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# Homiletical theology (keynote II)

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## Lecture on Homiletical Theology

David Schnasa Jacobsen

### Slide 1

I am honored to be with you today to talk about the importance of theology for preaching. I wish I had the linguistic skill to address you in your own languages today, but I clearly need to rely instead on the scholarly depth I've come to know from my Nordic colleagues as well as your many linguistic and cultural competencies. I do want you to know that I taught homiletics for fifteen years in Canada, which in many ways sharpened my English skills as well as my cultural sensitivity. I became so enamored of Canada that I am now a dual citizen—and my two adult children are still living and working in Toronto. Now, I realize the differences between Canada and the US seem minor by comparison. Yet I hope you'll allow me to both speak and hear today, to engage you across our differences in ways that enrich us both. So let's get started.

Homiletical theology offers a unique vista for doing theology today, both for preachers and scholars of preaching. It argues that preaching is not about consuming theology, but a place where theology is “done,” or produced. In doing so, it aims to concretize a commitment to seeing preaching as a thoroughgoing theological act, relating deeply to its practice, theories and contexts.

### Slide 2

I realize the term homiletical theology may just sound like just another trendy variation on theology proper. We could easily add it to a long list of qualifiers for theology: Biblical, historical, philosophical, or many others. Yet even if we were to focus on systematic theology as somehow representative of theology as a whole, the problem is still the same. In our day, even systematic theology has devolved into a series of theological loci now covered piecemeal. And

likewise under the pressure of disciplinary specialization of the Enlightenment university practical theology itself has made room for pastoral theology, liturgical theology, spiritual theology. . .and now, it might seem with my lecture topic, to yet one more variation: *homiletical* theology.

Yet my intention is not just to add to the list of adjectives for theology. Homiletical theology is not about further regionalizing theology yet one more time, nor making theology even more confusing. What homiletical theology does, instead, to make connections, start conversations across theology and among theological disciplines. It promotes homiletical theology as a different way of *doing* theology.

### **Doing Theology Homiletically**

In a brief editorial introduction in the journal *Homiletic* Paul Scott Wilson noted over two decades ago that homiletics was making “a theological turn.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one can find books over the last twenty years arguing that the work of the homiletician should be informed by kerygmatic theology, liberation theology, postliberal narrative theology, contextual theology, pastoral theology, revisionist theology, and many more. What homiletical theology does, however, is to reframe homiletics itself. Homiletics is not merely where theologies are applied or completed, it is rather a place for doing theology in light of preaching’s own practices, theories, and contexts. Preaching is thus not a venue for applying theologies, but a place for *doing theology*. And it sees the activity of preaching as a locus of theological conversation between preachers and hearers. What homiletical theology does is to put Paul Wilson’s theological turn in a new light.

### **Theology in a Homiletical Mode**

**Slide 3**

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, “Is Homiletics Making a Theological Turn?,” 15.

The term *homiletical* in homiletical theology is central for understanding its value. The English word homiletics is derived from a Greek verb *homileo* that appears in the New Testament. In Luke 24:14 two dejected post-crucifixion disciples are getting out of Jerusalem on the way to Emmaus while they “converse” with one another about “all that had happened”.

The use of this word “conversing” or *homilein* to name the outwardly troubled conversation of two dejected disciples might give us pause. This modest word rightly tamps down any hubris about homiletical theology. The homiletical conversation of two hapless disciples is dejected. And it uses the ephemeral, evanescent medium that is the spoken word. Homiletical theology is theology on the way—sometimes even on the way out of town. It is provisional.

