Speaking Their Language:
Leveraging Ethnographic Principles in Order to Proclaim the Word Through Culturally Appropriate Methods

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Introduction

All preaching involves translation, whether the preacher is aware of it or not; the preacher must translate and articulate their own understanding of their encounter with the Word, during the interpretive phase of preparation, in language that is aware of and sensitive to the specific cultural milieu of the people they serve.[1] If the preaching moment requires translation, how does the preacher learn the language of their context?[2] While there is no mythical cultural Rosetta Stone or smartphone application for the preacher to use to learn as they seek to proclaim their understanding of the Word in and through language that seeks to remove roadblocks and barriers for congregational hearing and is sensitive to cultural nuances and expressions of meaning in their community, implementing attentive and deliberate ethnographic principles can help the preacher explore, learn, and embody the cultural lexicon of their ministry context. The practice of implementing the Embodied Cultural Lexicon Apparatus, that is explored through this project, can help preachers to become better cultural translators of their understanding of the Divine Word and strengthen their communication effectiveness in the preaching moment.

The project seeks to help preachers be more informed of the cultural language of their congregation as they act as the congregational representative to encounter the Word of God revealed to them in order to articulate and deliver a more effectively communicated sermon for the congregation. To achieve this important goal, this project proposes an ethnographic tool called the Embodied Cultural Lexicon Apparatus that invites representatives from the congregation to offer constructive feedback about preaching moment communication effectiveness and study Scripture

[1] Cultural translation is particularly difficult for pastors due to the pastor's liminal role in their community; this will be discussed further on page 7.

[2] It's important to note that, while the preacher and the congregation may share many traits in common like: vernacular language, racial identity, socio-economic status, and national or even community identity, every congregation is a sub-culture or many sub-cultures that must be deliberately explored.

alongside the preacher to better equip the preacher for the task of translating and localizing their own divine encounter with the Word for the articulated sermon. This attentiveness to the communication norms of the local congregation and its many subcultures has the intended impact of a more predictable response to the preacher's sermon intent. For my own congregational context, the implementation of language that is meaningful to the congregation through the sermon will seek to provide congregational direction and edify the members in and through their response to the function statement.

1. Statement of Problem

I began my tenure as Senior Pastor of Fountain City Presbyterian Church on July 1, 2019. The important time of getting acclimated to the community and implementing congregational exegesis was cut short in March of 2020 when the office closed and worship moved to a virtual format due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 viral pandemic. This abrupt shift sharply limited my possibilities for learning about the congregation through common ethnographic principles. I knew, before my pastorate began, that attentiveness to the congregational context was important due to a presenting problem raised during the interview period.

During an interview with the Pastor Nominating Committee of Fountain City Presbyterian Church, the chair of the committee expressed a desire, articulated by many members of the church at listening sessions, to add more continuity to the church. There was a disconnect between the three core programs: worship, Christian Education, and mission. None of these programs were lacking in participation or commitment from membership, but there were little shared experiences connecting these three crucial facets of ministry at Fountain City Presbyterian Church. As the desire to provide consistency to Christian formation, worship, and service was explored, the committee chair noted that each facet of the church's ministry was healthy but essentially acted

independently of the others It was clear that weekly attendance and participation made worship the heart of congregational life at Fountain City Presbyterian church,[3] so it seemed that the preaching moment presented the best opportunity to help focus the congregation's response and bring the church together.

To address the need for congregational cohesion, I sought to direct my function statements[4], or actionable responses to the sermon, toward a unified congregational response through social justice, service, study, fellowship, giving, and personal growth. As I sought to implement the actionable portion of the sermons in this way, anecdotal feedback I received from the congregation in the halls and as the congregation left the sanctuary indicated that only some of the congregation heard or recognized the claim and/or function statement imbedded in the sermon.[5] I wondered if I was speaking the same cultural language as the congregation because, while I had preached in my contexts before, my awareness of this congregational culture was low.

To move from an anecdotal to a more measurable way of understanding sermon clarity and effectiveness, in March of 2020 (before the outbreak of the COVID-19) a survey was given to a small group of randomly-chosen members who were attending a "talk back" discussion of the sermon after worship. The questionnaire sought to determine whether the sermon was being heard and understood as anticipated by measuring the ability of the congregation to identify the "claim" of the sermon. Forty participants were polled, asking "Are you able to identify the 'point' (claim)

[3] 54% of the congregation attends worship weekly while mission and Christian Education participation was significantly lower (12% and 21% respectively).

[4] A "function statement" is defined by Tom Long with, "A function statement is a description of what the preacher hopes the sermon will create or cause to happen for the hearers. Sermons make demands upon the hearers, which is another way of saying that they provoke change in the hearers (even if the change is a deepening of something already present). The function statement names the hoped-for change." Long, Thomas G. *The Witness of Preaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 108-109.

[5] Very few comments had anything to do with the questions or charges posed in the sermon. I often would hear that they did like a story or that it was simply a "good message". Rarely did I get any indication that the intention of the sermon was fully heard or understood.

of the sermon when you listen?" with an average response on a 10-point Likert scale (lower numbers reflecting lower degrees of agreement) of 6.5. Another question that sought to measure the effectiveness of executing a function statement in the questionnaire asked, "How often does the hearing of a sermon inspire a change in your behavior, faith life, or personal devotion?" In this case the average response on a 10-point Likert scale (lower numbers reflecting lower frequency) was 6.25.

This questionnaire was followed up with conversations with four of the participants, chosen to reflect age and gender diversity. One of these conversations, with a white male who was more than 65 years old, noted that there was a connection between understanding the "point" of the sermon and acting on it. He noted that he was far more convicted to respond to the sermon if he could "follow it", expressing that he liked sermons that gave clear directions to follow. Another interview with a white female in her 40s echoed the notion that sermon clarity had a positive correlation with responsive action potential; she noted that her responses varied and that she liked the sermon form to be open to individual interpretation.[6] These interviews, along with the questionnaire, helped both clarify a connection between sermon/claim clarity and its impact on a person's predictable response. This exercise also illumined that the ways sermons were heard and aspects of the sermon that are expected or preferred vary from person to person, even while a connection between clarity and response exists.[7] In this way it appears that (at Fountain City Presbyterian Church at least) responsive action to a sermon depends on the sermon claim being

[6] The remaining two conversations mirrored the aforementioned but sermon form was not discussed explicitly, though one of these participants said that he liked when sermons were funny.

[7] In *Homiletical Theology in Action,* Sally Brown notes, "A congregation's working theologies are inevitably multiple; thus we need to think of this horizon as pluriform and complex, no univocal. It includes all those theological convictions and assumptions, conscious and unconscious, that shape church members' practice of faith, including the varied theological assumptions they bring to reading the Bible, listening to sermons, or debating issues. Brown, Sally. *Homiletical Theology in Action: the Unfinished Theological Task of Preaching*. Edited by David Schnasa Jacobsen. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015, 21

understood (heard), even though there are divergences among congregants with respect to the details of language and style they associated with the claim. If the successful execution of the function statement-- particularly around community cohesion and institutional vision-- was to be more predictable, sermons need to be crafted with careful attention to style, language, and form in order to remove barriers that could prohibit the congregation from identifying the point of the sermon.

