perception. What we can "see" and "know" when physically near to, versus far from, objects or events, differs, and this learned experiential knowledge, based on our physical senses and ways of acting in the world may be mirrored or analogically extended into our mental and conceptual world."¹⁷⁸ Basil's strategy of using imagery to reduce the psychological distance his listeners feel from the poor, from the perspective of cognitive science, appears well-placed.¹⁷⁹

This connection between level of conceptual construal and physical and psychological proximity bears implications for those who want to equip Christians with both the knowledge and love of God and others that leads to merciful action. The abstract language we often use to talk about God, people, or even Christ's commands can create psychological distance and foster more general, abstract concepts of the very people we hope they will see. This overemphasis on abstraction is problematic, since it can unintentionally dissolve the personal and emotional connections necessary for cultivating compassion, as well as the more specific concept formation necessary for deep understanding. Indeed, without such emotional connections and deep understanding, both insight into who God is and who the poor are, as well as the motivation to show mercy withers. Rather than meaning-laden cues to specific realities, abstract ideas of rich and poor, grace-giver and receiver, Benefactor and benefactee remain simply that: abstract ideas.

Seeing and hearing can reduce the actual and perceived distance between the people we want to practice mercy and those who would receive it. This is, first of all, because seeing and hearing—when

practiced from an attentive and open posture—invite us to notice and observe features that we otherwise have disregarded or simply failed to see. Looking at another person’s face or hearing the tonal inflections of his or her voice provides us with substantially more information than an abstract concept—such as “the disenfranchised”—might. Moreover, as we saw above, visualizing people or interacting with another person face-to-face heightens both our perception of proximity with those others and helps us to establish emotional connections at a physiological level.¹⁸⁰ By physically prolonging our gaze and tuning our ears, we expand our perceptual frames so that we literally see and hear more of reality.¹⁸¹ Basil uses imagery for this exact purpose. Describing a scene in which a person promises to provide for the poor after he dies but then find himself faced with sudden judgment at the end of his life, Basil writes, “Dark is the night, and grave the disease, and help nowhere to be found . . . then, when you look around and realize that you are completely forsaken, you will recognize your senselessness and lament your folly.”¹⁸² For Basil, it is only when one truly “looks around” that one “realizes” the truth of things. In this way, using one’s senses – in this case seeing and hearing – can counter the “senselessness” and “folly” that result from refusing to look or listen to the poor in the present and promote the emotional connections required for moving towards mercy.

Summary. When we don’t look or listen attentively to people, we can more readily abstract them away and stymie the emotional connections essential for developing a consistent practice of mercy. This is for two reasons. First, physical distance—in this case between our eyes and another’s—creates psychological distance, and psychological distance leads to more abstract concept formation. Rather than a particular person who happens to be vulnerable, we see a “poor person.” Rather than a brother or sister who belongs to our community, we see a categorical “other,” who does not fit into our circle of concern.

Second, physical distance can obstruct full sight. Details remain fuzzy. Categories must suffice. We simply try to “get the gist.” We start to view people as concepts or objects. We begin, as Martin Buber argues, to view others as “It.”¹⁸³ And the moment we begin to see others as “Its” not “Thous,” nouns not persons, we veer down the slippery slope of de-humanizing them. Basil’s sermons underscore over and over how this occurs, and his use of imaginative scenes, shocking imagery, and personal pronouns aim to bring the vulnerable into the rich’s purview so that they might recognize these “others” for who they are: bearers of the image of God, brothers and sisters of one’s own family, heirs of the same kingdom and entitled to the same benefits of God as oneself.

In short, right knowing and right loving require right seeing and listening. And right seeing and listening only occur when we have really stopped to look and listen attentively to those outside of us in a way that truly takes them into full account.

