

Dying to Be Creative: Playing In/With the Homiletical Hiatus¹

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Abstract: *Harbored within the preaching event is an innate and necessary spacing wherein the creativity of God—the Creative—works in and upon sermonic discourse. Against the grain of homiletical assumptions, governed as they are by Western philosophical assumptions, this essay points to the originary spacing structured by the Creative and offers an orientation to sermon development and delivery that attempts to engage the Creative for preaching.*

Creativity can save the Church in this era of ecclesial decline. I believe this applies to every area of the Church’s ministry and mission in the world; but, it holds most prominently in the act of Gospel proclamation: preaching. In short, creativity can save preaching.

Herein lies a theological sketch for creativity in preaching. Note that I am not writing about *creative preaching*. That would indicate a methodological project: how to preach more creatively. Instead, I wish to reflect upon the creative element *within* preaching, an element seldom mentioned in homiletics texts, which tend to focus on the preacher’s creativity, offering techniques to fan the flames of imagination, to fuel the preacher’s creative furnace.²

Homiletics, following the tracks laid by theology and philosophy, is dominated by what Jacques Derrida labels a “metaphysics of presence,” or, borrowing Heidegger’s rebarbative neologism, “onto-theology.” It is oriented to what is.³ I am not denying the importance of that which is given (*es gibt, il y a*) before consciousness; rather, I am posing questions to this governing principle. What if there is a more originary—sub-ontological, proto-phenomenological—creativity always already at work within our preaching that homiletics has failed to notice? What if our very efforts to be creative in our preaching frustrates that originary creativity from shedding its linguistic cocoon?⁴ How might we who preach have been seduced by a metaphysics of presence?

I believe we preachers must die to be creative. Following a certain death—a certain martyrdom of the preacher—we may catch a glimmer of the Creative always already at work within (and often in spite of) our homiletical imaginations. I am searching for a “crevice through which the unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed,” to borrow a line from

¹ I am indebted to the participants of the Theology of Preaching section of the Academy of Homiletics (Chicago, 2012) for their helpful feedback and constructive criticism. Lingering errors and oversights are, of course, my own.

² NB: I am in no way arguing against such an approach. Rather, my intention is to supplement such helpful contributions by pointing to signs of the Creative within the very structure of preaching.

³ Thomas H. Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 15: “The primary principle from which all others are derived is that we are attentive to what is.” Consider also Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 9: “. . . imagination is not culling something from nothing but rather is discovering what is given” and Barbara Brown Taylor, “Bothering God,” in *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process*, Jana Childers, ed. (St Louis: Chalice, 2001), 158. This is also the case for Mary Katherine Hilbert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York & London: Continuum, 1997).

⁴ N.b. we are restricted in English to describe the temporality of the Creative. “Originary” designates a time preceding origin, or any originating moment *in time*, that is irreducible to temporality. I am writing of a moment anterior to any *numen praesens*, or experience of the numinous *as present*. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, John W. Harvey, trans. (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), 11.

Derrida.⁵ The “closure” is onto-theological, and thus Derrida is a welcome conversation partner. The preacher as self-same subject must die in order for us to glimpse the Creative. The preacher’s death opens a necessary space—a fissure in the logocentric foundation—whereby *God* creates.⁶ Genuine creativity emerges from the Creator. God has elected human language—and preaching most of all—to manifest God’s creative energies in the world. God’s creation through the preacher’s words I am calling the Creative and I believe that such a manifestation worthy of the name *Creative* is necessarily prior to the work of the preacher and arises out of a certain dislocation of the preacher’s status vis-à-vis the sermon. The Creative arises out of the provenance of the Spirit, of whom Wendy Farley writes, “She is outrageous because of the kind of power that seems to spin off of Her. She is a troublemaker, always stirring things up in crazy directions, and blowing wherever the hell She wants to.”⁷ And just as it is with the Spirit, no preacher can summon the Creative to do his or her bidding; the best we can do is nurture a space for the work of the Creative to move where it wills.

This essay moves in search of a different notion of creativity than one typically finds in homiletics literature. Notwithstanding the helpful insights and strategies for harnessing the preacher’s creative energies offered by a number of astute homileticians, I am inquiring about a kind of creativity that participates in a certain death. Such a death, I believe, is necessary to experience the Creative. This is not a literal death—no homiletical hemlock is required. Rather, what I have in mind is akin to a kenotic self-emptying or what Paul Ricoeur will identify (following Jean Nabert) as *dépouillement*.⁸

Paul Scott Wilson gets it right when he avers, “Preaching and creativity belong together, and preaching is only authentically creative when illumined by the Spirit.”⁹ What remains to be seen, and what I hope to show in this paper, is what such agency on the part of God via the Spirit might look like for preaching, what God is doing before we even begin to conceive a sermon.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 14.