The problem that this project seeks to address is communicating the sermonic claim and function statement more clearly in the preaching moment by being more attentive to culturally conditioned language, form preferences, and style expectations of the congregation. There is a variety of sub-cultures within Fountain City Presbyterian Church, which has created a disconnect between theological and formative identity, missional focus, and worship norms. At times, it seems that the various Sunday school classes, small groups, and service pods of the church are speaking different cultural languages and even hearing sermons in a variety of ways.[8]

2. Fountain City Presbyterian Church Demographics

Fountain City Presbyterian Church is a 327-member (roughly 60% female, 40% male) congregation located in the Fountain City community of Knoxville, Tennessee. At the time of writing, I am entering my second year as the Pastor and am still learning the culture of the congregation. The church has a diverse age distribution with the largest age demographic being persons under the age of 25 (78 persons) with the next largest age demographic being 26-40 (76

[8] This desired result is based upon the intention of the preacher to most faithfully bear witness to the implications for growth, witness, pastoral care, action, or lament gleaned by their own private divine encounter with the Word. In other words, the desired result of the sermon is to translate the sermon given to the preacher, with the moral, ethical, and spiritual implications, to the congregation using a language they understand.

persons). The congregation is nearly racially homogenous with 99% of the congregation identifying themselves as Caucasian.[9]

While, on the surface, Fountain City Presbyterian Church might appear to be culturally homogenous, there are many sub-cultures that exist and present challenges to sermon preparation that attends to cultural accessibility. From denominational background, length of membership, political ideology, education level, income level, community of origin, or even favorite college football team, the membership of Fountain City Presbyterian Church is far more diverse than one might conclude upon superficial impressions. Because diversity is present in all congregations, Teresa Fry Brown notes, "The preacher therefore must have an awareness of the cultural subsystems present in the congregation. Differences are present even if all those present 'look' and 'sound' alike".[10] This diversity of culture has created difficulty for me, as the preacher, to successfully execute intended function statements like calls to recognize injustice, pleas for stewardship, public lament or celebration, or even calls to service in the wider community because the congregation hears the proclaimed sermon in such a variety of ways.[11]

At this point in my tenure as Pastor, I have given primacy to the interpretive work of Scripture. This sermon focus has meant that most of my sermons have been well-received, but I have not been able to count on my sermon's function statement being heard in a predictable way. Some sermons that seek to illumine broader social issues in the world that faith calls Christians to

[9] These statistics are reflective of Fountain City Presbyterian Church's official statistical report to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Office of the General Assembly in 2019 and can be found at https://church-trends.pcusa.org/church/20429/overview/

[10] Brown, Sally A., and Luke A. Powery. *Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016, 18.

[11] In response to a sermon directed at racial justice in the summer of 2020, many congregants responded by wanting to participate in an anti-racism class, others wanted to reach out and serve the community, and some thought the sermon was too political; there was little overlap among the responses that might have provided direction for the church's response.

address might be seen as "too political" by some in the congregation and elicit no action, while other members might not receive sermons that call for introspection and a change in personal habits in a way that causes growth.[12] Mission, justice, formation, spiritual discipline, stewardship, outreach, and worship are core values of the church, but the variety of subcultures present within the community make it difficult for the sermon to be heard as intended.[13]

In order that the proclaimed sermon be more wholly heard within the congregation, it is important that it be more deliberately shaped by language, images, and ways of making meaning that exist within the congregation. This shift in approach to preaching is what Leonora Tubbs Tisdale calls "Contextual Preaching" and is most characterized by the preacher's giving equal attention to the interpretation of Scripture and to the congregation itself.[14] By inviting a representative group of members into dialogue about the preaching text, to discuss interpretations, possible responsive outcomes, and language, images, and symbols that might best be heard by the congregation, the spoken sermon might better be heard and the function statement more predictably realized in congregational life.

3. Exploring Cultural Language and Localized Theology

3i. Preaching as Community Sustaining Translation

[12] An example of this was the preaching of a lectionary text that dealt with welcoming the stranger in the midst of a national conversation about immigration. I had several members respond to the sermon via email that indicated they felt the sermon "pandered to a liberal agenda" when that was not my intent.

[13] http://www.fountaincitypres.org/home/our-mission

[14] Tisdale notes, "Our quest, then, is for preaching that is more intentionally *contextual* in nature – that is, preaching which not only gives serious attention to the interpretation of biblical texts, but which gives equally serious attention to the interpretation of congregations and their sociocultural contexts; preaching which not only aims toward great 'faithfulness' to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but also aims toward greater 'fittingness' (in content, form and style) for a particular congregational gathering of hearers." Tisdale, Leonora Tubbs. *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010, 32-33.

The Church exists, as John Webster explains, because God communicates the Word in its midst.[15] The Church exists to and is able to hear the Word of God together.[16] How well we hear, as a faith community, is central both for the spiritual health of the community and for the faithful identity of the Church. The role of the preacher is crucial, then, as their proclamation through the preaching moment helps to both maintain and sustain the community as it seeks to faithfully listen for God's Word and be and become the Church. The hearing of the sermon leaves the hearer changed. Jürgen Moltmann notes that the Word, heard in the communal act of worship, has the capacity to elicit a responsive decision in the hearer.[17]

The preaching moment includes at least three "sermons": the sermon God revealed to the preacher, the articulated sermon written and preached by the preacher in light of their encounter with God, and the sermon that is heard by the assembly. These intended responses might be unintentional or expressly shaped through what Long calls, a "function" statementand cause personal or community change.[18] The heard sermon has enormous potential to add direction, depth, and life to individuals and communities alike. With such enormous potential for the sermon to act as a catalyst for change, it is important that the preacher do everything possible to ensure that the

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[15] Webster notes, "The church exists and continues because God is communicatively present; it is brought into being and carried by the Word; it *is* (as the Reformers often put it) *solo verbo.* The 'Word' from which the church has its being is thus the lordly creativity of the one who, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *calls* into being the things that are not." Webster, John Bainbridge. *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 44.

[16] Guthrie states, "Yet Christians believe that in this organization, despite everything that it is and is not in itself, God still speaks and acts – not just for the good of the church and its members but for the good of the world God loves and for whom Christ died. Here too – very indirectly! – the self-revelation of God happens." Guthrie, Shirley Caperton. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, 59.

[17] Moltmann states, "It challenges us to hear and obey and is accepted or rejected. It is understood as the Word of God where it is heard as an authoritative summons which provokes a person's decision. To perceive it therefore means to accept it." Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993, 211.

[18] Long writes, "A function statement is a description of what the preacher hopes the sermon will create or cause to happen for the hearers. Sermons make demands upon the hearers, which is another way of saying that they provoke change in the hearers (even if the change is a deepening of something already present). The function statement names the hoped-for change." Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 108-109.

articulated sermon that is proclaimed in worship is attentive to the cultural barriers that may limit its ability to be heard. One of the most basic and impactful considerations is the use of appropriate language – that is, language that best helps the congregation understand and respond to the sermon preached.

In the preaching moment the initial encounter the preacher had with the Word is expressed with and through contextually conditioned verbal and non-verbal language for the community. Thus, to preach is to translate – not solely the rendering into English of the ancient languages of Greek or Hebrew that comprise the biblical canon – but also the rendering of the revelatory encounter the preacher has with the Word of God into culturally vernacular language for a specific assembly at a particular time and space.

As the preacher fulfills their role as God's representative to the congregation, they are sent on behalf of the congregation to listen to the biblical witness on behalf of the church, they must also be an embodied cultural lexicon of their community of sending in order that the sermon intended for the hearers might be heard as intended, and in order that a response might be elicited in its hearing.[19] Sally Brown notes, "They count on [preachers] not simply for news of God in general, but news that matters to *them*. In order to do this, we need to know who they are."[20] Building a congregational lexicon requires congregational exegesis in order for the preacher to better know the cultural particularities of their congregation, but as Mary Moschella notes, religious leaders are situated in a "liminal" space that is neither inside nor outside of the community, making the full understanding of congregational culture difficult if not impossible.[21]

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[19] Brown notes, "Going to the Bible on behalf of the people is a priestly act. As an exercise of the priestly office, the preacher represents the people before the text as a way of representing them before God." Brown and Powery, *Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place,* 65.

[20] Brown and Powery, *Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place,* 100.

[21] Moschella notes, "A pastor, rabbi, minister, or spiritual teacher lives in the tension between being a member of a community and one set apart from it in order to perform a leadership role. Tom Frank calls this a liminal role,

Preachers, in this way, are neither able to fully be "in" the community nor are they able to be fully separated from the community as their roles necessitates constant emotional engagement. Given this status as perpetual "other," how can the preacher become fluent in the language that gives meaning to their congregation? This project seeks to address this need for preachers to gain fluency in the culturally specific language of their multi-cultural congregation.

