

**CLAIMING THE POWER OF THE PULPIT: FLORENCE SPEARING RANDOLPH
PREACHES ON THE TABOO OF “ANTIPATHY TO WOMEN PREACHERS”
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Preface

The theme of the Academy of Homiletics 2016 annual meeting “Preaching Taboos of Sex, Money, and Politics” piqued my interest. My academic approach is to seek to make connections between the historical and contemporary worlds of preaching. Interpreting “sex” as “gender,” I am submitting a historical account of how one woman overcame convention and preached compelling sermons with the rhetorical purpose of challenging the taboo of women preaching in nineteenth century America. I do not limit my scope to the discovery *that* women have overcome prohibitions to claim their call to preach, or even that they *should*, but more precisely in order to learn *how* they did so and, therefore, to imaginatively project a horizon in which we might do the same today. This historical tradition can be re-invented today in order to give women—and anyone struggling with claiming their place, authority, and voice of preaching—a proven practice in confronting the taboo by claiming power: power of Spirit, call, and pulpit. Reclaiming this historical pulpit rhetoric provides methods for use in contemporary homiletics in the teaching and the practice of preaching on taboo issues today.

Introduction

In the theatre of nineteenth-century American religion, women played the role of social reformers and Sunday school teachers. Women preaching was a taboo. Florence Spearing Randolph confronted sexism and racism by interrupting the dominant cultural and church narrative that restricted a black woman’s call to preach. She responded to the questions of her place as a southern black woman, her authority as an ordained minister, and her voice as a public preacher by claiming the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of her call, and the power of the pulpit. In her sermon “Antipathy to Women Preachers,” Randolph appealed to biblical witness in order to construct an inclusive narrative of call. She effectively utilized a three-part rhetorical strategy of naming the taboo, arguing authoritatively against it, and then summoning women to answer God’s call to the pulpit to preach a liberating word.

Florence Spearing was born on August 9, 1866 in Charleston, South Carolina to John and Anna Smith Spearing. She was the youngest of seven children in a black family who could trace their lineage of freedom back two generations before the Civil War. She was born at time when emancipation was proclaimed, the Civil War had just ended, and Reconstruction aimed to secure liberty and civil rights to blacks. But, she was born in a place where the Black Codes made segregation and discrimination permissible by law.¹ As a black woman living in the South during the time of Reconstruction, she faced obstacles to ‘life and liberty’ based on her race and

¹ Law passed by South Carolina immediately following the Civil War claimed to be fair to all races, but actually aimed at repressing black people. At first these laws were called Black Codes, but because of their deceptive nature, they eventually came to be known as the laws of Jim Crow. Jim Crow was the name of the character in minstrel shows, which featured white actors in “black face,” or black make-up. The name Jim Crow represented the fact that Black Codes were based on racial disguise.

gender. The dominant narrative of the time limited a woman's place, restricted a woman's authority, and silenced a woman's voice.

On the religious landscape, convention was stubborn and seemingly fixed, not allowing women the place, the voice, or the authority of the pulpit. And so, in order to affect change in the church, women had to proclaim a 'rhetoric of call' which came in a variety of forms: personal spiritual autobiographies, public platform speeches, and prophetic Biblical interpretations. Florence Spearing Randolph's 'rhetoric of call' took the form of sermons preached from a pulpit. As a Christian woman living during the rise of black churches that resulted from the religious revivals and great awakenings, she responded to the questions, challenged the prohibitions, and confronted the taboo by claiming power: power of Spirit, call, and pulpit.

Question of Place (as a Southern Black Woman)

The question of a black woman's place was challenged in political, economic, and social realms. During the period of Reconstruction after the War, a series of amendments to the Constitution were ratified—giving blacks freedom from slavery, and the right to be represented and to vote as citizens of the United States.² However, blacks continued to struggle to claim and maintain these basic civil rights.³

While the Civil War put an end to slavery, freed slaves were left without land or the means to provide for themselves or their families. "In the decades after the Civil War," note historians Martha Watson and Thomas Burkholder in *The Gilded Age and the New America*, "the 'race question' dominated all other issues in the South and affected life throughout the nation."⁴ Reconstruction efforts went beyond political rights, including economic opportunities as well. In response, Southern states passed laws in an attempt to continue to control the freed slaves. South Carolina Black Codes were thought to be some of the harshest: all blacks were forbidden to vote or hold political office. The Black Codes limited economic freedoms: a black person was prevented from becoming an artisan, mechanic, or shopkeeper without a proper license from a judge. Further, the Codes limited black migration into or within the state, forcing blacks to enter into a contractual relationship with a white master or go to jail.⁵