WIDENING THE CIRCLE OF KINSHIP: IMPLICATIONS FOR MERCY-MAKING TODAY

Nearly two millennia years later, Basil’s efforts to cultivate concern for the disenfranchised and move people towards mercy remain piercingly relevant. In a world where rich and poor are often segregated, class divisions shape social life, and Facebook “feeds” reinforce the echo chambers in which

many of us live, indifference towards marginalized and suffering peoples doesn't take much. Sloughing off responsibility is often as simple as averting our gaze or opting out of dialogue. If we don't look, we aren't accountable. If we don't talk, it is not necessary to listen and reflect. Even when we do stop long enough to look or listen, assuming a posture of detachment is tantalizingly easy. So long as our seeing and listening remain impersonal and abstract, action appears optional, a matter of individual choice rather than Christian responsibility.

The Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this tendency to selectively see and listen to those within our circles and block out those who do not. Social distancing, remote work, and quarantines, along with the increasingly politicized nature of the pandemic and related measures, not only make literally seeing and hearing others more challenging, but also make it easier to avoid, ignore, and ultimately misperceive those with whom we think we disagree, as well as those who are suffering most deeply. Misinformation and "fake news" have only furthered fueled the insidious problem of misrepresentation and non-recognition of others, especially marginalized communities, increasing polarization and re-entrenching social and racial divisions, disdain, and even violence.

For Christian ministers and leaders who view merciful action as one of the central modes by which Christians communicate Christ's love in the world, both indifference towards the vulnerable and disdain for the "other," as well as inconsistencies between theological theory and concrete practice present significant problems. The question of *how to move* people from indifference to compassion and from theological conversations about the suffering to caring for them thus remains imperative if the Church is to cultivate Christians who imitate and experience Christ's concern for the least.

On the one hand, Basil's efforts to bring suffering peoples into the sightlines of their parishioners provide preliminary pointers for Christian leaders who want to move their own congregants to mercy. Specifically, the evocative imagery, emotional register, and length of time he devotes to curating imaginative encounters in his preaching represent promising tools ministers and educators can use to helping people grow in authentic concern for the poor. As we saw above, this is because imagery—particularly when it includes people—enriches our understanding, heightens emotional connection and cultivates a sense of proximity necessary for establishing personal connections. Basil's image-laden sermons, when brought into conversation with current research in cognitive science, impress upon us the importance of seeing and listening for cultivating compassion.

That said, while visual and imaginative preaching can help cultivate accurate perception of and compassion towards the vulnerable, preaching occurs for most just one a week, making it difficult to sustain the kind of repetition that allows for rich knowledge and compassion to develop. Moreover, while many ministers may make mercy a repetitive theme in their teaching as Basil appears to do, most likely do not devote repeated, extended time in their preaching to the topic of mercy. Finally, the number of opportunities to "check-out" of a sermon or distance oneself psychologically (or even physically) from the preacher's words abound. Indeed, since the power in the preaching moment is often unbalanced—with the one who speaks possessing control and those who listen in a more passive position—preaching about mercy does not necessarily require the listeners to receive the minister's words. On the contrary, parishioners or community members can, if they desire, engage in exactly the kind of rationalizing that we

witness in Basil's congregations.¹⁸⁴

Like preaching, cognitive science also has its limitations. While Koutstaal's and others' research provide helpful insights into how looking and hearing relate to our construals of others and emotional connections with them, such scientific explanations do not address how the Holy Spirit operates as an agent of change. Christianity, by contrast, claims that right understanding of and love for God and others is a partially a gift of God, not something we achieve solely on our own.¹⁸⁵ As we saw in our examination of seeing and hearing in the Scriptures, right understanding and action require the transformation of our eyes and ears so that when we do look and listen, we do so with the illumination that comes through spiritual re-formation. In short, seeing others, God, and ourselves rightly entails looking and listening in the right directions, as well as having our eyes and ears transformed through encounter with God.