⁶ See Karl Barth, “The Need of Christian Preaching,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Douglas Horton, trans. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 131: “Under no circumstances and in no sense ought we to desire to be *creatores Creatoris*. Ours is not to give *birth* to God but to give *testimony* of him.” Such a notion is not alien to the thought of a frequent homiletical conversation partner, Paul Ricoeur, who confesses a “permanent mistrust of the pretensions of the subject in posing itself as the foundation of its own meaning. The reflective philosophy to which I appeal is at the outset opposed to any philosophy of the Cartesian type based on the transparency of the ego to itself, and to all philosophy of the Fichtean type based on the self-positing of that ego. Today this mistrust is reinforced by the conviction that the understanding of the self is always indirect and proceeds from the interpretation of signs given outside me in culture and history and from the appropriation of the meaning of these signs. I would now dare to say that, in the coming to understanding of signs inscribed in texts, the meaning rules and gives me a self. In short, the self of self-understanding is a gift of understanding itself and of the invitation from the meaning inscribed in the text.” Paul Ricoeur, “Foreword,” in Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971), xv.

⁷ Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 97.

⁸ See Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, Lewis S. Mudge, ed., David Stewart and Charles E. Reagan, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1980), 119–54. N.b., Kenosis is troubled by feminist scholarship and the recent contributions by scholars like Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ’s Self-Giving* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), draw our attention to the power arising from such acts as a power “that leans toward others and offers itself to them” (7). Such “power for” the other can actually lead to human flourishing rather than further subjugating and silencing already marginalized bodies/voices.

⁹ Paul Scott Wilson, *Broken Words: Reflections on the Craft of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 2.

Creativity can save the Church and we preachers must die to be creative, which is, after all, consistent with our task to take up our cross and follow Christ (Mt. 16:24).¹⁰

Creativity in Preaching

Wilson writes, “Today there is more emphasis on creativity in preaching than ever before.”¹¹ Most of such emphasis is on the preacher’s creativity. However, as one commentator puts it, “Preaching is not running truth through a pipe to a tank; it is filtering truth through a person to a person.”¹² To borrow this metaphor, the number of joints one employs and the span between them structure preaching’s conditions of possibility for creativity. By this understanding, the preacher is fully in control of the flow of information, or “truth,” a homiletical plumber, so to speak. But what if things aren’t so simple? What if our solder joints are never quite as secure as we think? What if our attempts to “filter” the content of our sermons never quite removes the impurities we think it does?

Creativity in Language

Preaching is impossible without language. Language is not all that preaching is, but it is nevertheless a necessary condition for preaching’s possibility. By scrutinizing the way language operates we may thereby gain greater insight into how creativity might be a function of language even as it is a result of a certain use of language.

Language in general is *sign language*. In other words, the general structure of language is structured by an arbitrary and differential system of signification in which sounds, gestures, inscriptions, etc. affix to acoustic images that cohere in the minds of its users. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure taught us this.¹³ Derrida is the one who drew our attention to a fundamental creativity at work within language, a creativity that Saussure attempted to control through a theoretical violence that cast writing outside of the pure inside of language as speech.¹⁴ Derrida writes, “. . . the immanence of language is essentially exposed to the intervention of forces that are apparently alien to its system.”¹⁵ The “usurpation” has always already begun.

As a conventional system of signification, language is structured according to the interplay of signifiers and signifieds, which are arbitrary and differential. Signifiers and their accompanying signifieds are inseparable for Saussure, like two sides of a sheet of paper.¹⁶ Derrida recognizes, however, that even if a signifier is inseparable from its signified concept

¹⁰ I am indebted to David Schnasa Jacobsen for drawing this point to my attention.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² Howard, 16.

¹³ See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger, ed., Roy Haris trans. (Chicago & La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1983). For a particularly incisive reading of Saussure’s *Course* see Paul J. Thibault, *Re-Reading Saussure: The Dynamics of Signs in Social Life* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁴ This creativity will take multiple names in Derrida’s texts: spacing, arche-writing, *différance*, etc. We must be careful to distinguish between creativity, which is a feature of language in general from the Creative, which is radically distinct from the linguistic economy and signifies something like a gift, or the impossible in Derrida’s later writings. See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, David Willis, trans. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995); *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Peggy Kamuf, trans. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1992); and Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 43.

¹⁶ Saussure, *Course*, 65–70.

there is a necessary space, or hiatus, between them. This space is necessary for the system to function, like a certain give between gears that enable them to turn. Thus, all of language is structured by an “arche-writing,” which conditions the possibility of language as such.¹⁷

Far from the “monstrousness” that Saussure observed in writing and condemned to a sort of “intralinguistic leper colony,” the fact that language in general is always already structured by a certain playful creativity is something that should be celebrated in homiletics.¹⁸ It is as if God has crafted a Divine loophole (an “enigmatic relationship of the living to its other”) in our tight linguistic fabric so that, in spite of our best efforts to control our words, God might speak. This feature of language will take on different names in Derrida’s writings—space, give, *différance*, trace, supplement, play, hiatus etc. But, whatever we call it, we may see this hiatus that is a necessary feature of language as a source of *theo-logy*, as a space where God-speaks.¹⁹