The Freedmen's Bureau had established schools in South Carolina, and Florence Spearing was educated in local public and normal schools. However, her race and gender limited her choices to teaching or dress making. Most of her classmates were studying to

² The Thirteenth Amendment outlawed slavery in the United States. The Fourteenth Amendment gave rights of citizenship to all citizens, including life, liberty, and property; further, it required that in order for Southern states to be admitted to the Union, they had to grant the vote to black men. The Fifteenth Amendment declared that the right of citizens to vote shall not be denied based on race, guaranteeing African Americans the right of voice and vote.

³ Although blacks would be officially/legally freed by the Emancipation Proclamation (1864) and black men the right to vote as equal citizens of the Union (1871), not until the Civil Rights legislation of 1965 would black men and women realize true equality and rights.

⁴ Introduction: "The Gilded Age and the New America" in Martha S. Watson and Burkholder, eds., *The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Reform: A Rhetorical History of the United States, Significant Movements in American Public Discourse* xvi.

⁵ For more on Reconstruction, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, 1st Perennial Classics ed., New American Nation Series (New York: Perennial Classics, 2002). For more on black codes of South Carolina see Theodore Brantner Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South*, Southern Historical Publications, No. 6 (University, University of Alabama Press, 1965), See also <http://www.crf-usa.org/brown-v-board-50th-anniversary/southern-black-codes.html>.

become teachers, but Florence aspired to become “an outstanding modiste with dreams of travel and some sort of a career.”⁶ When she saw her father grow ill and her sisters forced to work as domestic servants and seamstresses, she became determined to develop a skill that would allow her to earn a decent living for herself and for her family’s well-being. And so, after graduating from Avery Normal Institute, she achieved her goal of becoming a modiste and an instructor in a dressmaking school.

Although blacks won freedom in the Civil War, they remained second-class citizens in the nation. Within six years after the war (1871), black men were given the right to vote. However, neither the Fourteenth nor the Fifteenth Amendment made any provision for women’s suffrage. Women, both black and white, would have to continue to fight for equality into the twentieth century before they would be granted the right to vote—not until 1920 (with passage of Nineteenth Amendment). And even afterwards, they would need to keep talking about their right to place, authority, and voice. Powerful words in poignant rhetoric in public forums continued to be the most important weapon for all women—black and white. Other times, they discovered that their actions spoke louder than words.

While the Black Codes restricted black migration into South Carolina, they did not limit movement out of the state. In 1882, at the age of sixteen, Florence Spearing moved to New York and later to Jersey City, New Jersey. In a northern city she could not only earn three times the pay as she could in the South, but she also enjoyed more freedom. In 1886, she married Hugh Randolph of Richmond, Virginia, who had moved to Jersey City to work on the railroad as a cook. Together they had one daughter Leah Vila, born in 1887. They were married for 27 years, until Hugh’s death in 1913.

For ten years, Florence Spearing Randolph operated a successful dressmaking business from her home in Jersey City.⁷ There, Randolph sought not only economic liberty, but religious freedom as well. She had found a place in the business world, but she now desired to find a place in the church.

Response: Claim the Power of Spirit

The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.
~Alice Walker

The religious culture of nineteenth-century America was marked by evangelical fervor and revival experiences of conversion. Such an authentic conversion resulted from a spiritual rebirth that saved one from eternal damnation. Despite this conversion, only by complete surrender could one be sanctified to serve God fully. The Second Great Awakening aroused interest in spiritual transformations, and also provided holiness camp meeting services, particularly among Methodists and Baptists, where people gathered to listen to itinerant preachers, pray, and be formed into a disciple of Jesus Christ.

In this nineteenth-century religious culture of conversion, sanctification and formation, Florence Spearing came to faith. At the age of thirteen, she was converted at the Centenary Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The frequent house visits she made with her grandmother to teach the Bible and pray with the sick left an indelible impression on

⁶ Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, 103. Note: A modiste is one who makes and sells fashionable dresses and hats for women.