3ii. Awareness of Culture

Likening congregational diversity to a vast ecosystem under the surface of the ocean, Joseph Jeter, Jr. and Ronald Allen note that just below the surface of a seemingly homogenous congregation lies a great deal of cultural diversity – if the preacher is able to perceive it.[22] Each congregation is a complex collage of traits and characteristics, from the more obvious (such as gender, age, and race or ethnicity) to the less obvious (for example, education, sexual orientation, roles in community/industry, subcultures of youth, and income level).[23] The theological orientation of the congregation may be similar to the preacher but this is not as assumption to rest upon without further exploration and reflection. It is important, then, that the preacher recognize that they are preaching to a multicultural congregation, regardless of any external or superficial features that might convince them otherwise. Further complicating our understandings of culture within a congregation is the fact that congregations, like the humans comprising them, are consistently in flux and changing.[24] Further highlighting the diversity of congregations, Teresa Fry

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standing on the threshold of insider and outsider status.'" Moschella, Mary Clark. *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: an Introduction*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008, 37.

[22] Joseph Jeter, Jr. and Ronald Allen state, "Preachers sometimes view the congregation from the surface. The listeners appear to be much the same. But when preachers penetrate below the surface of the congregation, a more complex picture comes into view. In the same way that the ocean contains many different kinds of fish, the typical congregation contains many different kinds of people who are defined by many different traits." Jeter, Joseph R., and Ronald J. Allen. *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002, 5.

[23] Jeter and Ronald Allen. *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation*, 7-8.

[24] Quoting James Hopewell, Moschella notes, "Despite our aspirations, congregations are not timeless havens of congenial views or values." Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: an Introduction*, 39.

Brown proposes an understanding of cultural differences that are characterized less by traits and more by the way people experience relationships and community itself.[25] Quite simply, because congregations are as diverse and unique as the persons who comprise them, constant care and deliberate listening should be given to understanding the particular ways in which culture is formed and expressed when these distinct personalities gather together.

The diversity expressed through multicultural identities within congregations impacts the ways in which the congregation uses language, understands identity, and makes meaning. Tisdale argues that the multicultural nature of a congregation shapes the "signs and symbols through which it communicates its distinctive subcultural identity" – what she calls a church's unique idiom.[26] It should be noted here that, while persons in the congregation might also be multi-lingual in terms of spoken language (e.g., English and Spanish), cultural language refers primarily to the ways in which people make and form meaning using distinct words, symbols, methods, forms, and ideas that are common to their experience. In this sense, even people who share the same spoken language, and who might superficially look the same or generally have a similar demographic makeup may understand and express meaning in different ways, due to differences within their cultural context. The preacher, then, cannot assume to know or understand the congregation to and for whom they are speaking unless they explore and reflect upon the community's ways of forming meaning.

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[25] Teresa Fry Brown notes, "My understanding of the concept of culture is that it is the foundation of our individual and collective existence. Culture is deeper than such social designations as name, address, social security number, zip code, area code, credit rating, social standing, marital status, alma mater, or occupation. Culture is the totality of who we are as individuals and collectives. Culture is our genetic make-up, parentage, family configurations, and racial solidarity. Culture is the environment that we choose to live within, avoid living within, hold residence within by coincidence, or are barred from living within. Culture enables us to establish predictable and acceptable patterns of interaction. It is the basis of our ethical behavior and value system." Brown, Teresa L. Fry. *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation*. Elements of Preaching. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008, 16.

[26] Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology*, 16.

The congruence of the preacher's own expression of meaning through language and symbol impacts the complexity of communication to a group. Tisdale notes, "Preachers whose idioms, values, and worldviews are very different from those of their congregations will have to reckon with a higher degree of interculturality in their preaching than will those who are preaching to people whose subculture is more consonant with their own."[27] Thus, preachers must also attend to their own awareness of cultural understandings and biases.

Exploring the facets of the subculture that form meaning within the overall congregation can help a preacher to bridge the communication gap that may exist within a congregational setting and truly speak in language that is siphoned through the congregation's own way of understanding the world and itself. Teresa Fry Brown notes that communication is more effective when the speaker and hearer understand the "rules of engagement."[28]

At Fountain City Presbyterian, I have noticed that denominational background has a large bearing on what the articulated or unarticulated norms around language might be. For instance, one adult Sunday school class with a large portion of the members who had grown up in Evangelical denominations prefer sermons that have fewer pop-culture references and have messages that are clearly applicable, while a different adult Sunday school class comprised primarily of members raised in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seem to be more comfortable with sermons that leave room for the hearer to discern their own response or personal relevance. While I grew up in an Evangelical context, my preaching tends to be more consistent with the norms and expectations of those who were raised in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It is important then that attention be given to translating aspects of the sermon for those whose

[27] Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology*, 17.
[28] Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation*, 17.

theological backgrounds shape sermon preferences that are different than my default approach.[29] Differences between preacher's formative cultural context and congregation's corporate cultural identity can create cultural differences, as Tisdale argues, but attentiveness to these differences and a desire to speak "interculturally" can communicate more efficiently and effectively.[30]

3iii. Learning the Language of the Community

In his *Systematic Theology*, Paul Tillich writes that a preacher's revelatory encounters with God is filtered through their own culturally and historically conditioned language to express the divine encounter.[31] The Word of God, as revealed to the preacher upon their own encounter with it, is understood through their own ways of making meaning. Likewise, the way this divine encounter is expressed to the congregation through the sermon proclaimed should use the cultural vernacular of the community. Luke Powery echoes the very "earthliness" of the gospel heard, compelling the preacher to attentiveness of the vernacular language of the community to and with whom they are speaking.[32] How might the preacher best learn the language of community? The answer, in short, is that the preacher must exegete the congregation.[33]

Tisdale argues that, in order for pastors to uncover and learn about the subcultural worlds of the congregation, they must become amateur ethnographers who operate as participant-

[29] This shows that the preacher, as translator, needs to be aware of their own "language conditioning" as they seek to explore the community they server.
[30] Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, 16.
[31] "Human words, whether in sacred or in secular language, are produced in the process of human history and are based on the experiential correlation between mind and reality. The ecstatic experience of revelation, like any other experience, can contribute to the formation and transformation of language. But it cannot create a language of its own which must be learned as in the case of a foreign language. Revelation uses ordinary language, just as it uses nature and history, man's psychic and spiritual life, as mediums of revelation." Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973, 123.
[32] Powery notes, ""The Spirit does not cause us to escape the earthliness of reality but immerses us more deeply into the world for ministry in time and place. There is a groundedness to the gospel. In that way, the gospel is preached in the vernacular of the hearers so that the word may speak to the 'felt need' of the hearers." (30).
[33] Sally Brown notes, ""We need to exegete not only biblical text, but 'exegete' the congregation for whom we pray, study, and preach" (Brown and Powery, *Ways of the Word*, 107)

observers within their communities.[34] The unique role of pastors, as both insiders and outsiders, allows them to be able to observe norms without the congregation feeling as though they are being investigated. The pastor, aware of their insider-outsider role, can observe, ask questions, and learn through an analytical process called the "symbolic approach".[35] This approach, as described by Tisdale, pays careful attention to the array of symbols, signs, and language that comprise congregational subcultures, notes their existence, and interprets their meaning. To perform this ethnographic approach, the pastor becomes aware of the cultural "texts" within the congregation and seeks to analyze by giving a "thick description" of the symbol itself.[36] As each congregation is culturally diverse, it is important to note that multiple meanings might be present for the same cultural "text". Mary Foskett writes, "The ways in which we are positioned socially, as well as the communities to which we belong and from whom we draw our identity, shape our world-views, our symbolic universes, and our perceptions of "what is."[37] It is crucial, then, that the preacher explore the "meaning behind the meaning" or "deeper meaning" of the thick descriptions of cultural texts that exist and explore them as possible through earnest conversation.