Might we not think of the hiatus, the possibility of creativity, in language as a gift from God? Derrida writes, “One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence.”²⁰ In other words, we may consider the nature of human language as working against our proclivity to secure God in the simple presence of living speech. Always already at work, before the preacher ever puts pen to paper, God is at work in the fabric of language to save us from idolatry, from inscribing God in our language as a fixed ideology or concept.²¹ A feature at work *within* language—arche-writing, hiatus, etc.—opens our preaching to a void, to absence, to death. Derrida observes, “Arche-writing as spacing cannot occur *as such* within the phenomenological experience of a *presence*. It marks *the dead time* within the presence of the living present, within the general form of all presence. The dead time is at work.”²²

At all times, and against its every intention, language participates in an “*economy of death*.”²³ Death is the homiletical “hinge” (*brissure*) that simultaneously fractures or fragments (*brissure*) the preacher as a conscious subject, as *cogito*, and conjoins or folds (*brissure*) the preacher’s language into the creative energy at work within language. Such a concept has not gone unnoticed in homiletics. Richard Lischer, for instance, recognizes that death is necessary

¹⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70: “Arche-writing, at first the possibility of the spoken word, then of the ‘*graphie*’ in the narrow sense, the birthplace of ‘usurpation,’ denounced from Plato to Saussure, this trace is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing.”

¹⁸ Saussure, *Course*, 31 writes of “a genuine graphic monstrosity.” See also Derrida, 42. A similar Saussurian impulse runs through many homiletics texts. There is an obvious worry that creativity will get the best of the preacher and that which is external to the Gospel will somehow usurp the inside of the sermon. See Wilson, *Broken Words*, 21–5.

¹⁹ Without getting in the middle of the Derrida-Ricoeur debate concerning the transcendental capacity of language, I see this necessary spacing as a generative speech (whether it manifests on the level of language, sense, or reference). See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. R. Czerny et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 257–313. Cf. Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207–72 and *idem*, “The *Retrait* of Metaphor,” in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 1, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 48–90, esp. 53–60.

²⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 51.

²¹ See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, Thomas A. Carlson, trans. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 37: “To reach a nonidolatrous thought of God, which alone releases “God” from his (*sic*) quotation marks by disengaging his apprehension from the conditions posed by onto-theo-logy, one would have to manage to think God outside of metaphysics . . .”

²² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 68.

²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

for preaching: “For the very language that informs [the preacher’s] message is undergoing a kind of death and refiguration. Every week the preacher must begin from the end of words.”²⁴ This is not, I would argue, just a result of the inundation of words from Madison Avenue, Washington, and Hollywood. The preacher’s message undergoes a kind of death when she submits her sermonic language to the fallenness of language in general, a fallenness that simultaneously structures the end of her words and the (possible) beginning of the Creative: a kind of “bursting.”²⁵

We can therefore conclude that creativity is not just something that we might do to language—as a conscious decision on the part of the preacher—but it is always already at work within language as its most intimate possibility. Apart from the arbitrary and differential structure of language there is not enough give in the system to allow for signification in general. To get around this we would require a sort of Divine dictionary, an a priori rubric external to the system of signification—outside of language in general—that mandated a motivated (i.e., non-arbitrary) connection between signifiers and signifieds.

We have no such dictionary. Our dictionaries are *a posteriori* linguistic rubrics. They contain no non-arbitrary signifieds. They are endless circulations of signifiers pointing to other signifiers; they bolster the claim that there is no outside of language, no outside-language.²⁶ But the absence of a Divine dictionary is the very condition that makes creativity possible *in* language. We are not linguistic automatons, but free to play in and with words; we are free to play in and with the homiletical hiatus. Creativity is the necessary condition for the possibility of language and homiletics has only scratched the surface of this reality inasmuch as it has concentrated its attention on the preacher’s creativity.²⁷

Creativity in Speech

Preaching is impossible without speech, or at least without something that approximates speech.²⁸ As with language, there is more to preaching than speech, but there is no disputing the privileged status the spoken word has held in the history of preaching. Much has been written on creativity in speech; matters of tone, inflection, pacing, and projection are staple topics in our

²⁴ Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2005), 19.

²⁵ Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *The Disaster of Writing*, new ed., trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 124. What Blanchot says in reference to the book we might also think in reference to the sermon, which “is not the laborious assemblage of a totality finally obtained, but has for its being the noisy, silent bursting which without the book would not take place But it also means that since the book itself belongs to burst being—to being violently exceeded and thrust out of itself—the book gives no sign of itself save its own explosive violence, the force with which it expels itself, the thunderous refusal of the plausible: the outside in its becoming, which is that of bursting.”

²⁶ For this oft-quoted sentiment see Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158: “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (“there is nothing outside the text/no outside text”).

²⁷ A noted exception to this is John S. McClure in his book *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 5: “. . . language exists just beyond the threshold of the language user’s experience of the disastrous inadequacy of language and the complicity of language in potentially violent, oppressive, and self-perpetuating binary operations. It could be that preachers need to retreat into this second, passive, and non-binary language in order to discern and preserve the heart of preaching.”