⁷ Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, 103.

young Florence, as later in life, she decided to pursue a career in pastoral ministry. In 1886, she became a member of Monmouth Street African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Jersey City. Her gifts for ministry were recognized immediately; she was appointed Sunday school teacher and class leader for young people. In response to her conversion, Randolph sought direction for how to use her gifts by attending holiness meetings.

At one such meeting, she experienced instant sanctification. She heard the leader describe a vision she had had of someone at the meeting “whom God wanted all for himself and what would happen.” Randolph wrote of her powerful experience:

Well something did happen that afternoon and it happened to me. My friend and I were the only two colored persons in the building, so at the close of the sermon or message, the speaker invited all to come forward and unite in prayer as she termed it “to wait on God.” ... As soon as my knees touched the floor, I felt a burning desire to pray. I did, and how well I remember the words “Thou who knoweth all my weaknesses, thou who knoweth all my fears, while I plead each precious promise, hear, and answer [my] prayer.” With that I swooned to the floor and remained almost dead for some time, as the speaker would not let anyone to touch me.⁸

Randolph describes the impact on her body, mind and spirit. Her body was moved to go forward in response to the leader’s invitation and she uncontrollably swooned on the floor. Her mind came to a new understanding of herself as worthy of salvation. Her soul experienced instant sanctification, in which she felt God cleanse her sin, change her character, and set her apart as the one “whom God wanted all for himself.”⁹ Being one of only two black people in the holiness meeting may have been fortuitous. Perhaps she was better able to see that the Spirit is no respecter of gender or racial divisions. Perhaps she was better able to believe that the Spirit has the power to move where it wills, within all persons, converting sinners like her to beloved children of God, and calling all to the continual work of sanctification and perfection.

With her conversion and sanctification, Florence witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit to redeem her and call her beloved and to give her a place in God’s eyes and in the kingdom of heaven. Still, she had to challenge barriers to claim a place in the world—especially in the church to which she was called. However, as she soon discovered, she also needed to have the authority to inhabit the space.

Question of Authority (as an Ordained Minister)

Florence Randolph’s overwhelming experience compelled her to seek further religious formation and vocational discernment. In 1888, she began closing her flourishing dressmaking business once a week, so that she could attend to temperance and church missionary work.¹⁰ In the late 1880s, Randolph became acquainted with AME Zion Holiness Minister E. George Biddle. A former Greek and Hebrew scholar at Yale, Biddle was glad to provide Randolph with biblical instruction, theological training, and the use of his vast library collection. Biddle was

⁸ Florence Spearing Randolph, “My First Trip Away from Home,” and “My Second Trip from Home,” and “Marriage,” handwritten transcripts, Randolph Collection, compiled by Ibid., 104.

⁹ Sanctification is to set apart, cleanse or purify. It is that action which God performs within the believer as to changing the nature and character of the person. There is *instantaneous* sanctification which occurs at the point of salvation, by which God sees the believer as clean and pure because of the covering work of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, 104.

impressed by his student and so invited Randolph, along with Rev. Julia Foote, to become a helper in leading holiness meetings.¹¹ During one holiness meeting, when the pastor of the Jersey City AME Zion Church (Rev. R. R. Baldwin) suddenly became ill, Randolph was given permission to lead the meeting, which turned out to be “one of the greatest revivals in the history of the church.”¹²

Despite Rev. Biddle’s affirmation of Randolph’s gifts, opportunities presented to her by the church and her success as an exhorter and revivalist, still she resisted the full acceptance of a call to be an ordained preacher. After all, she was not immune from the forces of the conventional ideology of separate gender spheres and roles; Randolph was a product of them. In fact, she did not believe that women should be preachers. But if she was mistaken on a woman’s limited role in the church, she prayed that God would correct her and make her call abundantly clear. Seeking evidence of call, she bargained with God, praying that if her dressmaking business would fail, then she would preach. Her business failed. Thinking that God had called her to preach, she went to her family and shared her sense of call. They judged that she had lost her mind. Ministers criticized and opposed her. Again she took the matter to God in prayer. After a night of struggle in which she read about Abraham’s willingness to offer everything—even his own son, she surrendered to God’s call. Convinced of the truth of her call to preach, she defied gender conventions and gave up her responsibilities of family and home—“determined to go out homeless and [penniless] alone with Christ”—in order to answer God’s call and pursue a preaching career.¹³

