

Nancy Lammers Gross. *Women's Voices and the Practice of Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017. 182. \$20.

I am grateful in my life to have heard many good female preachers. However, I have also heard powerful messages from women who seemed unable to fully embody the strength and presence of what they proclaimed. When women are disconnected from their physical bodies, they are less able to authentically testify to the truth of the gospel. Nancy Lammers Gross' work, *Women's Voices and the Practice of Preaching*, seeks to help readers understand the nuances of embodied preaching. She is the Arthur Sarell Rudd Associate Professor of Speech Communication in Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary, which provides the background research for this book. Her premise is set out in the introduction, stating that her book "...addresses the tendency for women—even women of strong call, conviction, and gifts—to apologize with their bodies and their physical voices for presuming to preach or lead in worship, or for simply occupying pulpit or chapel space" (xviii). Gross understands that not every woman struggles with embodiment for the same reasons, but she does not want homileticians to neglect this practice for their female students.

An early definition the author lays out is that of Voice and a voice. The "Voice" is a woman's interpretive perspective, her prophetic view. The "voice" of a woman is her actual voice and presence behind a pulpit. Though it is true that sometimes a woman's Voice can affect her voice, this book focuses on the latter, discussing the problems many women face regarding their own embodiment. If the voice is a full body instrument, then women must first be reconnected to their bodies before they can truly use their voice (xviii). By emphasizing an understanding of the incarnation, Gross invites women to reclaim their own voice through a better understanding of creation.

Gross uses the story of Miriam, who appears four times in the Old Testament, as her example of an embodied woman who claimed her voice and was used by God. In her story, Miriam's voice and presence are the instruments of salvation for Israel. The next section tells stories of women who struggled to use their voices. Some stories are in their own words, others in Gross', but all have a powerful and representative quality. These women speak from different spheres of experience but each one struggles with embodiment. One woman, Sarah, in the portion where she gives her story, tells of her teenage years when she "didn't want her body at all" (27). Many women can understand the desire to be anywhere except for their own body simply because women's bodies are problematic for society.

Following this, Gross discusses the disconnection between women and their bodies. She speaks of why women lose their voice. Culture plays a role, as do trauma and abuse, all connected to the desire to avoid embodiment. Additionally, because women must pay for their presence in the world by having feminine voices and a demure presence, it is difficult to remain self-possessed. "So why do women disconnect from their bodies? Because it is precisely *women's bodies* that make women wrong" (48, emphasis added). Gross addresses the unrealistic overcommercialization of women's bodies and how imposing a cultural expectation on women's bodies leads to dissatisfaction and overwhelmingly negative understandings of their own bodies. This discussion alone is worth the price of the book.

If the first section of the book emphasizes the theological and experiential, then the final section of the book is practical. The last few chapters provide breathing exercises to learn full-belly breathing necessary for clear and loud voices. To help women understand their own voices, the author also gives an exercise of speaking aloud different emotional intonations using the

story of Mary, Martha, and Jesus after Lazarus' death. The book finishes with a sermon developed from this close reading process, helping readers see the practice of embodied preaching.

Gross does an extraordinary job of lifting up women's voices, empowering them by reconnecting them to their bodies and providing methods to help a more effective expression of the gospel. This book matters because it unites the experience of women, breaks the bonds of fears of embodiment, and allows the full voice of God to speak from a woman's body. By speaking to both the theological and the practical, those who wish to understand the experience of women or personally develop a better preaching practice would benefit from this book. *Women's Voices* provides a path forward for all those seeking to preach embodied.

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