²⁸ I am thinking of the animating movement of bodily gesture at work in sign-language, for instance. See Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

introductory homiletics courses.²⁹ That speech is the vehicle par excellence of preaching goes without saying, which is part of the problem. Even those thinkers who challenge the structure of preaching as speech-making do not challenge the privileged status of the spoken word, merely the authoritarian posturing they detect therein.³⁰

Speech is the privileged medium for Christian proclamation for (at least) two reasons.³¹ First, the spatio-temporal qualities of the sonic substance correlate with the event-like quality of God's revelation in preaching. Many take seriously the dictum from the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1562) that "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God." Thus some, like Charles Bartow, understand the "performance" of a sermon to be a re-animation of the living Word of God held in abeyance in the biblical witness. Through the preacher's speech, the Spirit of God is loosed upon the congregation, *hic et nunc*, as presence, reconfiguring both the preacher and the congregation in the process. Bartow writes, "We are speaking of the infinite in finite terms, of *actio divina* in the discourse of *homo performans*. We are using vocal and physical gesture to sound forth and body forth (enact) human experience of the divine."³² In short, the voice renders God present to human experience in the act of preaching.

The second reason why the human voice is the favored medium of Christian proclamation is that it seems to be the most effective vehicle to release the inner life of the preacher's mind (with its accompanying intention) outside of the preacher into the minds and hearts of congregants. The act of speech entails (for most) hearing oneself speak. The immediate feedback one receives from his voice as he speaks re-inscribes the communication process like no other medium of signification. Derrida calls this experience "auto-affection." When I speak I hear myself speaking, and unlike few other activities in the world, the connection between one's internal thought world—consciousness—and the outside world appears diaphanous. As Derrida notes,

The system of "hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak" through the phonic substance—which *presents itself* as the nonexterior, nonmundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier—has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, that arises from the difference between worldly and non-

²⁹ Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon*, 67 notes that "we too often think only in terms of language when we want to revitalize our religious imagination for the pulpit. This strategy often fails because without fresh sources of experience, we fall back into our old ways of thinking and expressing ourselves."

³⁰ See John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) and Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997). For a far less rigorous attack on speech-making ("speaching") see Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) and *Preaching in the Inventive Age* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2011), 41 ff.

³¹ The status of speech in preaching is rightly challenged on two fronts in homiletics. On the one side, are homiletics that have challenged the "silencing" or "oppression" of the voices of those marginalized by ecclesial structures. Here Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989); Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, *Saved From Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999); and Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) are must-reads. On the other side, are homiletics that have drawn our attention to the ableism that can be embedded in the privileging of the vocal apparatus in preaching. See Black, *A Healing Homiletic* and Christine M. Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 15–37.

³² Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), 60.

worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc.³³

Another way of putting this is that in the moment of hearing myself speak I convince myself that I am fully present: alive to a world that is outside of my inner thought-world. Edmund Husserl took great pains to articulate this movement from inside oneself to an outside world as a necessary component for his phenomenology.

For Derrida, Husserl's descriptions imply that within the living present of articulated speech, it must be the case that there is a minuscule hiatus differentiating me into the speaker and into the hearer. This hiatus is spatial as well as temporal, and this barely discernible gap makes speech possible. The infinitesimal distance (between my larynx and my tympanic membrane) produces a second (internal) hiatus that differentiates me from myself, a hiatus or gap without which I would not be a hearer *as well as* a speaker. This hiatus also defines the trace, a minimal repeatability,³⁴ and this hiatus, this fold of repetition that simultaneously ruptures and enables speech, is found in the very moment of hearing-myself-speak.

Derrida emphasizes the fact that “moment” or “instant” translates the German *Augenblick*, which literally means “blink of the eye.” When Derrida stresses the literal meaning of *Augenblick*, he is in effect deconstructing auditory auto-affection into visual auto-affection. When I look in the mirror, for example, it is necessary that I am “distanced” or “spaced” from the mirror.³⁵ I must be distanced from myself so that I am able to be *both seer and seen*. The *space* between, however, remains obstinately invisible. Remaining invisible, the space gouges out the eye, blinds it. I see myself over there in the mirror and yet, that self over there is other than me; so, I am not able to see myself as such. What Derrida is trying to demonstrate here is that this “spacing” (*espacement*) or blindness is essentially necessary for all forms of auto-affection, even tactile auto-affection which seems to be immediate. There is a “difference within auto-affection,” within the “sameness” of the *Augenblick*.³⁶

This is the key to understanding Derrida's treatment of auto-affection and representation in Husserl: “What constitutes the originality of speech, what distinguishes it from every other element of signification, is that its substance seems to be purely temporal.”³⁷ Unlike writing which need not be synchronous—the writer need not even be alive—in order to signify, speech necessitates spatio-temporal proximity.³⁸ Derrida sums up his observations nicely in the following quotation:

When I speak, it belongs to the phenomenological essence of this operation that I *hear myself at the same time* that I speak. The signifier, animated by my breath

³³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 7–8.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, David B. Allison, trans. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 85: “But this pure difference, which constitutes the self-presence of the living present, introduces into self-presence from the beginning all the impurity putatively excluded from it. The living present springs forth out of its nonidentity with itself and from the possibility of a retentional trace. It is always already a trace.”

