

One New Book for the Preacher

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A HEALING HOMILETIC: PREACHING AND DISABILITY by Kathy Black. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996. 199pp.

I bought *a Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* after hearing its author, Kathy Black, Assistant Professor of Homiletics at the School of Theology at Claremont and an ordained Methodist minister, speak at an Academy of Homiletics meeting. I was moved by Black's account of her own disability, which comes upon her unawares, immobilizing her entire body, so she can still see and hear, but cannot move or speak. The rawness of the daily struggle and secondary status to which most disabled persons are relegated in independence-oriented USA cannot be illustrated better than by Black's own experience. One day while grocery shopping, her body goes into paralysis. The carton of milk in her hand falls to the floor, smashes open. Black herself collapses on the dirty, milk stained floor. Several fellow shoppers stop to look. Others pretend she isn't there. One remarks to another, "There but for the grace of God go I."

The challenge to homileticians is, "What kind of a God and message about God are we sending to the disabled among us?" Black's purpose in *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* is to confront the Christian smugness and stupidity we often reveal in ourselves when we attempt to explain sickness, suffering, and disability to others. Black addresses all ministers: those of us who identify ourselves as theologically and biblically liberal and those among us who consider ourselves to be conservative in our theology and biblical hermeneutics. The latter group of clergy is taken to task for suggesting that the sinfulness is the cause of disability, and for the accompanying pressure upon the disabled not only to name and forsake their sin but also to have a strong enough faith for God to reward them with a cure. To the liberals among us, Black points out the hurt we inflict by preaching metaphorically on the miracles of Jesus. When we preach on Mark 10: 46-52 about Jesus and blind Bartimaeus, and then link Bartimaeus's literal blindness to our own spiritual blindness, we unintentionally associate physical blindness with something bad, something in need of fixing.

Black further calls into question our homiletical presumption that all disabilities must be cured for a person to be fully human and whole. She makes a key distinction between cure and healing. In most of our minds, the miracles of Jesus are about cures for disabilities. The lame man walks, the blind man sees, the dying daughter is restored to good health. Understandably, we are not comfortable with proclaiming cures for our own parishioners, yet we deny them healing when we resort to metaphorical interpretations of texts in which Jesus heals not only the physical body but also the self-esteem and soul of the individuals he encounters. This point is one of Black's most telling. We look at a person in a wheelchair, a couple signing to one another on the street, or a street person shuffling along muttering to herself, and we think "cure." This person needs to be fixed, to be made whole, to be like us. We do not look at the person

and think, “person,” “child of God,” “contributor to the Kingdom of God,” “friend,” “equal partner,” “colleague,” or “church leader.” We assume that healing is about curing people of their ills. We do not realize that their biggest ill may not be a physical or mental disability, but the way disability marginalizes them in our health-conscious, independence-focused society. Healing means recognition of contributions, ideas, thoughts and feelings, and the personhood of all people.

Black begins Part I of *A Healing Homiletic* with a general introduction of the problem and her own experience as both a disabled person and a minister in church communities largely populated by persons who are physically deaf. Using miracle texts included in the three year cycle of the lectionary, Black examines them anew from the perspective of the disabled and offers readers a chance to rethink and reconsider how we preach on these texts. Her book is an invaluable resource for those of us who would preach on the miracles of Jesus and on the theological and anthropological meaning of disabilities for people today. In her careful examination, Black also points out places where other Bible commentators have often conveyed mixed or misleading messages to disabled Christians by the readings they offer for these texts.

In Part II, Black presents all of the lectionary texts which deal with the miracles of Jesus. In each chapter she examines texts related to a particular disability: Blindness, Deafness and Hearing Loss, Paralysis, Leprosy and Chronic Illness, Mental Illness. Chapters begin with a description of the disability, offering factual information and insight about it:

The linguistic differences revolve around whether a person’s primary language is American Sign Language, a sign language based on the English language, or “oralism”—speechreading and speaking English. There is also a manual code of phonetics sounds in the English language called Cued Speech.

The cultural differences are determined by which language is used. If American Sign Language is the primary language (preferably a native language), the person is considered “Culturally Deaf.” If English is the primary language, then the person is considered “Culturally Hearing” (90).

Thus, Black stresses how important it is for ministers to possess more than a cursory knowledge of the disabilities and illnesses of their congregants. She presents traditional exegetical readings of each text, pointing out ways these traditional readings have been read to imply either sinfulness or wrongness and incompleteness on the part of the disabled person. Black approaches each reading with special sensitivity to the details so often overlooked by those of us going for the larger picture or the grand theme. Many of the miracle stories take place in the context of ongoing theological skirmishes between Jesus and his opponents. Consequently, a miracle such as the curing of the paralytic in Mark 2: 1-12 causes us to proclaim the importance of faith and forgiveness in healing the paralyzed portions of our lives when that is not the text’s message: “Jesus does not place prerequisites on healing” (120). Through such examples, Black illustrates the ways each miracle text has been understood and preached in the past before highlighting the unhelpful and destructive messages we sometimes convey to the disabled. Each chapter concludes with guidelines for a

healing homiletic, and suggests ways to preach on these texts which affirm the interdependence of all people, the wholeness we receive in Jesus Christ, and the capacity we possess to love and heal one another without insisting upon changes and cures of what cannot be changed or cured. My one disappointment with the book was the absence of sermons. I wanted to observe Black's own healing homiletic in action.

How is this book helpful to us? It sensitizes us to the unintended and unexamined messages we proclaim when we preach the miracles of Jesus. I won't preach any of these miracle texts again without consulting Black's chapter on that particular disability and text. It provides excellent and thoughtful biblical readings and interpretations of texts we may think have nothing new to say. It invites us to be better informed about the lives of disabled persons in our congregations and to call upon them to educate us and serve with us as equal members in the community of faith.

While *A Healing Homiletic's* primary audience is preachers, it can also serve as an excellent resource book for pastoral counselors and therapists. Moreover, its clear, straightforward discussion of biblical texts and theological issues makes it an excellent book to study in a Sunday School class composed of persons both disabled and not. Finally, Black's book provides a quiet reminder to those of us who outwardly appear "whole" that all of us are disabled at various points in our lives by strokes, heart attacks, cancer, depression, or illness, and that all of us need each other and Jesus Christ in order to be healed.