#### Slide 4

Homiletical theology requires humility. It emerges, I suspect, when you know you need to say something, yet don’t really know just what to say. The apostle Paul, himself quite possibly himself a provisional, contingent homiletical theologian<sup>2</sup>, at least had the good sense to place all theological claims under the eschatological reservation in 1 Cor. 13:12: “for now we see through a glass darkly” (KJV). Homiletical theology speaks of God because it must. But it also speaks of God in full awareness that it can never do true justice to its subject matter. Like a preacher herself, homiletical theology trudges into the pulpit, shuffles its notecards, and clears its throat only to encounter a strange mystery there: the huge silent gap between the reading of the day’s scripture lesson and the sermon’s beginning—and right there in the silence a yearning expectation can still open up. Theologically, this gap may well be the high point of a Sunday

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<sup>2</sup> The “contingent” side of this description of Paul goes back to Beker’s work in *Paul the Apostle*. The homiletical side represents a surmise on my part, especially in terms of the marks that many of Paul’s letters bear that they may have been intended for reading in the assembly. Paul, at any rate, thinks carefully and theologically about the practice of preaching (Rom 10, 1 Cor 1–4) and the nature of the gospel (Gal) in his letters.

service. For a moment, people actually sit there silent in that gap, expecting that there might still be a Word from the Lord today—at least before our feeble homiletical efforts have had the chance to dissuade those hearers of their resilient hope! That mysterious moment, for me as a homiletical theologian, is the most gracious gap I know. And it makes the work of the homiletical theologian in all of his, her, or their brokenness, worthwhile.

Of course, homiletical theology also needs to know its other limits. Homiletical theology can never make pretensions to universality. Why? Because preachers preach with some sort of construal of an audience in mind or as Lisa Thompson from Vanderbilt would put it, “on the ground.” We do theology in earshot of actual hearers. Homiletical theology must naturally conceive its task relative to hearers and the medium in which it takes place. That’s what makes homiletical theology unique among all those theologies. It is not because preaching is primary speech, or *theologia prima*, or is in some way foundational for all theology. The two Lukan Emmaus disciples *homilein*, beginning to converse, are making their way out of town will testify to that! No, homiletical theology is just that fragile, that... contingent. It starts not with universal claims or pretensions or grand ideas, but with Sundays and life on the ground, at least in most cases. It starts quite simply with the practices, theories and contexts of preaching within earshot of hearers.

### **Homiletical Theology: Turning Barth on his Head**

**But first a warning:** I want to make sure we understand, though, that the kind of homiletical theology I am envisioning turns Karl Barth on his head.

Karl Barth tried hard to reinvigorate the relationship of theology to preaching. In his book based on his time teaching preaching in Bonn, *Homiletics*, Barth asserts that all theology is

sermon preparation.<sup>3</sup> In some ways, Barth was being kind to us hapless preachers on the way to Sunday. After all, preachers have usually been relegated to the theological task of “application”-- as if what homiletics did was all about packaging content already delivered from headquarters. What Barth did, however, was to place preaching in a very powerful relationship to theology.

At the same time, making theology preparation for the sermon in the Barthian sense also had the effect of putting preaching on a kind of post-theological pedestal. Some say that being “put on a pedestal” does not always result in a relationship of mutuality and respect, but can still have the effect of placing a person outside of the realm where real thinking is done and real decisions made. It can therefore be that such a Barthian salute to preaching may have ended up being something less than intended.

#### Slide 5

This made all the more interesting homiletician David Buttrick’s response to Barth. Buttrick wrote a surprising Foreword to Barth’s *Homiletics* when it was translated into English in 1991. Toward the end of his Foreword to Barth’s *Homiletic*, David Buttrick wondered out loud: perhaps the issue is not so much whether all theology is sermon preparation, but whether all sermon preparation is theology.<sup>4</sup>

To my mind Buttrick’s statement concretized what was really missing in the relationship between theology and preaching. It’s easy to fall into the trap of assuming that the preaching task is reducible to method.<sup>5</sup> There is, of course, good reason for that. A practical-theological field should be about *practice*. And practice is worthy of reflection and methodological refinement.