Foster and Brelsford argue that the participant-observer, simply asking "why" in the congregation when explicit (or freely shared and accepted) narratives lacked an obvious explanation, can uncover the implicit stories that offer deeper insight into how the group understands itself at an existential level.[38] Elliott Eisner describes the phenomenon of organizations not articulating or even being aware of cultural texts within the system as "implicit

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[34] Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, 60.
[35] Tisdale*, Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, 62.
[36] Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, 58.
[37] Foskett, Mary F. *Interpreting the Bible: Approaching the Text in Preparation for Preaching*. Elements of Preaching. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009, 30.
[38] Foster, Charles R., and Theodore Brelsford. *We Are the Church Together: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996, 31.

curriculum".[39] this Purposefully moving from thin to thick descriptions of the meaning from cultural "texts" can even illumine gaps in the congregation's self-awareness, called "null curriculum", a term that describes spaces of cultural ambiguity or confusion within the community, that might cause the congregation to confront ignored or repressed aspects of their identity such as discriminatory attitudes.[40] Awareness of the cultural "texts" and explicit narratives that lead to thick descriptions help to weave the congregational narrative together into a "meta-story" that articulates the congregation's understood identity, purpose, and cultural language.[41]

For the purpose of acquainting oneself with the cultural vernacular of a congregational subculture, it is crucial to observe and note the words congregants use that express theological meaning, descriptions of sermon form and length expectations, metaphors and illustrations that convey meaning, and symbols discussed or referenced. Anything, from the smallest detail to the most obvious actions, conversations, physical symbols, or even reactions to disruptive events within the community, should be noted and explored for meaning. The ethnographer is not to assume they understand the meaning of these facets of the community, but in the observation, recognition, documentation, and exploration, deeper meaning and insight can be gleaned.

These and other forms of meaning making comprise the "cultural texts" of the congregation, but the pastor cannot attain an awareness of meaning by simply learning the vocabulary. The unique position of being an insider-outsider in the community allows for the pastor to ask clarifying questions that help the pastor move from a thin to thick description of these cultural "texts," building language competency and the ability to better be an embodied lexicon of

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[39] Eisner, Elliot W. *The Educational Imagination: on the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*. Upper Saddle River (N.J.): Merrill Prentice Hall, 1979, 96.

[40] Foster and Brelsford, *We Are the Church Together,* 32.

[41] Foster and Brelsford state, "A second step in making sense of the stories engaged us in the effort to *weave the stories* that cluster around each sign into a larger story or 'meta-story' integral to the identity and vocation of the congregation." Foster and Brelsford, *We Are the Church Together* 33.

the congregation as they seek to translate the Word of God faithfully to and for the congregation in the preaching moment.[42]

Applying the information gleaned from careful observation and analysis happens through the "Pastoral Cycle" described by Graham, Walton, and Ward in *Theological Reflection: Methods.* The "Pastoral Cycle" uses a theological reflection methodology to establish an ethnographic process, or orthopraxy, that prevents the information gathered from observation from living strictly in the hypothetical.[43] To accomplish this shift from knowledge to practice, which is crucial for the preacher if they are to engage the congregation's cultural language, the preacher moves through four stages of reflection: immersion, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning.[44]

Immersion begins with the praxis of engaging in and with the community. The next move of social analysis begins to critically analyze the experiences of praxis through a "hermeneutic of suspicion", a critical perspective that seeks to move from anecdotal to analytical by questioning or challenging the accepted forms of understanding within the community by asking "why". The phase of theological reflection moves to a reflective "hermeneutic of mediation" that synthesizes the information gleaned from immersion and analysis into a praxis. Finally, the last phase of pastoral planning involves "practical mediation" that implements the praxis to be tested again by the community.[45] These stages are to be explored in a cyclical way, giving the preacher an

[42] Tisdale writes, "Cultural analysis inevitably involves a great deal of guesswork on the part of the ethnographer. Yet it is Geertz's contention that through a close analysis of very microscopic and homely events and actions within a local culture, the anthologist can gain great insight into the larger and more abstract realm of cultural worldview and values." Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, 59.
[43] Graham, Elaine, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward. *Theological Reflections: Methods*. London: SCM, 2010, 188.
[44] Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflections: Methods*, 188-190.
[45] Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflections: Methods*, 188-190.

opportunity to continually test their assumptions and further explore the ever-evolving nature of the community.[46]

In the case of Fountain City Presbyterian Church, seeking to preach in a more informed vernacular for the purpose of function statement execution and community cohesion, the yield of this ethnographic observation and reflection will help the pastor "discover the distinctive listening profile of the community so that the pastor can incorporate as many listening orientations as possible into the design of the sermon."[47]

Jeter and Allen call this pastoral cycle task "priestly listening." It is "priestly" in that equips the preacher to act on behalf of the congregation to carry their language to the biblical witness as they seek to translate the revelatory encounter with the Word more faithfully for the congregation in order that the language used by the preacher is heard and understood by the congregation.[48] Thomas G. Long attests, "the preacher goes on behalf of the faithful community and, in a sense, on behalf of the world. Their questions and needs are in the preacher's mind and heart."[49] In this way, learning the cultural language is for a specific outcome of preaching and not solely for deeper involvement within the community, since the preacher maintains their liminal role due to the particularities of the office of pastor.

3iv. New and Familiar – Localizing the Eternal Word

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[46] Graham, Walton, and Ward note, "Practice is thus both 'foundational and aim' of a process of experience-analysis-action; and arguably, within such a method, even the activities of reading, reflection and interpretation are themselves forms of praxis because they serve to excavate the theological values by which faithful practice is to be guided." Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflections: Methods*, 190.

[47] Jeter and Ronald Allen. *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation*, 15/

[48] Jeter and Allen state, "Through priestly listening, the pastor can discover the distinctive listening profile of the community so that the pastor can incorporate as many listening orientations as possible into the design of the sermons." Jeter and Ronald Allen. *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation*, 15.

[49] Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 49.

When the Word is proclaimed and heard, it should be both new and familiar to those who encounter it. The Word is always new insomuch as it continues to evoke mystery, provocation, comfort, healing, and awe.[50] The Word heard in the midst of worship is always familiar in that the sermon is deliberately crafted using culturally-sensitive vocabulary, forms, and symbols to remove "hearing barriers" for a particular people. The preacher must recognize their task of interpretation and proclamation to be sensitive to the ways in which the cultural language of the congregation shapes the claim, form, and function of the text.[51]

Marvin McMickle describes a sermonic claim as, "the essence of what any sermon is about, it is the central truth or teaching of the at sermon. It is a creative and engaging combination of what the biblical text says, how that message is communicated by the preacher."[52] Each pericope of Scripture invites new opportunities for the preacher to relay a message of resurrection to and with the congregation; but the needs of the congregation must be taken into consideration in order that barriers that might prevent the intended claim of the text to speak life for that particular congregation be removed and conveyed in and through language they hear as normative. Taking their needs and preferences into consideration lets the congregation know that they are known and valued by the preacher and gives the preacher a greater likelihood of being heard.[53]

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[50] In *Determining the Form,* Allen states, ""It is important to remember that ultimately, we are not called simply to preach the gospel but to get the gospel heard. In other words, while all Christians are committed to the content of the gospel, preachers are committed to it specifically as that content affects those gathered in the sacred assembly to hear it proclaimed. Different forms offer hearers different experiences of the gospel – different ways of thinking, of feeling, and of acting. All sermons should invite intellectual, psychological, and behavioral/ethical responses. Different forms do this differently. Allen, O. Wesley. *Determining the Form: Structures for Preaching*. Elements of Preaching. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008, 5.

[51] Foskett, *Interpreting the Bible*, 33.

[52] McMickle, Marvin A. *Shaping the Claim—Moving from Text to Sermon*. Elements of Preaching. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008.