What then might Christian ministers, leaders, and lay-persons do to help themselves and others cultivate the compassion and empathetic insight that correspond to mercy-making? Given the diversity of contexts in which Christian persons find themselves, perhaps the simplest step one can make is to create climates where seeing and listening deeply are both normalized and abundant. Whether in person or over Zoom, we might employ imagery, visuals, emotion, and metaphor to broaden persons' frames of awareness and put flesh on categories like "the vulnerable" or "the sick," so that those beyond the community's perception can come into view and compassion can begin to take root. We might practice a preferential attentiveness in one's preaching, teaching, and gathering toward those who are unseen and vulnerable. We might attempt—whether through prayer, corporate laments, service opportunities, art and music, or other faith practices—to foster psychological and physical proximity to those who are suffering through stimulation of the imagination. Each of these strategies aim to help others and themselves widen their circle of kinship: namely, the circle of those to whom they believe they belong and to whom they have an obligation.

A critical question can be raised as to whether cultivating compassion as I have described is possible via digital media or in a digitized environment. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage this question fully, my initial assessment is that digital platforms may actually enhance emotional connection or make more likely than if an event was held in-person. Of course, digital platforms like Zoom may impede certain aspects of relational connection, such as preventing impromptu conversations or encouraging "curated" forms of self-presentation. However, such technologies are also immensely helpful at increasing eye contact between people. They also allow more nuanced readings of others' facial expressions, augment hearing through amplified sound, encourage vulnerability and more personal sharing, and bring together people who would not normally be in close proximity. All of these can contribute to the deepening of emotional connection with and more accurate seeing of those within and beyond our communities.

While not a complete answer, Zoom and other similar platforms are likely here to stay, and it will be important for Christian leaders to consider how to continue to employ them strategically both during and following the pandemic. Such platforms can serve as vital channels by which to help communities see and hear others, especially those in need of material, physical, and psychological care. Doing so in ways that deepen compassion, rather than reinforce stereotypes, will be the challenge, and the strategies noted above can offer starting points for making our looking and listening powerful tools of emotional

connection. Indeed, looking and listening, taking time to look another in the eye and engage in speech and hearing, even in a time of a pandemic, are the first steps towards nurturing the kind of relationships and compassion that energize and sustain merciful action.

CONCLUSION

In a time where the practice of mercy can mean life and death, and where compassion and concern for the vulnerable has become a matter of national and global mandate, the necessity of finding ourselves “moved” to merciful actions is at a high. How will we sustain the compassion and empathy required for long-term support of those in need, both personally and at the level of local and national communities? How will we forge the capacities to care for others as our “kin” so central and vital to solidarity? My exploration of Basil and cognitive science research seeks to show that seeing and hearing—whether physically, imaginatively, or through social and religious practices—will have an indispensable role to play in cultivating and sustaining the compassion essential to moving people towards the practice the mercy towards others that they have themselves received from God. While not a final solution to enduring and complex social issues, including the systemic racism and wealth inequalities that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought into greater relief, seeing and hearing are nevertheless invaluable starting points for a movement towards a more lasting mercy. Indeed, seeing and hearing, limited though they may be, can, as Basil puts, help us as individuals, communities, and nations “imitate Joseph in his philanthropic proclamation . . . ‘Come to me, all you who lack bread, let everyone share as if from common springs in what God has graciously given.’”¹⁸⁶