³⁵ Cf. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 141: “The specular dispossession which at the same time institutes and deconstitutes me is also a law of language. It operates as the power of death in the heart of living speech: a power all the more redoubtable because it opens as much as it threatens the possibility of the spoken word.”

³⁶ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁸ Of course we could discuss electronic modes of preserving and re-transmitting the phonic substance over space and time, but that would take us far afield from Derrida's conversation as well as the scope of this paper.

and by the meaning-intention (in Husserl's language, the expression animated by the *Bedeutungsintention*), is in absolute proximity to me. The living act, the life-giving act, the *Lebendigkeit*, which animates the body of the signifier and transforms it into a meaningful expression, the soul of language, seems not to separate itself from itself, from its own self-presence. *It does not risk death in the body of a signifier* that is given over to the world and the visibility of space. It can *show* the ideal object or ideal *Bedeutung* connected to it without venturing outside ideality, outside the interiority of self-present life. The system of *Zeigen*, the finger and eye movements . . . Are not absent here; but they are interiorized.³⁹

Nevertheless, because speech is always and already exposed to the structure of signification in language, as arche-writing, living speech is forever exposed to its other: death. Derrida writes, "The autonomy of meaning with regard to intuitive cognition, what Husserl established and we earlier called the freedom or 'candor' of language, has its norm in writing and in the relationship with death."⁴⁰

As we think about these words for preaching, we may uncover an aspect of creativity in speech that has been overlooked in even the best treatments of the performance of preaching. Always already at work within living speech is a certain death; the experience of presence in speech is conditioned, at base, by a non-presence. We need to think more deeply about how an experience of something like death in our preaching—in the very articulation of *homo performans*—might give way, or expose, a "supplement at the origin" of preaching: *Actio Divina*, the Creative. John McClure offers an insightful take on the "sonic personality" of preaching in his *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention*. He rightly urges preachers to consider not only the linguistic value of our words, but also the "voluptuousness of sounds and signifiers—which amounts to capturing the *desire* that resonates beneath those sounds and signifiers."⁴¹ McClure's work moves us in the right direction by adding a level of philosophical sophistication to our understanding of speech, even if such practice has long been at work in the best of our preaching, particularly in the African American preaching tradition.⁴²

Derrida concludes, "It remains, then, for us to *speak*, to make our voices *resonate* throughout the corridors in order to make up for [*suppléer*] the breakup of presence. The phoneme, the *akoumenon*, is the *phenomenon of the labyrinth*. This is the *case* with the *phônè*. Rising toward the sun of presence, it is the way of Icarus."⁴³ Even as we, with LaRue, seek to "lift the sermon to higher heights," we must divest ourselves (*se dépouiller*) of the hopes of

³⁹ Ibid., 77–8. Emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 97.

⁴¹ John S. McClure, *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 116. McClure's helpful discussion on "the grain of the voice" borrows from the work of Roland Barthes. See Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath, ed. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 179–89.

⁴² For instance, Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 80 argues that the tone and tenor of black preaching is essential to "deep communication" in the African American Church tradition. Aspects of delivery rate, sentence structure, and tonal inflection are crucial for Black Preaching. Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 10 writes that the creative use of speech allows "the presence of God through the power of language to lift the sermon to higher heights." He continues, "To this end, the employment of literary devices such as antiphonality, repetition, alliteration, syncopation, oral formulas, thematic imagery, voice merging, and sacred time continues to be a compelling concern of the African American preacher."

⁴³ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 104.

mastering our speech. Rather, by living into a certain death that is always already at work within the phonic substance, according to a necessary hiatus that structures the possibility of speech, we may encounter that which must give itself outside of the economy of speech.⁴⁴

Creativity in Sermons

Preaching is impossible without the Word of God. This is the most salient point of differentiation from a sermon and a speech. In keeping with the focus of this paper, I wonder whether we might be missing something *in* sermons that bespeaks an originary creativity that always already precedes the preacher's creative impulse. Preaching is "peculiar speech"⁴⁵ as well as a peculiar use of language. There are many aspects that lend themselves to such peculiarity, but I will focus my remarks on the strange relationship between the Word of God proclaimed (sermon) and the Word of God written (the Bible).

James F. Kay, in his helpful volume, *Preaching and Theology*, insists, "Preaching is the Word of God if, and only if, it preaches the Word of God, that is, the scriptures as witnesses to the will and way of God."⁴⁶ Kay goes on to argue convincingly that preaching must arise out of the biblical witness "[b]ecause God wills to address us, *here and now*, in our time and in our place . . . If God's Word is to continue as *an event in the present*, then there must be interpretation of the holy scriptures as they themselves indicate."⁴⁷ In other words, if Kay is right, preaching is necessarily scripture-dependent in order to "accommodate" God's "present speaking" to contemporary persons.