[53] Craddock, Fred B. *Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985, 91.

Fred Craddock offers insight into taking the local community's needs, preferences, and cultural identity into consideration by arguing that the pastoral context of the preacher should attend to the historical, liturgical, and theological dimensions of their local context. Giving attention to local considerations and needs in one's interpretive decisions as they shape the claim will ensure, Craddock argues, that "the interpretation of the parishioners in their personal, domestic, political, and economic contexts does not replace but joins the interpretation of Scripture."[54] Thus, prayer requests, community joys and concerns, jokes overheard between services, social media posts, memes shared, or any other form of communication that speaks to what life is like for the members of the community should be accounted for and considered as the preacher shapes a claim that transcends the "what" and addresses the "so what" for the listener.

Regarding word and imagery selection to relay the sermon's claim, Jennifer Lord explains, "we make sure they can stand the 'so what?' or the 'how does this make a difference?' test."[55] Both thin and thick descriptions of cultural texts give the preacher an insight into the language and preferences that may shape facets of their interpretation of biblical pericope in a way that addresses the "so what" questions.

When the "so what" of the claim can be understood, the function statement is clearer and more realistically achievable. If, for instance, the preacher is able to determine how the text matters to the individual or community and speak that claim to them in language and forms that are familiar, the function statement can be extended as a new invitation that authentically offers a way to bear witness to the Word's hearing. Sally Brown calls this invitation to respond a "rehearsal" through which the preacher and congregation imagine what the presence of God's redemptive

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[54] Craddock, *Preaching*, 39.

[55] Lord, Jennifer L. *Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech*. Elements of Preaching. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010, 12.

work might look like in their own setting, summoning them to join in.[56] Responding is not a box to check; it's an invitation to deeper faith, and a fuller sense of community. The members' response to this summons is dependent upon considered and culturally appropriate communication during the preaching moment; but how can we know if the congregation hears the message as the preacher intended?

4. Can You Hear Me Now? – Assessing Effective Communication in Preaching

Fred Craddock states, "Whether one's theology of preaching locates the Word of God at the speaker's mouth or the listener's ear, the fact is, it takes two to communicate."[57] How, then, can the preacher actively know whether they are communicating in a way that is heard by the congregation, and that the congregation hears? This first step to assessment happens in the moment of proclamation.

Teresa Fry Brown argues that effective communication can be understood by the mutuality of the sender and receiver made manifest in a "feedback loop" or two-way communication flow.[58] In this model, the preacher is the sender and the congregation is the receiver of the message. Fry Brown Notes that the sender initiates the communication when the receiver is ready to listen; this act of initiation is undergirded by a sense of trust between the two parties. After the sender initiates communication, they must await a verbal or non-verbal cue that acts as feedback to the sender, helping them to know that the message is being understood and affirmed by the congregation. This dialogical act of sending communication to the receiver and the receiver responding closes the

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[56] Sally Brown notes, "Spirit-driven imagination leads to Spirit-empowered action. In this rhetorical task, a preacher imaginatively projects the possibilities that open up as God's new-created future for humanity lays claim to the present. Preacher and congregation together 'rehearse' what it might look like to participate in God's redemptive work in the concrete settings of their ordinary lives. Imaginative rehearsal means imagining the world with 'spirit' - illuminated insight and with hope grounded in divine promise." Brown and Powery, *Way of the Word*, 21.

[57] Craddock, *Preaching*, 25.

[58] Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 6-7.

"feedback loop", connecting the preacher with the congregation through the mutual sharing and receiving of the message, as well as making clear to the preacher, that communication is effective.[59]

Those cases where the interplay of sending and receiving communication is affirmed through direct response on the part of the congregation is called "participant proclamation" by Evans E. Crawford.[60] To Crawford, the closed "feedback loop" represents the congregation moving from observer to active participant in the sermon proclaimed and can even, based on their feedback, speak to their emerging concerns by lifting up a need or a prayer.[61] This feedback helps the preacher to feel less alone, joined with the congregation by the Word proclaimed, helping both the congregation and the preacher. Crawford states, "The direct benefit is that the communication barriers between pulpit and pew sharply decrease, while corporate action of giving glory to God increases.[62] While this type of closing the feedback loop through audible acclamation is more common, as Crawford notes, in African-American Churches and Appalachian congregations in which "talk-back" is a normative part of the cultural language, there are ways of closing the feedback loop in churches where such expressions are not part of the lexicon of cultural expression.[63]

Frank Thomas argues that deliberate moments of response give the preacher the ability to pay attention to the emotional reaction of the congregation as one means of gauging their hearing.[64]

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[59] Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 7.

[60] Crawford, Evans E., and Thomas H. Troeger. *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999, 37.

[61] Crawford states, "On one hand, the listeners observe, listening to and watching what is happening in the pulpit, and absorbing the verbal content of the sermon, and the vocal inflections and bodily gestures of the preacher. While on the other hand, they participate by adding their own verbal responses, which are sometimes coupled with a gesture of prayer or praise, such as a lifted hand." Crawford, *The Hum*, 38.

[62] Crawford, *The Hum*, 42.

[63] Crawford, *The Hum*, 37-38.

[64] Thomas notes, "Because most relationships are governed by this emotional field, paying attention to the emotional context is more important than the choice of the right words. Because communication is rarely neutral,

Teresa Fry Brown notes that feedback from the congregation does not have to simply come in the form of verbal cues. Nonverbal cues such as "a nod, turning the body, facial expression, [or a] physical gesture" can create the feedback needed for the speaker to know that the receiver has heard the communication and understands it.[65] It is important for the preacher, as they seek to exegete their congregation, to understand the means by which the congregation closes the "feedback loop" and use this information as a means of adapting their delivery in the moment of proclamation or as a call to change their delivery style or content as they seek to speak in order to be heard. This information acts as the immersion phase of "Pastoral Cycle" and will be used to further explore and analyze after the moment/s of immersion.[66]

Since March of 2020 my ability to recognize the closing of the "feedback loop" has been severed at Fountain City Presbyterian Church, as well as in many other congregations around the world who have moved to virtual worship.[67] This move to an online-only format has given preachers the capability of speaking *to* the members of the congregation, but has created difficulty if not an impossibility of speaking *with* them. Sally Brown notes that the lack of the incarnational nature through preaching in a digital space creates dissonance between the preacher and the

there are natural limits to what words can accomplish." Thomas, Frank A. *They like to Never Quit Praisin' God: the Role of Celebration in Preaching*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2013, 19.

[65] Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 7.

[66] Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods,* 188-190.

[67] In my own experience preaching in a virtual setting, the lack of non-verbal (in my congregation) feedback makes it impossible for me to know if I am connecting with the congregation and speaking in a way that my message is being heard as intended. While social media likes and real-time comments could be a possible substitute in certain ways, they lack the nuance of a pensive look, an unrestrained chuckle, or a streaming tear. This lack of real-time feedback through the response from the congregation has created an even more imminent need, for many, to be more fluent in their congregation's cultural vernacular in order that they be heard. Such feedback can be gleaned after the preaching event through online dialogue, checking analytics to see if viewers fast-forwarded or rewound the sermon, or interpreting emojis or comments, but the yield of such an exercise would have to be applied to the next preaching opportunity rather than giving the preacher the ability to adapt in the moment of preaching.

congregation, compelling the preacher to think differently about the very nature of preaching in a virtual or digital setting.[68]

3v. "The Cutting Room Floor" Class as a Virtual Trial

In order to test assumptions about language gathering and its ability to help shape a more impactful sermon, I formed a virtual class in August of 2020 that sought to follow ethnographic principals and test assumptions as a more robust apparatus was being conceived.[69] The class, called "The Cutting Room Floor" was a Tuesday evening class to test this process of "Priestly Listening" through ethnographic observation. The class lasted one-hour on Zoom and was led by the pastor but invited active dialogue and conversation. The point of the class was to discuss the sermon to be preached the following Sunday, aspects of research that would likely not be utilized in the proclaimed sermon due to time constraints but would deepen the participant's knowledge of the text, and have a conversation about the claim of the text that those gathered heard, and about how they might communicate it. This class lasted four weeks and had around six, mostly consistent, participants per week.