NOTES

- 1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1960), 250.
- 2 Barth, 3:252–53.
- 3 Barth, 3:260.
- 4 Barth, 3:243–49.
- 5 Basil and C. Paul Schroeder, *On Social Justice*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press Popular Patristics Series, no. 38 (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009).
- 6 On engaging ancient texts in the work of theology, see, Reimund Bieringer, “Texts That Create a Future: The Function of Ancient Texts for Theology Today,” in *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics Issues and Challenges for Twenty-First-Century Christian Social Thought*, ed. Johan Verstraeten, Brian J Matz, and Johan Verstraeten, CUA Studies in Early Christianity (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011).
- 7 Indeed, the abundance of sermons from late antiquity hounding hearers to harness their resources in service of the poor suggests that showing mercy has proved arduous for Christians for a long time. Ambrose and Ivor J. Davidson, *De Officiis*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Saint John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, 1st edition (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1999); Stuart G. Hall, ed., *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Seventh International Colloquium on Gregory ... French, German, Italian and Spanish Edition* (Berlin ; New York: De Gruyter, 1993); Gregory of Nazianzus, *107: Select Orations*, trans. Martha Vinson (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004).
- 8 Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 129.
- 9 “Everyone present who loves Christ as well as the poor and who has a capacity for pity, which both defines God and derives from him, I am sure feels the same.” Nazianzus, *107*, para. 9.
- 10 Kasper, *Mercy*, 348–49.
- 11 Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014): 54, 379. C.f. M. Farrell, r.s.m., “The Mercy of the Lord Endure Forever,” *Compass* 49, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 6–11.
- 12 Kenneth Seeskin, “Ethics and Holiness: Leviticus 11:44” (The Jewish Publication Society, 2016), 119–20.
- 13 Kenneth Seeskin, 119–20.
- 14 Isaiah claims that the knowledge of God that leads righteousness will manifest in showing making “sacrifices” of

mercy to the needy, not the superficial sacrifices of fasting and sackcloth they have been offering. Isaiah 56:1-11, esp. vv. 6-11: Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

15 M. Farrell, r.s.m., “The Mercy of the Lord Endure Forever,” 8.

16 M. Farrell, r.s.m., 8.

17 Psalm 34:15.

18 Luke 10:25-28.

19 Amos 6; Jeremiah 4. See also Walter Brueggemann’s analysis of prophetic criticism in the book of Jeremiah. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination, 2nd Edition*, 2 edition (Minneapolis, MN: FORTRESS PRESS, 2001), chap. 3.

20 See, for instance, Luke 20:45-47; Matt. 23:1-32.

21 Matt. 15:1-15.

22 Matt. 25:31-46.

23 Matt. 25:44.

24 Matt. 25:45.

25 Isaiah 6:9-10.

26 Mark 4:10-12; Luke 8:9-10; Isaiah 6:9-10.

27 Nazianzus, 107, para. 27.

28 “In nothing does man’s affinity with God lie so much as in his capacity to do good. Even though God performs good works in greater and we in lesser number, each, I think we may say, does so in accordance with his power. God created us; and, when he frees us, he gathers us to him again. Do not you, in turn, neglect the one who has fallen. God has been merciful in the greatest ways. You, then, servant of Christ, who are devoted to God and your fellow man, granted we are dealing with a terrible affliction, one that should make us careful, do not give in to small-mindedness; draw strength from your faith; let compassion overcome your misgivings, the fear of God your fastidiousness; let piety come before considerations of the flesh; do not disregard, do not walk past your brother; do not turn away from

him as though he were an abomination, a blight, or anything else that one should avoid and repudiate. He is part of you, even if he is bent down with misfortune.” Nazianzus, para. 15.

29 Nazianzus, para. 14.

30 John Chrysostom, in *On The Priesthood; Ascetic Treatises; Select Homilies and Letters; Homilies on the Statues*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. IX, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Father of the Christian Church 1 (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1889), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf109.xv.iii.html>; Sozomen, in *Church History*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 2, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2 (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, n.d.), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202.iii.ix.xxv.html>.

31 Basil and Schroeder, *On Social Justice*, 41–58.

32 Liviu Petcu, “‘Do Not Deprive Beggars of Their Rejoicing in Doing Their Work!’ An Insight into Bestowing Mercy in the Writings of St. Basil the Great,” *Romanian Journal of Artistic Creativity* 7, no. 2 (2019): 89.

33 Basil and Schroeder, *On Social Justice*, 63-64. 67-68.

34 Basil and Schroeder, 58, 61.

35 Basil and Schroeder, 49.

36 John Chrysostom, para. 2.

37 John Chrysostom, para. 3.

38 Nazianzus, 107, para. 7.

39 Nazianzus, paras. 32–33.

40 Michael Squire, ed., *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, 1 edition (London ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 1.