I do not wish to counter this claim, especially inasmuch as it structures my own preaching. Yet, when we read such words in conversation with Derrida, we may gain a deeper appreciation for the kind of presence at work in and by means of the Word of God, and the creativity always already arising therefrom. Derrida writes, "In the spoken address, presence is at once promised and refused. . . . We are dispossessed of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it."⁴⁸ In other words, on account of the general structure of iterability that makes our preaching possible, full-presence is never quite accessible. Whether we preach from the scriptures or not, we are incapable of ever fully "accommodating" God's "present

⁴⁴ Marion, 105: "*Gød gives*. The giving, in allowing to be devined how 'it gives,' a giving, offers the only accessible trace of He who gives."

⁴⁵ See William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

⁴⁶ James F. Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2007), 18. He goes on to argue that, while both "equally instruments of the Divine Speaker," there is an instrumental though not normative equality between Scripture and preaching: "The scriptural Word of God must govern our preaching if that preaching is to be received as 'Word of God.'" With regard to the instrumentality of Scripture, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: III/1 The Doctrine of Creation*, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, ed., J.W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight, trans. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 93 regards the Scriptures as a "very inadequate medium" and they only ever approximate the Word of God "by the self-witness of the Holy Spirit to whom alone they owe their origin and power."

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 141.

speaking,” at least not a present speaking that might ever arise as a plentitude, as “full-speech.”⁴⁹ This point arises clearly out of Derrida’s “reading” of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.⁵⁰

To put it as clearly as possible: a sermon is an especially peculiar form of speech inasmuch as it incorporates, openly and without remorse, the spoken and written modes of language. There is no attempt to conceal the fact that the preacher has tethered her speaking to the written Word. Herein we find a great power at work within preaching, one that “dislocates the subject that it constructs.” It prevents us from ever “being present” to the signs we employ. This power “torments” our language as the work of *différance*. Derrida writes,

Différance does not *resist* appropriation, it does not impose an exterior limit upon it. Difference began by *broaching* alienation and it ends by leaving reappropriation *breached*. Until death. Death is the movement of difference to the extent that movement is necessarily finite. This means that difference makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. Without the possibility of difference, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space. That means by the same token that this desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction. Différance produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible.⁵¹

As we think about this claim in relation to that “peculiar speech” that arises from our sermons, we may observe that *différance*—the structure of difference and deferral that governs language, and thus, preaching—simultaneously denies and “accommodates” God’s presence in sermons.⁵² God’s presence is not “constituted” by this *différance*, for that would merely make God a function, albeit an ordinary function, of language. *Différance* “is” the structure that makes it possible for us to think the difference between presence and absence in the first place.

We would do well to think theologically alongside Derrida, for the Word to which preachers bear witness in the event of preaching is even more ordinary to preaching than the anarchic linguistic structure highlighted by *différance*. As Jean-Luc Marion writes, “Before our words, the Word lets people talk, thus manifesting that he cannot be spoken in them, but that, by

⁴⁹ Though never quite achieving a religious status, this notion of an anticipated though never fully arriving presence will continue in Derrida’s later mention of “messianicity,” which signifies a posture of openness to the future beyond (religious) expectation. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 33 and John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 22–5.

⁵⁰ Derrida locates a tension at work in Rousseau. On the one hand, Rousseau castigates writing as a destruction of presence and as a disease of speech. On the other hand, Rousseau rehabilitates writing to the extent that it promises the reappropriation of that which writing initially robbed from speech: presence, life. Rousseau confesses that, as an introvert, he feels that he can communicate himself more fully through writing than were he present to another in direct discourse: “If I were present, one would never know what I was worth” (*Confessions*, cited in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 142). This is the tension that divides Jean-Jacques (the author of *Emile* and *Confessions*) from Rousseau (the author of *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and *The Essay on the Origin of Language*). The irony, of course, is that Jean-Jacques and Rousseau are one and the same person. We see this same tension at work in preaching in the use of sermon manuscripts. There is an unexamined belief that by drafting our thoughts apart from the congregation beforehand we can better communicate our intentions (and God’s presence) than were we to preach extemporaneously.

⁵¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 143.

⁵² See Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 11: “*Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences.”

the lordly freedom of this redoubled incarnation, he (*sic*) gives himself in them to be spoken. What is unheard of in the Word stems from the fact that he only says [himself] unspeakably (gap Word/words), but that in the very unspeakableness he is said nevertheless perfectly.”⁵³

When we think about a certain creativity that might emerge in the hiatus between text and sermon, between the Word of God written and the Word of God spoken, we see that the Creative emerges as much through the structure of *différance* as it does from the preacher’s imagination. God’s Word is possible “in the present” only as it participates in a certain death, in writing. And yet, as Rousseau observed such “death is not the simple outside of life. Death by writing also inaugurates life.”⁵⁴ It inaugurates life by inviting the preacher to experience death in the written Word of God. We may speak of creativity *in* sermons by experiencing the homiletical hiatus, between text and sermon, that “accommodates” God’s presence by manifesting God’s absence.