The class began by discussing the previous week's sermon and the effectiveness of the sermon in communicating message and prompting responsive action. Next, the class moved to a reading of Scripture that would serve as the basis of the sermon for the following week. This reading was based on the model of monastic *lectio divina*, with the prescribed text read aloud slowly, four times, by separate individuals. After the reading, I asked the participants to describe, in one sentence, what the passage meant to them. These responses varied, but the conversation was

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[68] Sally Brown states, "This is not to say God cannot speak or use technology but rather to indicate the complexities of what is at stake when we use technology but rather to indicate what may be lost. One has to consider how the Word is received differently when a real body is present in the sanctuary compared to when one watches a sermon on a big screen." Brown and Powery, *Way of the Word*, 215.

[69] The classes were held August 4, 11, 18, and 25 from 7:00pm – 8:00pm on Zoom.

framed in such a way that conversation was not combative or argumentative. It was instead designed to be a true dialogue, following O. Wesley Allen Jr.'s description of dialogue: "Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose one another and attempt to prove one another wrong. In dialogue one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement."[70] Dialogue was maintained by allowing each person uninterrupted time to discuss their perspective and questions or comments about their perspective were aimed for clarity not correction.[71]

Afterward, the participants stated what they felt the passage might compel them to do, as both a person of faith and as a member of a faith community, in response to hearing it. The same framework for dialogue was followed for each of the participants. After this, I asked how they might communicate this to the church (i.e., what stories, images, or style they might use to convey both what the passage meant and what it compelled them to do in response).

This process followed the "Pastoral Cycle" methodology of immersion, analysis, reflection, and action. The classroom time served as the immersion, in which I took copious notes as the participants discussed their understanding of the passage and the potentiality for response. These notes focused on observations, images used to describe, stories and symbols, and how they might seek to retell the passage to someone else. After the participants answered the proposed questions related to claim and function, I would follow up the question by asking "why" in order to seek to move from thin or superficial descriptions to a more reasoned and better explored thick description of their understanding, as well as the assumptions they relayed regarding community receptiveness and preference. This process of hearing was completed before I discussed my own rendering of claim and function, as I was concerned that the pastoral authority might skew their

[70] Allen, O. Wesley. *The Homiletic of All Believers: a Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 21.

[71] This worked relatively well, one participant had a difficult time not interrupting others or offering them correction. We, as a group, had to be reminded of the aims of dialogue on two separate occasions.

opinions or keep them from voicing divergent opinions. Analysis was carried out by reviewing these notes and assessing the participants' ways of expressing meaning, drawing themes and weaving those themes together to move toward a broader understanding of the community through reflection. During the reflection phases, I sought to synthesize the assumptions gleaned to actionable praxis in the shaping of sermon form as well as language, illustration, and narrative accommodations.

On one occasion, my own understanding of the text's claim was shifted in this process, but the primary objective was that the praxis would allow me to acquire a more contextually appropriate language and form to better communicate the biblical message to this congregation. The cycle would be revisited at the beginning of the next class, when there was a discussion of the effectiveness in communication and methodology in the sermon. In this way, the assumptions made through observation, analysis, reflection, and praxis were tested against the norms of the community itself.

3vi. The "Cutting Room Floor Class" Observations and Outcome

There was a significant amount of contextual information about language and form preferences of the congregation gleaned from the pilot "Cutting Room Floor Class" including a preference for more narrative and less academic sermons, shorter sermon length, and a preference for sermons that reach the personal spiritual needs of individuals in the congregation. The yield from this pilot class was that a much clearer form of interpretive aims and spiritual needs became clear from this small group of participants, which was put into practice in changing the form and language of the subsequent sermons.

While many sermons prior to this class focused on a great deal of academic and scholarly exegetical work, the dialogue that emerged helped to refocus the sermons shaped by the class to

be more attentive to spiritual and congregational need as well as form, length, and language preferences. This theme emerged as the claims the participants would offer focused almost solely on the pericope addressing spiritual and pastoral needs rather than formative learning. This thin description was explored by asking participants if sermon form and language through which spiritual/pastoral need was highlighted was preferred over a more intellectual/academic form, to which all of the respondents said "yes" or "most of the time". On one occasion, my own claim and function statement was completely reshaped by the dialogue, after several participants interpreted the passage to address community need and were not as impacted by a more exegetical approach that the claim of my sermon relied upon.[72]

It also emerged, through dialogue, that sermons with heavy narrative elements were preferred and useful for conveying both the message and call to action with one participant noting, "we aren't motivated by our heads, we're motivated by our hearts and stories are the best thing to get to my heart." These form preferences helped me to feel more comfortable implementing personal narratives that offered vulnerability and emotion from the pulpit, creating a sermon that the group described as more impactful and successful in communicating the claim and function statement, increasing their own likelihood of response.

While this pilot was largely successful in that it helped to illumine the language of the congregational community, several issues emerged that will be addressed through the apparatus proposal section. These issues included: the lack of in-person gathering limited the degree of interaction and spontaneous conversation that was hampered by the virtual space as well as the

[72] This instance saw the interpretation of the Beatitudes in the Matthew 5 pericope. More than half of the participants discussed the ways in which the pandemic has made them aware of the blessing of community and their reliance on it for sustenance, leading them to render a function statement that sought to reengage people in the community who had fallen away or who were homebound. This interpretation and function were a far cry from my own and completely reshaped the articulation of the sermon to be more attentive to these personal and community care concerns.

technological limitations of the participants; due to the coronavirus pandemic's impact on in-person gatherings and the necessity of our congregation to move online during the pandemic, the only feedback offered about effectiveness was retrospective and only from the participants rather than a larger section of the congregation who did not participate; the participant base was comprised of members who were largely already interested in and attentive to the sermon in worship, rendering an assessment of the effects of vernacular language on the overall congregation a bit skewed and potentially not reflective of the whole of the congregation; and the conversation did not equip the preacher for the revelatory encounter with the Word, but rather compared the information gleaned with that of the participants.[73]

The participants who gathered on Zoom were restricted by the online platform in that only one person could speak at a time. This expectation was set at the beginning of the class, but the lack of the ability to hear other voices left me unable to gauge agreement among the rest of the participants who might have affirmed a comment with a less intrusive verbal affirmation that could not be expressed in the online format. Furthermore, I was unable to assess body language and facial expression to observe agreement or consensus. It will be important, based on these limitations, for the apparatus to be in-person in order to make a more informed observation.

The lack of the possibility for in-person worship meant that, functionally, the only feedback I was able to glean from the implementation of the sermon was from the participants after the sermon. This meant that I was unable to change or adapt the sermon based on non-verbal feedback from the congregation to close the "feedback loop" in real-time and assess the effectiveness of the sermon communication in the midst of the full community during the preaching moment. Instead, the successful implementation of more contextually appropriate cultural language was assessed by

[73] In other words, the Cutting Room Floor sought community exegetical perspectives rather than preparing the preacher for the priestly act of community interpretation.

the same small group who helped shape the praxis in the first place. In retrospect, it would have been more telling to gauge the effectiveness of the sermon with a congregation-wide survey due to the lack of the possibility for real-time "feedback loop" closing because of the distance of virtual preaching. This information would have helped determine whether the participants were accurately conveying the cultural nuance and preferences of the wider community as well as my own ability to assess, analyze, reflect, and implement the information in praxis.

