

Amy P. McCullough. *Her Preaching Body: Conversations About Identity, Agency, and Embodiment Among Contemporary Female Preachers*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018. 178 pages. \$24.

As a female preacher, I took particular interest in Amy P. McCullough's book *Her Preaching Body*, but it is also a book for anybody who preaches or wants to understand more about the embodied act of preaching. McCullough asserts, "Since one cannot preach without her body, to explore preaching is to explore the body" (13). Her work is based on qualitative interviews with contemporary female preachers and seeks to understand more fully what it means to preach with a female body and how women preachers name and claim their identity as an embodiment of the word of God.

McCullough traces (and ultimately dismisses as inadequate) three theories of embodiment: women are essentially different from men (essentialism), women's bodies are formed by and conform to cultural contexts (social constructivism), and women exercise linguistic agency (performance). By adopting the phenomenological approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*The Phenomenology of Perception*) who contends perception begins not with cognition but with the body's lived experience and views "physicality, cultural influence, and individual choice as three interwoven, constantly interacting, and shifting aspects of the self" (23), McCullough critically analyzes the body of the preacher as the locus of negotiations between flesh, culture, and actions. She seeks to bring into the light these "habitations operating in the body that are often hidden from conscious comprehension" (29) so that a female preacher can be more mindful of the messages she gives and receives from others.

Throughout Christian history, as the female preaching body has attracted scrutiny, women employed (knowingly or unknowingly) four habitations to overcome cultural resistance and to give their message a hearing: rising above the female body (habits of transcendence), adopting signs of maleness (masculine form), becoming an impeccably moral woman (virtuous woman), and breaching boundaries (transgressors). Uncovering unnamed assumptions or unreflective behaviors gives a female preacher tools to analyze her preaching decisions, "thinking about her agency in her efforts to embody God's word" (61), because, whether in or out of the pulpit, with or without words, consciously or unconsciously, the "preacher's body is always preaching" (45).

"What should I wear today?" is not a superficial question for female preachers, but a deeply symbolic query, because as one woman interviewed astutely realized, "my clothes preach and teach" (63). Analyzing female preachers' choices of pants or skirts, robes or stoles, high heels or dangling earrings, short or long hairstyles, McCullough argues that every decision is a means to exercise agency and authority, and at the same time, to affirm identity as an embodied preacher who discloses a divine word.

As perplexing as it is, McCullough demonstrates how awareness of the fact that congregations will not notice a male preacher's body but will observe and comment on a female preacher's body can actually empower female preachers to become embodied preachers. One preacher said, "Believing we are made in the image of God with beautiful, amazing, and diverse bodies...with the word of God dwelling within us...my role as the preacher is to give voice to that word of God, [so that] God wells up in other people" (146). Whether it was through utilizing her strong voice, exercising the clergy robe as a tool, preaching without a manuscript, or claiming pregnancy as an illustration of incarnation, the women McCullough interviewed gave

witness to the fact that the more they became self-aware about how their bodies communicate, the better preachers they became.

Among the most significant contributions of McCullough's work is her application of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* to homiletics in order to critically analyze the unique role the body, especially the female body, plays in preaching and worship leadership. Although we may find ourselves seeking a homiletical practice with a proven method for matching the messages of the body and mind, McCullough demonstrates that there is no one prescribed way to do it, but that it is an ongoing negotiation. In the #MeToo era with increased attention to women's bodies and voices, McCullough's work of theory, history, perception, and practice makes a valuable contribution to the conversation, even while inviting further theological and homiletical research. The questions for interviews McCullough included (Appendix B) invite all preachers into a deeper awareness of our preaching body.

By shining light on the body of the female preacher, McCullough gives women the tools to analyze the internal and external conversations about their bodies so that they might be more than silent repositories of preconceptions, and that they might knowingly make decisions on how to fully preach—in body, mind, and spirit—the word of God.

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