The homiletical hiatus between the Word written (in Scripture) and the Word spoken (in sermons) invites a certain playfulness in interpretation. Paul Ricoeur observes, “If interpretation is possible, it is because it is always possible, by means of this gap, to mediate the relation of meaning and event by another meaning which plays the role of interpretation with regard to their very relation.”⁵⁵ The homiletical hiatus that is necessary for the proclamation of God’s Word invites a shift, as McClure has noted, from a hermeneutical posture to an “intertextual posture.”⁵⁶ By entering creatively into this intertextual space, through a kind of divestment, through a kind of death, the preacher encounters the Creative always already at work in preaching.

Toward a Theology of the Creative for Preaching

Theology has tended to curb creativity in favor of conformity. This is a lamentable part of our history and it is necessary that we recognize this fact prior to any theology of the Creative. We cannot fault Derrida for the following observation: “That the logos is first imprinted and that that imprint is the writing-resource of language, signifies, to be sure, that *the logos is not a creative activity*, the continuous full element of the divine word, etc.”⁵⁷ This illustrates that the history of the Church bears so little semblance to the Creative One that those outside of our flock cannot detect any resemblance between the Word we proclaim and the Creative.

So where does this put us on the path toward a theology of the Creative for preaching? The Church is present—we might say, the Church is alive to its presence in its non-presence in the power of the Spirit—through the Creative.⁵⁸ What marks our present age of ecclesial retreat from the spotlight into the shadows, as Craddock put it, is an enervation of the Creative in the Word

⁵³ Marion, *God Without Being*, 141.

⁵⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 143.

⁵⁵ Ricoeur, 145.

⁵⁶ McClure, *Mashup Religion*, 86.

⁵⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 68. Italics added. As Amos Wilder observes in his *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, “When imagination fails doctrines become ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic. It is at the level of the imagination that any full engagement with life takes place.” *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 2, cited in Troeger, “A Positive Theology of Imagination,” in the Papers of the Academy of Homiletics Annual Meeting (2006):138.

⁵⁸ William H. Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 15. Willimon avers, “If God should stop talking, if God should withdraw, even for a moment, into apophatic, empty silence, then the mountains would fall, chaos would overwhelm, the light would become darkness, and death would have the last word. Yet God’s creative, life-giving, people-forming, intrusive Word keeps creating, keeps being made flesh, keeps pushing in, keeps having the last say.”

(“*the logos is not a creative activity*”).⁵⁹ But the obverse side of this declaration is just as damaging: some preacher’s selfhood is stolen a priori because it is tethered to certain aspects of the preacher’s self (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race). Part of the argument I am making for the Creative works against such marginalization. With Farley I believe that such an abdication of the self “does not leave us impotent; it fills us with power. . . . We should understand that we are leaning into *power*, not impotence, passivity, neurotic patience, self-sacrifice, or the evacuation of personhood.”⁶⁰ The Creative is the power of preaching par excellence.

First, we require a homiletical medium appropriate to the Creative that is always already at work *in* preaching. I believe we need an invigorated appreciation for the power of language, as a “medium of the Holy,” as Thomas G. Long puts it.⁶¹ Such a medium is suggested in the notion of preacher as witness, albeit a radical witness (*martyr*) who has experienced the divestment (*dépouillement*) by the Creative *in* preaching.⁶² For, as Marion reminds us, “The other appears only if I gratuitously give him the space in which to appear; and I have at my disposal no other space than my own; I must, then, ‘take what is mine’ (John 16:15), take from myself, in order to open the space where the other may appear. It is up to me to set the stage for the other . . .”⁶³ Only when the preacher lives into his own divestment before the Creative, as a kind of martyr, as a witness hovering between activity and passivity, does the preacher sacrifice the space necessary for the Creative to manifest itself in the event of preaching.⁶⁴

Second, as we move toward a theology of the Creative in preaching we need a renewed

⁵⁹ Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 68–9: there is a “general unwillingness to lose oneself in the task of communicating.”

⁶⁰ Farley, 148.

⁶¹ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 42. We also need a wariness of language as a medium for silencing the Holy. See Chopp, *The Power to Speak*, esp. her focus on language as a political activity that is oppressive for women.

⁶² See Ricoeur, 120 and his discussion of how the divestment of the witness allows the other “to appear of itself.” See also Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 45–51 and Karl Barth, “The Task of Ministry,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 216: “. . . our task [is] to believe in their witness to the promise, and so to be witnesses of their witness, ministers of the *Scripture*.”

⁶³ Marion, “What Love Knows,” in *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 166–7. Feminist scholarship has taught us the dangers of such a perspective, and the same thought moves against the traditional, (phal)logocentrism at work in homiletics. Marion accepts as given the spacing for the other, a culturally dominant and powerful assumption, to be sure. But the history of patriarchal readings of a certain *kenosis* need not render *eros* unjust. See Mercedes, *Power For*, esp. her emphasis on “*forness*” vis-à-vis Christ’s *kenosis* and crucifixion (p. 151 ff.).