41 Kelli Rudolph, “Sight and the Pre-Socratics,” in Squire, 53.

42 Andrea Nightingale, “Sight and the Philosophy of Vision in Ancient Greece,” in Michael Squire, ed., *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, 1 edition (London ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 55.

43 For a more detailed treatment of Basil’s economic critiques and sermons on mercy and “redemptive almsgiving” (Holman, pp. 107-109), see: Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2001), chap. 3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195139127.001.0001>; Brian J. Matz, “The Principle of Detachment from Private Property in Basil of Caesarea’s Homily 6 and Its Context,” in *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics Issues and Challenges for Twenty-First-Century Christian Social Thought*, ed. Johan Verstraeten, Brian J Matz, and Johan Verstraeten, CUA Studies in Early Christianity (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

44 For a preliminary treatment of different types of “poor” and “rich” in late antiquity, see Matz, “The Principle of Detachment from Private Property in Basil of Caesarea’s Homily 6 and Its Context.”

45 Liviu Petcu, “Do Not Deprive Beggars of Their Rejoicing in Doing Their Work!’ An Insight into Bestowing Mercy in the Writings of St. Basil the Great,” *Romanian Journal of Artistic Creativity* 7, no. 2 (2019): 82.

46 Petcu, 82.

47 Petcu, 84.

48 Several scholars have focused on themes of mercy, economic justice, and Basil’s social ethics. For a selection, see: Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen, “Basil and Gregory’s Sermons on Usury: Credit Where Credit Is Due,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16, no. 3 (2008): 403–30, <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.0.0182>; Robert P. Maloney, “The Teaching of the Fathers On Usury: An Historical Study On the Development of Christian Thinking,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 27, no. 4 (January 1, 1973): 241–65, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157007273X00233>; Susan R. Holman, Caroline Macé, and Brian J. Matz, “De Beneficentia: A Homily on Social Action Attributed to Basil of Caesarea,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 66, no. 5 (2012): 457–81, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157007212X627875>; Matz, “The Principle of Detachment from Private Property in Basil of Caesarea’s Homily 6 and Its Context.”

49 Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 101.

50 Holman, 101.

51 Author, “Moved to Mercy: Sight, Desire, and Sensibility in Basil of Caesarea’s *Sermons on Social Justice*,” (Unpublished paper, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2017).

52 Basil and Schroeder, *On Social Justice*, 17–18, 25.

53 Basil and Schroeder, 70.

54 Particularly interesting is how Basil links a failure to act mercifully to a failure to see God: “Where then did you get or belong? If you say that you acquired them by chance, then you deny God, since you neither recognize your Creator, nor are you grateful to the One who gave these things to you” (69); also, after describing a scene in which a rich person “hems and haws” in the face of the poor’s plight, Basil declares, “In everything you see gold, you imagine everything as gold...Just as those who are out of their do not see reality, but rather imagine things out of the malady, thus also your soul, being seized with avarice, see everything as gold or silver” (65). In short, a disoriented gaze leads to both diseased desire and an inability to perceive “reality.” Basil and Schroeder, 50, 55–56, 65, 67–69.

55 Basil and Schroeder, 42.

56 Basil and Schroeder, 43.

57 Basil and Schroeder, 42.

58 Basil and Schroeder, 52.

59 Basil and Schroeder, 52–53.

60 Basil and Schroeder, 52.

- 61 Basil and Schroeder, 52–53.
- 62 Basil and Schroeder, 58, 70.
- 63 Basil and Schroeder, 53.
- 64 Basil and Schroeder, 58.
- 65 Basil and Schroeder, 50.
- 66 Basil and Schroeder, 42.
- 67 Basil and Schroeder, 42.
- 68 Basil and Schroeder, 57.
- 69 Basil and Schroeder, 52.
- 70 Basil and Schroeder, 53.
- 71 Basil and Schroeder, 53.
- 72 Basil and Schroeder, 53.
- 73 Basil and Schroeder, 52.
- 74 Basil and Schroeder, 52.
- 75 Basil and Schroeder, 52.
- 76 Basil and Schroeder, 52.
- 77 Mary Farag, “Who were the Needy?” (Lecture, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, Sept. 12, 2017).
- 78 Basil and Schroeder, *On Social Justice*, 52.
- 79 Basil and Schroeder, 52.
- 80 Basil and Schroeder, 52.
- 81 Basil and Schroeder, 52.
- 82 Basil and Schroeder, 52.
- 83 Basil and Schroeder, 52.
- 84 Basil and Schroeder, 42.
- 85 Basil and Schroeder, 42.
- 86 Basil and Schroeder, 46.