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<sup>3</sup> Barth, *Homiletics*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Buttrick, “Foreword,” 10.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Farley has pointed out the practical theological disciplines and ministerial practitioners have long run the risk of being captive to the methodological rigor of a sister discipline outside of theology in *Practicing Gospel*, 13.

While method can get out of hand and reduce even ends to mere means, it seems something of a necessary evil.

That same tension goes all the way back to Augustine in his famous homiletical text *On Christian Doctrine*.<sup>6</sup> Slide 6

Augustine seems suspicious of mere method. Augustine was a rhetorician, thinks that eloquence cannot be taught—after all, who can think of the rules of speaking, *while speaking!* Nonetheless, by the end of his four-part homiletic he is at it: giving practical advice on style and admiring a few of the Bible's own rhetorical and homiletical tropes. But while he does this, Augustine is quick to frame his methodological offerings within a theological perspective. Preaching, for Augustine, is about theologically norming what it is that preachers do when preparing to preach. Thus, when working with texts that seem to push immorality (like stories of Biblical patriarchs with multiple wives) or make a claim about God that is somewhere beneath the Divine, Augustine does not advocate a methodological norm, but a theological one: namely, whatever in the literal meaning of a Biblical text does not tend toward love of God or neighbor should be interpreted figuratively.

Yet let's be clear. Augustine's steadfast theological vision does not mean that method is *absent* from Augustine either. If Augustine's Prologue to *On Christian Doctrine* is to be taken at face value, apparently some of Augustine's opponents thought it silly that he should actually try to teach people to interpret the Bible for preaching—an ostensible purpose of his writing *On Christian Doctrine* in the first place. Biblical interpretation was *Spirit* work, Augustine's opponents claimed, not something that could be taught at all—least of all, using that filthy, pagan *rhetoric* which Augustine had so mastered in his earlier years. But Augustine had a different

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<sup>6</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*.

point of view. Method was fine, for Augustine, so long as it was in its place. In the meantime, no cultural product, no method, no technique was beyond the pale for enhancing the practice of preaching. Augustine put his relationship to method and theory this way: Just as the Hebrews plundered the Egyptians before leaving to go worship God, so preachers could feel free to put rhetoric and other such tools to the use of Christian preaching so long as it was put to non-idolatrous uses.

To my mind, homiletical theology operates from a similar principle—and one that makes sense of Buttrick’s clever inversion of Barth. It is not the kind of theology that can exist apart from its rootage in a practice in relation to hearers. Just as Christine Smith does in her book *Weeping, Confession, and Resistance* rethinks preaching theologically in light of concrete experiences of interlocking radical evil! When a homiletical theologian organizes and arranges her discourse, she is doing more than making methodological choices. She is doing theology homiletically—that is, with hearers in mind.

### Slide 7

So just imagine with me the unique theological problems that a *homiletical* theologian faces! What kinds of language or tropes dare we use for a God whom preachers would proclaim as Wholly Other? Will mere analogy ever carry such freight? Or must we grope toward God with our speech, only to recognize the gap between our little human words and the Divine. We can appeal like rhetoricians to “how much the more” as in the trope of the “lesser to the greater.” We might invoke tensive paradox, or perhaps just trail off intentionally into solecisms when correct grammar just cannot contain the infinite. And then how do we engage in any of these rhetorical practices with ancient theological language as our contexts and hearers change? To speak of the cross, do we appeal to first-century images of ransoming the enslaved, satisfaction metaphors of



Anselm's feudal world, or is the homiletical theologian charged to work the edges of speech to discern new or more local ways of conversing about Jesus' death? These are the kinds of practical, theoretical, and contextual decisions that preachers make. And we make them not as mere tacticians, but as *homiletical theologians*. I think homiletical theology is just *that*: a unique venue for doing theology in light of things that matter most for sermon preparation, its practices, theories, and contexts. It is a way of doing theology within earshot of hearers.