4. Apparatus Proposal, Methodology, and Justification

Based upon findings of the "Cutting Room Floor" class trial, the proposed apparatus to gain a better understanding of the cultural language of the congregation will implement the following key changes: the apparatus will be implemented in an in-person class to better facilitate conversation and give the preacher a more comprehensive understanding of the emerging cultural "texts" as well as a less hindered means of closing the communication loop; a question will be introduced to explicitly assess the emotive impact of the text; the study will be implemented ahead of any research in order to preserve the priestly role of the preacher's engagement with the text during the interpretation phase of the sermon construction; the sermon's communicative effectiveness, especially the execution of a the function statement, will be assessed both through real-time verbal, or more likely, non-verbal feedback from the congregation gathered, as well as through a congregation-wide survey; the goal of congregational cohesion and direction will be stated to the participants of the class, as this addresses the initial presenting issue expressed by the Pastor Nominating Committee; feelings of community cohesion will be explored and assessed throughout the duration of the study; the participant pool will be the Session (Ruling Elders) elected to the leadership office by the congregation in order to preserve participant continuity, attentiveness to and investment in the goal of community cohesion through the execution of the function

statement(s), and a variety of interest levels in engaging with the sermon that will help offer a more reflective representation of the congregation as a whole. These changes will address key issues with the pilot and potentially offer a great deal more insight into the cultural language used to articulate meaning at Fountain City Presbyterian Church as well as increase the likelihood of accomplishing the specific functional aim of community cohesion in an assessible way.

4i. Apparatus Description – The Embodied Cultural Lexicon Apparatus

The Embodied Cultural Lexicon Apparatus will be a once weekly, one-hour class for a duration of 6-weeks that is comprised of the Session of Fountain City Presbyterian Church, and which has the purpose of providing a context for ethnographic research into language, image, narrative, and form preferences (called "cultural language"), and of allowing that cultural language to be considered when the preacher interprets the preaching text. While there is an array of cultural expressions within the congregation, the Session, as an elected office, represent a wide array of perspectives at Fountain City Presbyterian Church. As the participant pool, the Session will add consistency of participation, investment in the well-being of the church and accomplishing of function statements, and a much deeper awareness of the community than the preacher.

Further, the Embodied Cultural Lexicon Apparatus seeks to help assess the effectiveness of the preacher's communication by surveying the congregation, in real-time, as a whole as well as dialogue with the members of the class after the preaching moment. The Embodied Cultural Lexicon Apparatus fits within the "reflection" phase of the "Pastoral Cycle", The aim of the Embodied Cultural Lexicon Apparatus at Fountain City Presbyterian Church will be to implement the information gleaned from the discussions, reflection, and assessment of culturally relevant communication to help formulate responsive function statements. While the individual and corporate claims and function statements may not reshape the interpretive focus of the preacher's

interpretation, the insight of these elected community leaders can help the preacher glean normative ways of understanding possibility for both individuals and the congregation as a whole; this can be considered as the preacher discerns how to embody the norms, language, culture, and customs of the congregation while moving from interpretation to sermon.

4ii. Apparatus Format

Part 1: Open Prayer and Posture to Hear

The class begins with prayer, asking God's Spirit to illumine the hearts and minds of the participants, allowing them to hear and receive the Word of God in and through their study. This prayer is in accordance with the Reformed theological understanding that the Word of God can only be heard through the work of the Holy Spirit.[74] Along with the wider theological consistency of the prayer for the congregation's denominational identity, the prayer also acts as a means of beckoning the participants to a receptive posture.

Part 2: Assessment of Prior Communication Praxis

The class portion of the Embodied Cultural Lexicon Apparatus begins in discussing the communication effectiveness results of the congregational survey, highlighting the quantitative data and inviting constructive dialogue. In order to invite feedback and disarm any trepidation from the participants who might feel uncomfortable offering feedback to the preacher, the preacher will ask the following questions with regards to the results of the congregational survey:

1) In what way/s do you agree with these results?

2)In what way/s do you disagree with these results?

3) What could have changed in the sermon to increase the favorability in the survey results?

4) What could have changed or been adapted in the sermon to decrease the survey results?

[74] Allen, O. Wesley. *Determining the Form: Structures for Preaching*. Elements of Preaching . Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008, 12.

These four questions act as the foundation for dialogical community reflection in the "pastoral cycle" between the participants and the preacher. The preacher will address each of the four questions as well, based on their own awareness of the verbal and non-verbal feedback from the congregation during the sermon. It is important, as Tisdale argues, for the Preacher to fully participate in the process of ethnographic research, acting as both "dance partner" and "dance leader" in the process of local theological construction.[75] The preacher's own assessment projects vulnerability and a sincere desire to hear the constructive feedback of the participants. The preacher will record the responses for further analyzing and reflection.

Part 3: Reading and Hearing the Text

As with the exercise conducted in March 2020, in the apparatus, pericopes will be read four times by four separate individuals, following the *lectio divina* format. This process will take roughly 30 minutes depending on the length of the text selected. This part restarts the "Pastoral Cycle" and acts as the immersive portion of the 4-step cycle. The participants will be invited to take time to write down observations after each movement of the *lectio divina* process, which will be shared with the larger group in the next step.[76] During the *lectio* phase, the participants will be asked to consider words, phrases, or images that come to mind in the midst of hearing the passage.

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[75] Tisdale states, "The preacher's role in the dance of local theological construction is a dual one. The preacher, on one hand, is a dance partner, engaging the other partners in the rigorous discipline and unmitigated joy of dance. On the other hand, is a dance partner, engaging the other partners and being engaged by them in the rigorous discipline and unmitigated joy of the dance. On the other hand, the preacher is also charged with the task of imaginative choreography –bringing biblical text, church tradition, and congregational context together into one proclamation of local theology and folk ark that is integrative and capable of capturing the imaginations of its hearers." Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, 93.

[76] Dan McAfee describes the Lectio Divina process with, "The traditional practice of Lectio Divina has 4 parts: Lectio (read), Meditatio (meditate), Oratio (pray) and Contemplatio (contemplate). As the scripture text is read multiple times, it allows us to go deeper and deeper into the text. To pray Lectio Divina, you will need a copy of Scripture. A pen and a notebook are also helpful to write down your thoughts, reflections and prayers. Find a place that is free from distractions. This prayer usually takes about half an hour. Begin by quieting yourself and becoming aware of your breathing. Let go of the concerns of the day and invite the Holy Spirit to guide your reflection. McAfee, *A Guide to the Lectio Divina Prayer Style.*

During the *mediatio* phase, the participants will be asked to consider how hearing the text makes them feel emotionally. As the participants move to the *oratio* phase, the participants will be asked to write a short prayer for and to the congregation based on their hearing of the text and informed by current congregational joys and concerns. Finally, during the *contemplatio* portion of the *lectio divina*, the participants will be asked to silently consider what the passage means for their own individual lives as well as for the congregation as a whole. They will also be asked to write down what the passage urges them to do in response as an individual as well as to suggest a congregational response that would bring the congregation together.[77]

Part 4: Dialogue and Listening

After the reading and hearing of the text, the participants will be asked to share their findings. Part 4 includes elements of steps 2 and 3 of the Pastoral Cycle, in which the preacher analyzes information gleaned from step one as well as explores and problematizes this information with the community. This process of listening will be a functional expression of what James Nieman calls a "semi-structured interview" for which the dialogue has prepared. While standard questions will be offered, the conversation will not be limited to these questions.[78] This more open design allows for more dynamic and responsive reactions to participant feedback that can help further uncover thick descriptions. This process of assessing, refining questions, and seeking clarification based upon participant feedback and leader input in the semi-structured interview

[77] McMickle offers several responsive possibilities to hearing the sermon including: personal piety, care for the soul, social justice, corporate concerns, and maintenance of the institutional church (73). Largely, the intended function statements in the short term for Fountain City Presbyterian Church will seek to incorporate any or all of these possibilities as a means of community cohesion. McMickle, *Shaping the Claim,* 72-73.