87 Basil and Schroeder, 42.

88 Basil and Schroeder, 42.

89 Basil and Schroeder, 46.

90 Basil and Schroeder, 49.

91 Basil and Schroeder, 49.

92 Basil and Schroeder, 49.

93 Basil and Schroeder, 49.

94 Basil and Schroeder, 48.

95 Basil and Schroeder, 49.

96 Basil and Schroeder, 53.

97 Basil and Schroeder, 53.

98 For a helpful introduction, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Cambridge, U.K. ; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2009).

99 The need for interdisciplinary dialogue represents a fundamental assumption for practical theologians and scholars of spirituality. See: Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds., *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Dreyer and Burrows, *Minding the Spirit*.

100 Cahalan and Mikoski, *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*, 3.

101 This is because the life of faith, to use interdisciplinarity scholar Julie Klein's definition, is a "problem or question that cannot be satisfactorily addressed using single methods or approaches." In order to understand the complexities of ministry, challenges of pastoral care, or contexts in which Christian faith is lived out, practical theologians must exercise disciplined competence in theology while cultivating cross-disciplinary conversations with fields that analyze lived experience on the ground. In short, studying concrete practice in context-bound communities demands interdisciplinarity. For further information on interdisciplinarity, see Julie Thompson Klein, *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory, and Practice*, 3. print (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1993), 196.

102 Cahalan and Mikoski, *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*, 3.

103 Cahalan and Mikoski, 4; Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2008), 4-42.

104 Terry D. Cooper, *Don Browning and Psychology: Interpreting the Horizons of Our Lives*, 1st ed (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 2011), 27.

105 Cooper, 29.

- 106 Wilma Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 107 Michael Squire, ed., *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, 1 edition (London ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 5.
- 108 Richard J Davidson and Sharon Begley, *The Emotional Life of Your Brain: How Its Unique Patterns Affect the Way You Think, Feel, and Live--and How You Can Change Them* (New York: Plume, 2013).
- 109 Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind*, chaps. 1, especially pp. 4; 2.
- 110 Koutstaal, chap. 4.
- 111 Koutstaal, 125.
- 112 Koutstaal, 125, 161–66; Also, see Mareschal, Quinn, and Lea for a helpful introduction to concept-formation. Denis Mareschal, Paul C. Quinn, and S. E. G. Lea, eds., *The Making of Human Concepts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), esp. chap. 2.
- 113 Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind*, 125.
- 114 Koutstaal, 137, 170.
- 115 Cognitive scientists studying the relationship between vision and cognition similarly point to correlations between the situational context and the categories and abstract concepts people create. Other cognitive scientists looking at concept formation identify material dimensions to abstract construals. See, for instance, John M. Henderson and Fernanda Ferreira, eds., *The Interface of Language, Vision, and Action: Eye Movements and the Visual World* (New York: Psychology Press, 2004); Mareschal, Quinn, and Lea, *The Making of Human Concepts*.
- 116 Daniel J. Siegel, *Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 62.
- 117 Siegel touches on this in most of his work, and our dependence on the material world for constructing neural pathways and ultimately concepts is embedded in his definition of the “mind” as a an “embodied and relational, emergent self-organizing process...” (see Endnote 62); a selection of his work includes: Daniel J. Siegel, *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being*, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007); Daniel J Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2015); Daniel J. Siegel, *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*, 1st ed (New York: Bantam Books, 2010).
- 118 Daniel J Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2015), 47. For further study, see Chapter 2.
- 119 Siegel, *Mindsight*, 40.
- 120 Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind*, 125.
- 121 Christian Keysers, *The Empathetic Brain* (Kindle E-book: Social Brain Press, 2011), 55.
- 122 Keysers, 46.