**And this is why I think Homiletical Theology** rightly understands itself as a *constructive theology*. **Slide 8**

Week in, week out preachers theologize. With every illustration, image, metaphor, or even stumbling syntax preachers invoke the divine presence and do so in ever new and broadening contexts. The upshot is that homiletical theology is much more than the sphere of application; it is also a realm for the ongoing *constructive* theological task. Despite its own stammering, inadequacy, and yet persistent concern for practices, theories, and contexts, homiletical theology sometimes by grace actually names God into the world again. While much preaching can be hackneyed, too reliant on old tropes or tired images, or, on the other hand, slow to change its gospel speech in light of realities of power and marginalization, what cannot be gainsaid is that Sunday to Sunday preaching across myriad contexts, denominations, and situations offers a potentially ever widening ambit of homiletical theology. Theologian Rebecca Chopp speaks of proclamation as the "perfectly open sign." Marginalized others, their faces and their presence, keep pushing us to name in ever greater variety the gospel's core. In speaking of God in the presence of hearers, homiletical theology is more than simply the realm of application; it is the doing of theology itself with ever new accents and perspectives and articulations of good news.

Yet in many ways, the idea of homiletical theology is not really a new one. Within the history of preaching, the sermon itself is one of the chief genres of theological reflection. The Cappadocian fathers themselves were known for the role their theological sermons played even in the great Trinitarian theological struggles of their day. In the Reformation, sermons and pamphlets of sermons played a key role in the theological transition of a world somewhere between the medieval and the modern. In our own day we have witnessed preachers like Martin Luther King, Jr. whose sermons stirred the conscience of a nation, along the way refiguring its own civil religion theologically! Sermons do not have to be the locus of the sentimental image, the unexamined power relation, or the dogmatically reductive idea. They can be places where theology takes up its unfinished task anew to name God into the world again. That, we propose, is the ultimate task of homiletical theology that views sermon preparation as theology—and why doing theology homiletically can be important today.

### **Moving Forward: Homiletical Theology on the Way**

By now you will no doubt have noticed that homiletical theology is far from a settled thing. It is at this point still in development, a focus of conversation, and not one whose end we can yet foresee. What shall we think of this embryonic conversation about homiletical theology, a theology on the way? **Slide 9**

Take a careful look at that picture. Perhaps we should remember how homiletical theology had its linguistic conversational roots in two, dejected disciples making their way out of Jerusalem for Emmaus. They were beginning to converse (*homilein*) with one another about “all the things that had happened.” Please note, these two did not go alone. They were met along the way with a strange visitor who not only connected all the things that had happened to the scriptures, but spoke with them in a way that made their hearts burn. Homiletical theology is

theology on the way. It may be located in concrete practices, theories, and contexts, but it is ultimately animated by Another who keeps the conversation going and sends those two dejected disciples scampering back to Jerusalem in the middle of the night with a new message and a new account of all that had happened. These trudging disciples are good enough models for homiletical theologians—with their mysterious conversation with each other, and leading to a meal with the stranger, they uncovered by grace a way forward: a way to name God into the world again.

**And this is precisely the rub for homiletical theologians. That gospel is what really matters.** **Slide 10 Homiletical Theology** calls preachers to go back to the core of theology itself: the gospel. Theology, in its broadest sense, has been about what generations of believers have done and continue to do in connecting the gospel to life. One popular introduction to theological reflection puts it this way:

. . .we hold to a time-honored conviction that when Christians are baptized they enter into a ministry they all share, responding to a God-given call to disclose the Gospel (God's good news of Jesus Christ) through all they say and do. Their calling makes them witnesses of faith, and hence theologians as well. This is because the witness they make in the course of their daily lives sets forth their understanding of the meaning of the Christian faith, and—in keeping with another time-honored conviction—because Christian theology is at its root a matter of faith seeking understanding.<sup>7</sup>