[78] Nieman, James R. *Knowing the Context: Frames, Tools, and Signs for Preaching*. Elements of Preaching. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008, 41.

format is called probing and will help the preacher better explore the "meaning behind the meaning" of participant responses.[79]

Each participant will be invited to share their responses to the following questions: What words, images, phrases came to mind as you heard the story? How did the passage make you feel? How might this text speak to the joys or concerns of our congregation? In a few words, what was the passage about to you and for the congregation? What, if anything do you feel compelled to do in response to hearing it? How might this response better call our congregation together in service, witness, fellowship, or formation?

The responses from the participants -- along with the words, images, stories, and symbols used to describe them – will be treated as thin descriptions to be further clarified by the preacher by asking clarifying questions that explore the meaning behind the responses until a more comprehensive, thick description is established. The preacher will note these observations and do an initial synthesizing of the data from the participants by stating themes, dominant images/words, form preferences, and actionable outcome possibilities to the participants and ask for further clarification. The preacher can draw on common themes, images, and form preferences from this section to help them make decisions about how to communicate the sermon in the preaching moment. The preacher will pay careful attention to the verbal and non-verbal responses from the participants that affirm or challenge the preacher's assumptions, thereby allowing further clarification. The preacher will end this part of the experience by articulating the themes they heard and the potential forms for effective communication. The participants will be invited to respond and affirm or clarify the observations of the preacher.

[79] Nieman describes six types of probes that can be used to clarify meaning in a semi-structured interview setting: silence, encouragement, elaborations, redirection, clarification and repetition. These six probes help to dynamically explore deeper meanings in group or individual interview settings. Niemen, *Knowing the Context,* 42.

Part 5: Closing Prayer and Priestly Sending

The program concludes with prayer as well as a charge to the preacher to serve as a priestly listener on behalf of the congregation as they begin their interpretation and they listen for God's Word revealed. This step sends the pastor away, with considered information, to complete the fourth phase of the pastoral cycle on their own as a priestly act on behalf of the community. This prayer will delineate the role of preacher as one who encounters the Word and who translates that encounter into a sermon to be proclaimed in the preaching moment. This prayer asks God's guidance as for the priestly task of listening for the Word and translating as an embodied cultural lexicon on behalf of the community with the knowledge that, while each joy, concern, norm illumined, form preferred, or perspective lifted may not be addressed in the sermon, the participants have prepared the preacher for the preaching moment to communicate in the cultural language of the congregation. This sending does not imply, however, that the congregation needs the preacher to hear the word, but rather commissions the preacher for this sacred task of the office.

Next Steps: Listening for the Word and Translating it for the Preaching Moment

After the completion of the class with the Session, the preacher moves to interpret the Scripture passage, listen for the Word of God revealed, and better translate that encounter in the preaching moment. As the preacher does their own interpretive work, seeking the Word revealed, they must, as Jennifer Lord argues, "imagine the congregation" in the midst of this work in order to use language and imagery that speaks to the congregation's own circumstances.[80] It might be helpful for the preacher to reference their notes frequently about the contextual circumstances, vernacular language and imagery, form preferences, and function statement potentiality. These

[80] Lord writes, "As you sit down with the biblical text and your initial notes, think about the people who will hear this sermon. You may know them or you may have to do some research about their congregation to get a sense of who they are. Do they know you? As you write, imagine what they know about the text at hand. Imagine what examples or stories might resonate with them." Lord, *Finding Language and Imagery*, 40.

considerations will help the preacher move from encountered word to the translated sermon to be delivered in the preaching moment.[81] To aid with this articulation and translation, Tisdale offers a number of questions to prompt the preacher to localize and contextualize their interpretation for the congregation: "1. What would my people doubt to be true in this text? 2. What do my people need to know or be reminded of from this text? 3. With what inner feelings, longings, thoughts, and desires of my people does this text connect? 4. If this text is true, what kind of a world do we live in? Or what if this text were not true, what would be the consequences?". [82] These questions, as Tisdale argues, should be considered throughout the interpretive process rather than retrospective to ensure a more localized communication. [83] The resulting sermon's communicational effectiveness offered at the preaching moment will be assessed through congregational survey and participant feedback in step one of the next class.

4iii. Anticipated Outcome

While the Covid-19 pandemic makes gathering in-person -- a crucial element of both assessing the sermon in real-time as well as gathering information during the program -- impossible, based on information gleaned from the virtual trial and the subsequent changes corrected in the apparatus proposal, I can safely assume the following outcomes:

1. The class will allow for a much greater awareness of cultural language, form preferences, congregational needs, and contextual understanding. In particular, the in-person format will allow

[81] O. Wesley Allen Jr. offers important considerations for the preacher to consider as they move from interpretation to an articulated sermon with, "Here the preacher should ask the following types of questions during the sermon preparation: In this sermon how will I respond to what I have been hearing in the congregation's conversations? Which particular conversation partner am I addressing or responding to most directly in this sermon? What should be the nature and tone of my sermonic contribution to the conversation? What should be the function of the sermon be in relation to the state of the conversation?" Allen, *Homiletic of All Believers, 62*.

[82] Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art,* 150.

[83] Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art,* 149.

for a more dynamic means of probing the participants and uncovering additional ethnographic information while in-person worship will allow for the possibility of observing direct reactions from the congregation due to the closed feedback loop established through non-verbal feedback in real-time.

2. The assessment of the effectiveness of claim clarity and function statement execution in both the congregational survey and the dialogue with the participants will indicate that the class will yield more contextually appropriate and culturally relevant sermons delivered in the preaching moment due to the deliberate ethnographic research.

3. In the short and medium term, I believe that function statements geared toward congregational cohesion will be more effective due to a greater awareness of the characteristics of the congregation. I believe this particular function aim is only a short- to medium-term goal, as the potential of the cultural immersion and ethnographic study can uncover ever-changing needs and desires of the congregation that could be addressed through the function statement. In other words, the desire to focus the function statement is not a static goal, as the program itself demands a more open-minded and dynamic approach to listening than a pre-conceived objective could potentially hamper. It is important, however, that the short- to medium-term goal be congregational unity, as this was the presenting problem that the congregation expressed before my hire as pastor, as well as a persistent and systemic problem that I, myself, have observed in congregational life and leadership.

4. I believe that, since all congregations are multi-cultural communities that exist to listen for God's Word together, this apparatus could be portable to most congregations. The participant selection might differ, but any manifestation of lay leadership – elected or not – could serve as an important window into the cultural vernacular of the congregation. Some congregations might

struggle, however, in offering real and constructive feedback to the preacher depending on congregational understandings of the office of pastor, and careful attention will need to be given to invite such feedback. All congregations could benefit from a pastor preaching sermons that are more attentive to and shaped by the cultural vernacular.

5. With more awareness of the cultural vernacular of the congregation and through the establishing of normative means of further exploration and learning through additional classes, I believe the most important outcome of this apparatus is that the congregation will better hear the life-giving Word of God siphoned through their ever-changing cultural vernacular. This increased capacity to hear the sermonic claim and function could lead to transformative change, mobilize congregational response, offer a path through congregational or community trauma, and most importantly help the congregation deepen their faith in God and love for themselves and the Church.

Conclusion

While the multi-cultural identities and distinct cultural languages of congregations can create chasms between the preacher and the congregation, making it difficult for the preacher's intended sermonic claim and responsive function statement to be heard throughout the congregation, the ethnographic principles that undergird the Embodied Cultural Lexicon Apparatus can potentially help the pastor become aware of and learn the cultural language of their community in order to be better equipped for the task of priestly listening and interpretation of the Divine Word into the sermon delivered at the preaching moment. While the communication issues created by virtual preaching make the implementation of the apparatus difficult during the pandemic, the Embodied Cultural Lexicon Apparatus has a great deal of portability in other ecclesial and denominational settings.

The potential for clarity, relevance, and communication of the claim and function statement gleaned from using the apparatus can allow the congregation to better hear the sermon, helping the preacher to use the preaching moment to address real needs like: congregational direction, stewardship, pastoral/community crisis, call for social justice, mobilizing for service, deepening of individual and corporate faith, or, as in the case of Fountain City Presbyterian Church, congregational cohesion and direction.

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