123 Keyzers, 16, 48.

124 Keyzers, 43-44

125 Keyzers, 57-58.

126 Keyzers, 48.

127 Keyzers, 66.

128 Keyzers, 66.

129 Keyzers, 65.

130 Keyzers, 18.

131 Keyzers, 16, 41.

132 Basil and Schroeder, *On Social Justice*, 48.

133 Basil and Schroeder, 68.

134 Basil and Schroeder, 50.

135 Basil and Schroeder, 44–45.

136 Basil and Schroeder, 67.

137 Basil and Schroeder, 65.

138 Basil and Schroeder, 65.

139 Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind*, 40, 151.

140 Koutstaal, 93, 99.

141 Koutstaal, 137.

142 Henderson and Ferreira describe gists as a “general semantic interpretations,” that include, “establishing the identity of a scene...some semantic features of that class of scenes, and some aspects of the scene’s global spatial layout.” Henderson and Ferreira, *The Interface of Language, Vision, and Action*, 12.

143 Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind*, 14, 40.

144 Henderson and Ferreira argue that “the evidence is overwhelming that gist can be apprehended very rapidly and can in turn influence various other visual and cognitive processes (e.g., biases about the presence of particular objects) and behaviors (e.g., eye movement)” (12). The research they cite finds “gists” can emerge with 30-50 milliseconds of “scene onset.” Henderson and Ferreira, *The Interface of Language, Vision, and Action*, 12-13.

145 Henderson and Ferreira, *The Interface of Language, Vision, and Action*, chap. 2; especially pp. 12-13.

146 Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind*, 40.

147 Siegel's research on memory suggests that not only do we try to reduce mental energy by automatizing ideas, we actually engage in "selective forgetting" so as to not overwhelm the mind with unnecessary details (82). Daniel J Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2015); Christina Cleveland's work on stereotyping and its effects on disunity within the Christian community are particularly insightful. She too highlights how our biological desire to reduce "cognitive taxation" connects to biasing. Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart*, 9.3.2013 edition (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2013), 47–49.

148 Henderson and Ferreira, *The Interface of Language, Vision, and Action*, 13.

149 Henderson and Ferreira, 12.

150 Ibid., 49-56. Christina Cleveland expounds on the sociology of disunity as it regards the Christian community, calling our tendency to love our "in-group" and resist alternations to our primary categorizations of the world a kind of "cognitive miserliness." Through her analysis of intra and inter-ecclesial interactions in the United States, Cleveland reminds us that cognitive categorization represents a formidable opponent when it comes forging intra-cultural unity, let alone interculturality.

151 Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 49.

152 Cleveland, 50.

153 Cleveland, *Disunity*, 49.

154 Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 46–47; Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *Why We Believe What We Believe: Uncovering Our Biological Need for Meaning, Spirituality, and Truth*, First Printing edition (New York: Free Press, 2006), chap. 4; Mareschal, Quinn, and Lea, *The Making of Human Concepts*, chap. 2.

155 Newberg and Waldman, *Why We Believe What We Believe*, 78.

156 Leonardelli, "Social Categorization," 71. "Categorized individuals share definition, uncategorized individuals do not... what may be known about uncategorized individuals is that they are unknown or undefined..."

157 Samovar, *Communication Between Cultures*, 169; see also Cleveland, *Disunity* 47-51.

158 May O. Lwin, Andrea J.S. Stanaland, and Jerome D. Williams, "American Symbolism in Intercultural Communication: An Animosity/Ethnocentrism Perspective on Intergroup Relations and Consumer Attitudes," *Journal of Communication* 60 (2010), 496.

159 Cleveland, *Disunity*, 74.

160 Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind*, 73.