The church and the world need specialists who do theology as a unique vocation. But this also means that doing *homiletical* theology—is a *shared* theological task ever taken up anew. Danish

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<sup>7</sup> Stone and Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 1–2.

homiletician Marianne Gaarden's work in the *Third Room of Preaching* is instructive here as was her article with Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen in *Homiletic* back in 2013. Such empirical work on sermon reception shows the deep ways in which theology is being done as a matter of individual meaning making beyond the sanctuary. Their work helps us see that theology is certainly not something to be regionalized, least of all to homileticians. And there is also no such thing as a finished theology, for every theology by definition takes up its gospel task anew. Whatever homiletical theology should be, at the very least it takes up this *common* task: the task of naming gospel in this moment and in this context with others.

I want now to turn to some examples that invite us to connect preaching to our theological task of naming gospel. **Slide 11** Here we can see how homiletical theology plays out in specific circumstances. The circumstances are interesting, to my mind, not because they are so rare, but because they are common to the tradition and the scriptures themselves. I've identified three key issues from the scriptures that call forth the theological work of the preacher: acknowledging differences in the scripture and tradition, confessing the truth about scriptures that call forth theological repair, and naming gospel amidst the broken shards of texts and traditions.

### **Slide 12 Acknowledging Differences in Scripture and Tradition**

**Acknowledging Differences in Scripture and Doctrines is the first part** of homiletical theology's unfinished task. For homiletician Ronald Allen, the theological task of preaching begins at the very point where individual Biblical texts disagree (in textual sermons) and doctrinal positions must be named in a way that has coherence from sermon to sermon (in topical

sermons).<sup>8</sup> Systematic theology for Allen ensures a coherent way of preaching that acknowledges the otherness of texts and doctrines and thus the need of theology in preaching to differentiate and systematize across sermons. In the process, Allen offers a conversational approach along with his own revisionist (process) theological views as a way of showing how such homiletical work can be done by honoring texts and doctrines in their uniqueness while still holding to a coherent theological center in preaching.

In my view, Allen's work remains important for understanding theology's unfinished task. The Bible, as Allen points out, is not a monolith, but is in fact a collection of diverse theologies and views. In this way, the theological task is no mere overlay to preaching, but goes to its heart in taking it up again. More than that, however, Allen's conversational approach moves profoundly in the direction of our de-clericalized vision of theologizing about the gospel:

..systematic theology helps the congregation name what we believe and make coherent sense of life from the perspective of God so that the community can live and witness with integrity. As the title of the book suggests, preaching is itself an act of believing. The sermon bodies forth the deepest beliefs of the congregation. .and the preacher. . .in the context of theological reflection.<sup>9</sup>

Here Allen's irenic, congregational view envisions hearers themselves participating in theological reflection. The key difference is this: homiletical theology as I am proposing it is a more constructive and provisional task and aims to embrace preaching's *unfinished theological task*. What does this look like? Theologian Serene Jones' work on trauma and Biblical interpretation provides us with a useful example. Our tendency is to reduced differences

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 35–36. The notion also extends to texts and doctrines which we do not sufficiently treat in their otherness to hear on their own terms. Either way, his conversational vision for using systematic theology in preaching is designed to surface differences honestly to shape a conversation on what hearers might believe today.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2.

between resurrection narratives in the Bible and in so doing emphasize the triumph of resurrection. Serene Jones in her book *Trauma and Grace* by contrast lifts up the unique theological shape of the Markan resurrection scene of Mark 16:1-8. Mark has no appearances, just an empty tomb. The angel's directions to go to tell the disciples and meet him in Galilee remain unfulfilled. And the women, they run away and tell no one, for they are afraid. In a powerful part of her book Jones *re-reads* Mark's truncated resurrection narrative in light of the reality of trauma. Jones joins with women in trauma to re-read this story and at the same time to lift up what I see as the traumatic origins of such Biblical texts themselves. In doing so, the ever unfinished work of homiletical theology with the differences among texts matters. And its attention to practices, theories, and contexts, makes the doing of theology a more shared reality.

