

HOM6/701 - Fall 2018  
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### **Learning from African American Preaching**

Black preachers are our culture's "last folk poets." So says Richard Lischer of the black church tradition that nourished Martin Luther King Jr. The preaching of the black church is a magnificent *rhetorical* tradition, among many other things. And we notice that when we bring up African American preachers to Canadian students and congregations, they lean in. White Canadians know their churches will not emulate the extravagant and worship style of the black church in North America. But they long for . . . something. A bit more exuberance? Some rhetorical brilliance? Some marching orders for justice? What analogies can be drawn from the divine gift of the black church for the life of congregations in the liberal mainline in Canada? When Robert Graetz, the only white preacher to join the Montgomery Improvement Association, rose to read 1 Corinthians 13, Ralph Abernathy whispered to him, "read it like you never have before." Before Graetz could get through the first few verses the congregation was already drowning him in applause and amens. "Isn't that peculiar?" Reporters asked Abernathy after. "Yes, but we are a peculiar people," Abernathy replied.

How might Canadian students of homiletics learn to be like Robert Graetz?

This course is, in one way, patently ridiculous: two very white guys teaching on African American preaching to mostly white students. Liberal arts education has always held that *anyone* can teach *anything*. Christians have always held that claim with a bit of suspicion—those in Christ surely "know" more than those who are not. We should not be surprised that African-American intellectuals demur more quickly still. Their tradition has often been raided or belittled by outsiders. Our outsider status is risky then. The virtue of our outsider status however is that it will be clear we are not trying for outright imitation. White observers often fetishize black worship, patronize it, dismiss it. Blackness has always been the "other" that has made whiteness white, as James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and many other black intellectuals have made clear. One benefit to our outsider status is that we can approach this magnificent homiletical tradition with no pretense of trying to do likewise. And yet we can learn something about how our preaching and our churches' ministry might be different. The black community has always, even in the darkest days of Jim Crow, been open to white observation, participation, questions, and even joining. And there are analogies to be drawn in a Canadian context. White observers of black worship often *feel* nervous—as white participants in Indigenous communities often feel in worship. There is something to that feeling. Historically oppressed communities embrace Jesus, but not white Christianity. And they embrace him in a way that clearly signals their bodies do not belong to white people. They belong to God.

We want to ask about the nature of preaching in the black church. What is it *for*? How have its treasures been passed from one generation to the next? How has it changed as the black

community has struggled for liberation? How has it received challenges over the inclusion of women, LGBTQ people and, perhaps most interestingly, white people? Naturally there is no homogenous community here. The black church has no pope. But it is not ridiculous to speak of it as a singular tradition, rather than the more scholarly fashionable plural traditions, as African American Christians themselves do without vacillation. It is a tradition in a MacIntyrean sense—as an argument about the goods inherent to the tradition. But there we go again—analyzing the black church with the interpretive grid of a white academic. What other resources are there?

We will study the African American church's preaching tradition first by reading its practitioners: Frank Thomas and Otis Moss III are our required authors, in addition to the sermons compiled by Martha Simmons. We will watch and dissect some of these sermons, including greats of blessed memory like Gardner Taylor and Peter Gomes and current leading lights like Bishop Vashti McKenzie and Anthony Bailey. We will also draw on friends in this tradition to whom we will talk via Adobe Connect, including Ross's teacher, Dr. Thomas, and both of our colleagues.

### **Competencies**

Students will show they can . . .

- Identify the unique aspects of the African American rhetorical homiletic.
- Review and report on the theological, cultural and liturgical contribution of the African American homiletic to the wider church.
- Distinguish and differentiate between the structure of the African American homiletic and the European influenced Western preaching tradition of the New Homiletic.
- Create and deliver a sermon to professors and peers that reflects the structure of the African American homiletical tradition
- Assess, evaluate and discuss in a research paper the impact of African American homiletical theory on preaching in the broader western mainline church.

### **Assignments (Certificate students #1 & 2; Diploma and Degree #1,2 & 3)**

1-the reading and presentation of a classic piece of the intellectual infrastructure of the black church that each student will present to the class 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the way through the semester. Some of these texts are recent but are not particularly theological; others are multi-generational classics (if the student chooses Simmons, they can choose a favourite time period on which to focus). The options are not limited to those in the bibliography below—please see instructor(s) to propose another.

2-students will preach a sermon in the class that is appropriate to the student's own tradition but showing clear engagement with this material 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the way through.

3-a final paper engaging the tradition of the black church in its historical depths, its

contemporary practice, and the ways that tradition can bless, challenge, and enhance the student's own (roughly 15 pages)

**Required Books** (available at the UBC bookstore or at your friendly online book dealer)

Richard Lischer *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford, 1994).

Frank Thomas *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016)

**Recommended Book**

Martha Simmons, ed. *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: Norton, 2010).

**Intellectual Infrastructure** (this list could be endless, but we have to start somewhere. Another book by one of these authors would also be acceptable; other authors should be cleared with the instructors).

Maya Angelou *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Ballantine, 2009).

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X As Told to Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine, 1992).

James Baldwin *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

Taylor Branch *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

J. Kameron Carter *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford, 2008).

Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

James Cone *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997).

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Kelly Brown Douglas *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2015).

WEB DuBois *The Souls of All Black Folks* (Dover Thrift, 1994).

Willie Jennings *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2011).

Kimberly P. Johnson *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington 2017).

Cleophus LaRue *I Believe I'll Testify: The Art of African American Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster, 2011).

C. Eric Lincoln *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

Richard Lischer *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford, 1994).

Henry Mitchell *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

Toni Morrison *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2017).

—. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

Pauli Murray *Proud Shoes: The Life of an American Family* (Boston: Beacon, 1999).

Luke Powery and Sally Brown *The Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

Howard Thurman *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon, 1996).

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

Delores Williams *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2013).