161 Koutstaal, 71.

162 I am drawing on Jesuit Gregory Boyle’s use of the term “kin” to describe intimacy, a way of relating to other that includes them into our circle people we “family.” Using “kin” is a way to convey, concretely, what it is like to truly understand something (see Koutstaal on deep understanding, which is cultivated by drawing on various modalities, including the senses; pp. 389-90) Gregory J Boyle, “The Voice of Those Who Sing,” *Spiritus* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 79–87; Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2011).

163 Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind*, 275.

164 Davidson and Begley, *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*, 2013, chaps. 7, 10.

165 Richard J Davidson and Sharon Begley, *The Emotional Life of Your Brain: How Its Unique Patterns Affect the Way You Think, Feel, and Live--and How You Can Change Them* (New York: Plume, 2013), 204.

166 Davidson and Begley, 222–23.

167 Davidson and Begley, *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*, 2013, 224.

168 Davidson and Begley, *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*, 2013, 223.

169 Siegel, *Mindsight*, 31–32.

170 This idea of kinship is also connected to Parker Palmer’s understanding of how truth and community are related. For Palmer, “to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced” (95). This vision of teaching stems from a fundamental claim that reality is communal; moreover, we can only know that reality by being in relationship with it (95-97). This model has the “Great Subject” at the center, with the “knowers” creating an interconnected and dynamic web around the center. By means of their dialogue and engagement with one another around the subject, they come to practice and discern Truth. One does not ascertain this truth by mastering “the conclusions”; rather knowledge is gained through “our commitment to the conversation itself, our willingness to put forward our observations and interpretations for testing by the community and to return the favor to others” (104). Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life, 10th Anniversary Edition*, 2 edition (San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

171 Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind*, 105.

172 Nira Liberman and Jens Förster, “The Effect of Psychological Distance on Perceptual Level of Construal,” *Cognitive Science* 33, no. 7 (September 1, 2009): 1330, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1551-6709.2009.01061.x>.

173 Liberman and Förster, 1331.

174 Liberman and Förster, 1337.

175 Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind*, 103–5.

176 Koutstaal, 105.

177 Koutstaal, 105.

178 Koutstaal, 105.

179 The effects of distance – both literal and figurative – that result from people failing to see and hear others rightly couldn't be clearer in Basil's sermons. Indeed, by "completely ignoring [their] brothers and sisters in their time of need," the bishop's hearers don't even bat an eye when those "brothers and sisters" suffer. Basil's observations in the very next line highlight this psychological distance that results from purposeful ignorance: "Yes, while glitter of gold so allures you, you fail to notice how great are the groans of the needy that follow you wherever you go." This blindness and deafness, moreover, have not resulted from one-off events; rather, they are the result of looking and listening a long time in the wrong directions and to the wrong voices. Indeed, not only do Basil's congregants not hear or notice the needy's "groans," they don't even perceive the poor as persons. Basil describes how this listening to the wrong voices and seeing one's wealth as self-generated manifests in the rich man who insist on building bigger barns: "How easily you might have said, 'I will satisfy the souls of the hungry, I will throw open the gates of my barns and summon those in need...But you are not such a person. How do I know this?...taking wicked counsel in your soul, you consider not how you might distribute to others according to their needs, but rather how, after having received so many good things, you might rob others of their benefit.'" For Basil, wrong sight and deranged listening allow the rich man to abstract the poor into potential competitors and distance himself psychologically from their needs. From the perspective of cognitive science, one might say that the lack of physical and emotional engagement with the poor that can allow the rich man to construe their plight as personally meaningless. Basil and Schroeder, *On Social Justice*, 62.

180 See especially Barbara Fredrickson's work on the biochemistry of love. Fredrickson, *Love 2.0*.

181 Koutstaal, *The Agile Mind*, 144–46.

182 Basil and Schroeder, *On Social Justice*, 56.

183 Martin Buber and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *I and Thou* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1970).

184 Basil and Schroeder, *On Social Justice*, 54–55.

185 1 John 4:19.

186 Basil and Schroeder, *On Social Justice*, 62.