### **Acknowledging the Need for Repair and Resumption of the Theological Task** Slide 13

At the same time, the unfinished task of homiletical theology is also evident in other ways. As preachers and hearers deal with the good gifts of the scriptures and the tradition, we notice places where the tradition itself is still “unfinished” and perhaps in need of repair.<sup>10</sup> We either stumble on some texts because they are morally problematic for us or choose to relegate them to a distant past. There is, however, another way in which an unfinished homiletical theology might be useful. In some cases, it may just be that our texts or traditions offer ways forward that themselves were never really resolved. German NT scholar Günter Wasserberg considers, for example, Luke–Acts to be a “grief document.”<sup>11</sup> Its problematic language about Jews and Gentiles reflects an unresolved grief in the early church. Many other NT commentators likewise acknowledge the massive crisis that the destruction of the temple produced in the final third of

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<sup>10</sup> I treat this issue, described below, in much greater detail in *Theology Today*, “Preaching as the Unfinished Task of Theology.”

<sup>11</sup> Wasserberg, “Die Haltung der beiden grossen Kirchen in Deutschland nach 1945 zu Auschwitz,” 53–57. Dr. Wasserberg treated this issue in our co-authored volume, *Preaching Luke–Acts*, 9–12.

the first century. In many ways, NT writings from Mark onward are trying to work through this trauma and grief through their narrative theologies.<sup>12</sup> Sensitive interpreters of the NT struggle with anti-Jewish elements that may have emerged in early NT narratives precisely because of these traumatic events. If so, the task of an unfinished theology is even more complicated than we might first imagine. Our resistance to anti-Judaism in our preaching texts may mean more than simply identifying such problematic elements in our theological conversations. They may be more like theologizing through unresolved grief. At any rate, it recasts the unfinished task of homiletical theology. The issue is not just how we interpret Mark, or Matthew, or Luke, or any NT writer. The issue may also be whether we can “take up” their theological task again beside them. It is in this extra sense in which I wish to talk about homiletical theology’s unfinished task. As preachers we are continuing to take up the theological task of the tradition even while our responses are themselves provisional. The task of homiletical theology is not merely unfinished because of new times and new places, nor is it unfinished solely because of tensions between texts and doctrinal traditions; it is also unfinished because the good gifts of scripture and tradition came to birth, at least in part, amidst grief and trauma.

We are, in other words, homiletical theologians because the tradition continues to sustain us and yet also sometimes troubles us. We might think of a doctrinal parallel, for example, in the expanding critical reflection on a theology of the cross that runs from Luther to Moltmann to Deanna Thompson to James Cone. On occasion, preachers take up such unresolved issues as Gospel passion narratives because the remembrance and ritual of the calendar keep rolling around, as does the carnival of death and suffering that is human weakness, profound pain, and

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<sup>12</sup> Brown points out an analogous relationship to the theological development beyond atonement theories for preaching in *Cross Talk*.

oppression. It is here where homiletical theology is ever ventured in the presence of others and communities, in face-to-face assemblies and before ever wider publics.

For reasons of this sometimes unfinished theological task, I also wish to move more in the direction of seeing homiletical theology as a provisional and constructive enterprise rather than a systematic one. Why constructive? The authors of an important text on constructive theology put it this way:

We are not interested in merely describing what theology has been; we are trying to understand and construct it in the present, to imagine what life-giving faith can be in today's world. In doing so, as with any construction job, we are attempting to build a viable structure. In our case, that structure is an inhabitable, beautiful, and truthful *theology*.<sup>13</sup>