⁶⁴ Such divestment will not look the same for all. While space will not allow for a thorough treatment of this point, let me point to the troubled constitution of the preacher’s subjectivity. A “dying to self” might signify an abdication of the privileged position of the preacher as self-same subject, say, for white, heterosexual male preachers. For LGBTQ, women and racial minorities—those whose subjectivities have been formed out of the fold/speculum/alterity of the normative white, straight, male preacher before the patriarchal structures of the church—*dépouillement* might take the form of “stripping off” the hegemonic labels borne by the preacher. See Susannah Cornwall, “The Kenosis of Unambiguous Sex in the Body of Christ: Intersex, Theology and Existing ‘for the Other,’” *Theology and Sexuality* 14, no. 3 (January 2008): 181–199; Catherine Keller, “Scoop up the Water and the Moon Is in Your Hands: On Feminist Theology and Dynamic of Self-Emptying,” in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, reprint, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr., Christopher Ives (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005); Jeremy Ayers, “Towards a Eucharistic Politics of the Black Body: Black Sexuality in the Horizons of Christian Theology,” *Theology and Sexuality* 10, no. 2 (March 2004): 99–113; and the classic essay in this regard from a feminist theological perspective: Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed., Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992).

sense of the subject matter of our preaching: the Word. As Willimon puts it, “Creativity is a word-derived phenomenon.”⁶⁵ What Derrida has helped us to see is that anything that might be appropriate to the Word, anything worthy of the name Creative as an expression of the Word, can never be experienced as a full-presence in language. To preach is to be radically Word-dependent, open to that which exceeds language. Where the Church forgets this fact, where it seeks to ground itself in its own identity apart from God’s Word, where it suppresses *différance* by inscribing a hermeneutically closed totality, the Word of God is there to name a certain spacing always already at work within our preaching.⁶⁶ We need to think more about the Word as the agent and agency of the Creative in preaching.

Third, the manner, or approach, toward the Word encountered by the preacher as witness must be reconsidered in route to a theology of the Creative in preaching. Such an approach is found in the erotic mode of encounter. Jean-Luc Marion writes that “[l]ove is defined by its ignorance of the other” and “[o]nly love opens up knowledge of the other as such.”⁶⁷ The erotic offers itself as an epistemology for preaching the Creative. Moreover, such a way of knowing (God) is appropriate to preaching the Word as witness because only love can open a path toward the death of the preacher: “The more it loses (disperses, gives, and thus loves), the more it gains (because it still loves). In the erotic reduction, the lover who loses himself gains himself all the more as lover.”⁶⁸

In conclusion, the *homo performans*, the activity to which human preachers ought to strive, is their own martyrdom, a kind of death made possible by loving the Word which first loved us. Only when we experience the death always already at work in our language, our speech, and our sermons can we proceed to bear witness (*martyrion*) to the *actio divina* promised by God in Jesus Christ.⁶⁹ We who preach are dying to be creative, to present that new insight or image that facilitates a deeper encounter with God. But this will require the supreme sacrifice. In a completely different sense, we must die to be creative; we must die so that the Creative may live in our human all too human language, speech, sermons. We must die (in order) to be creative.

⁶⁵ Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology*, 12.

⁶⁶ This is not a blind spacing that could signify anything just as easily as it signifies nothing. Thus it is not quite as radical as, say, John D. Caputo’s “radical hermeneutics,” but is closer to an approach proffered by Richard Kearney, which he labels, “diacritical hermeneutics.” Diacritical hermeneutics sees a middle ground between a “fusion of horizons,” or “romantic” hermeneutic and an apocalyptic rupture arising from the other (*à la* Levinas and Derrida). See Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 18 and Idem., “What is Diacritical Hermeneutics?” *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* 2, no. 1 (2011): 1–14.

⁶⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, “What Love Knows,” 157, 160.

⁶⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, Stephen E. Lewis, trans. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 73. This is not just apropos for philosophy. Cf. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., Edwyn C. Hoskyns, trans. (London, Oxford, & New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 158: “[People] can never wrest love unto themselves, and make it their possession. They can only continually receive it afresh as something *shed abroad* from above. Such love, which is God’s work, is possible only because He first loved us (v. 8). This insight into the invisible, which is ours because it is not ‘ours’, is the anchor of our hope.” See also Wendy Farley, *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), esp. her chapter 3 on Eros and the Other.

⁶⁹ Thomas A. Carlson, “Apophatic Analogy: On the Language of Mystical Unknowing and Being-Toward-Death,” in *Rhetorical Invention & Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives*, ed. Walter Jost & Wendy Olmsted (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), describes a certain “theo-thanato-logy” along these lines. He writes, “. . . the one who exists thoughtfully in language, or the one who exists understandingly through interpretation, always stands in relation to a term that ultimately eludes thought and language, a term that escapes understanding interpretation—a term that marks, in short, a certain figure of the ‘impossible.’” (209).