The point is an important one for dealing with theology as an unfinished task in a *conversational* mode that moves beyond the normally clericalized vision of theology.<sup>14</sup> If the tradition itself is sometimes the locus of its unfinished character, perhaps it is helpful—especially in a late modern context like ours—to consider not an overarching systematic coherence as the goal of a homiletical theology, but what philosopher Charles Taylor calls a “best account.”<sup>15</sup> A best account attempts to organize a way of viewing things that is plausible while acknowledging its limitations. The notion is not born solely of a late-modern, or even post-modern concern about truth claims, but makes sense within the tradition's own modesty: “for now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face” (1 Cor 13:12, KJV). Within this eschatological frame, we must all concede that our best accounts, in an age of theological construction, remain provisional

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<sup>13</sup> Jones and Lakeland: *Constructive Theology*

<sup>14</sup> I treat the importance of the conversational mode for homiletical theology in the Introduction to this volume.

<sup>15</sup> In Taylor's work, the concern is making an ethical case in an age of scientific explanation. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 58f.



and thus unfinished this side of heaven. It may be that such an approach is also more open to the kind of conversations across “best accounts” that may be necessary for Christian faith in a pluralistic context. It may also be a profound invitation to mystery in our linguistic practice as homiletical theologians.

**[A]A Starting Point for Homiletical Theology: Naming Gospel Anew Slide 14**

The unfinished character of homiletical theology means ultimately that naming gospel, the starting point for doing such theology as I am proposing, is therefore a moment of interactivity between scripture/tradition and experience/culture. It is this moment of mediation that shapes homiletical theology most profoundly. Preachers occupy space between the two, knowing full well that they must articulate gospel not just to construed audiences in articles and monographs, but face to face as a theological act and “on the ground.” One concern for any homiletical theology is chiefly one of clarity: how to speak gospel and not to say something else, that is, *not to say more than one needs to*. This mediation usually entails either a deepening of the shared practical wisdom that is theology or else bringing theory and theology to bear on practical moments so that preaching can be refined as a practice. But homiletical theology is not confined to this alone. Homiletical theology also occasionally bumps into moments when scripture, tradition, or situation themselves bring to the fore unfinished theologies which call forth a different kind of engagement: *to say more when one needs to*. In those occasions homiletical theology entails constructive, conversational moments where in the interaction between gospel and experience/culture something new is named: perhaps even just new in this time and place. In such moments, a conversation is set loose and a constructive homiletical theology begins and a new way of being emerges through what American theologian Edward Farley calls “the world of

gospel.”<sup>16</sup> Such moments may not occur every day; the gospel still needs to be recognizable over time to be gospel. However, silence in the presence of our unfinished task will also prove untenable—we will need to say more. The question is how we do so admitting both our limits as homiletical theologians and the mysteries to which we attend.

### **Conclusion** Slide 15

For homiletical theologians, the naming of gospel is itself unfinished. Unfinished because the broken work of theology continues apace in the ever new contexts in which the word is preached and its symbols are broken open--not just because preachers are hankering after innovation. Homiletical theologians know it when they face the question: What am I going to say this Sunday? Or how am I going to say *this* on Sunday? They are questions about the limits of what can be said in the face of mystery and the need to say more on occasions when situations emerge. Homiletical theologians know to ask such questions because they live with the practices, theories and, most profoundly, contexts of preaching. They seek to be present at the times when the world of gospel, as Farley calls it, opens up a future in light of them, a gospel world in all its startling newness. But because of the beautiful brokenness of our scriptures and traditions, homiletical theology in the act of preaching is a bit like picking up broken pieces of stained glass. The shards are beautiful, but also sharp-edged. A homiletical theologian, however, embraces the scriptures as good gift even as its sharp edges require care. In those moments, homiletical theologians as preachers learn to pick up a broken shard of glass, treat it discerningly, and hold it up to the light in preaching. In those moments, God calls us forward to the “world of gospel,” and the opportunity as homiletical theologians to name God into the world even now.

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<sup>16</sup> Here I am eliding notions hermeneutical *and* theological in the work of Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 87 and Farley, “Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel.”