Even as she tried to convince her family and herself of the authenticity of her call, word spread about this powerful preaching woman. Soon, she was receiving invitations to conduct revivals at other churches, both black and white. Her popularity precipitated the official recognition of her authority: she was named a class leader, an exhorter, and even a local preacher. Lay people—men and women—were permitted to lead class discussions or to exhort, but could not preach without a proper license.¹⁴ And so, despite her resistance to this official authority, she accepted a local preacher’s license so that she could preach in the church. With a measure of humility, Randolph celebrated her achievements, “The ball of criticism, fault finding and persecution began rolling. In 1897 I was granted head preacher. Not that I wanted honors, nor sought them, but pressure was brought to bear by the pastor.”¹⁵

Despite her popularity and success as a preacher, when Randolph sought to have her call endorsed by the New Jersey Conference of the AME Zion Church, she faced strong opposition from fellow ministers and the presiding bishop. The church leadership feared that by approving Randolph’s request for membership, they would subsequently be endorsing the elevation of women to positions of authority. Despite the opposition, Randolph’s request was approved and she was admitted as a member of the New Jersey Conference in 1898. In April of 1901, Randolph was ordained as a deacon at the Annual Church Conference; two years later, she was

¹¹ According to Randolph, Julia Foote “preached and taught holiness in white and colored churches for many years” in *Ibid.*, 103. In 1895, Foote became the first woman to be ordained a deacon and in 1899 was the second woman, following the controversial ordination of Mary Small, to be ordained an elder in the AME Zion church.

¹² *Ibid.*, 104.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁴ Exhort is to urge strongly by argument to accept the truth of the sermon which has been preached by a licensed or ordained preacher.

¹⁵ “Florence Randolph Life and Work in Part,” handwritten transcripts, Randolph Collection, as referenced by Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, 104.

ordained as an elder.¹⁶ Randolph was granted full preaching and ministerial authority—at least in theory. Despite her efforts to claim the authority of the outward call, the church did not supply her with many opportunities to preach. The question of her authority was raised throughout her ministry, and she responded to the challenge by claiming the power of her call and the authority of the ordained office.

Response: Claim the Power of Call

We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to women as freely as to men. If you ask me what offices they may fill, I reply -- any. I do not care what case you put; let them be sea captains, if you will.

~Margaret Fuller¹⁷

Ministry

Nineteenth-century America was marked with great economic change resulting from Industrialization, with unprecedented economic growth and population expansion. Entrepreneurs in steel (Andrew Carnegie), oil (John D. Rockefeller) and railroads (Cornelius Vanderbilt) made millions, establishing the U.S. economy as the largest and richest in the world. This “Gilded Age” was an era of enormous economic wealth for some and devastating poverty for others.¹⁸ The rapid industrial growth of northeastern cities resulted in corruption and social ills. Chiefly in response to the material excesses and extreme poverty, reform organizations were created. Throughout her ministry, Florence Randolph served as a committed suffragist, temperance worker, missionary, lecturer, and organizer of efforts toward the betterment of humanity, particularly to expand opportunities for women and to eliminate racism and elevate her race.¹⁹

Still, her primary occupation was that of church pastor and preacher. Seeking to prove herself as an ordained elder worthy of the authority of a pulpit in a mainline denominational church, Randolph’s early ministry was marked by sacrifice, suffering, and success. For the sake of her call, from 1897-1909, she worked as an itinerant preacher without a salary in order to help small dying churches throughout New York and New Jersey who could not afford to pay her. After Randolph would help the church become financially solvent again, she was replaced by a

¹⁶ See Ibid.

¹⁷ “Margaret Fuller, American writer, journalist, and philosopher, was part of the Transcendentalist circle. Margaret Fuller’s “conversations” encouraged the women of Boston to develop their intellectual capacities. In 1845 Margaret Fuller published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, now considered an early feminist classic.” (about.com women’s history, accessed 4-13-12).

¹⁸ The term “Gilded Age” was coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their book, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873). The term comes from Shakespeare: “To gild refined gold, to paint the lily... is wasteful and ridiculous excess.” John D. Buenker and Joseph Buenker, *Encyclopedia of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe Reference, 2005). John D. Buenker, *The Gilded Age and Progressive Era, 1877-1920*, Sources of the American Tradition (Acton, MA: Copley Pub., 2002).

¹⁹ Randolph was the “founder and first president of the New Jersey Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, a member of the executive board of the New Jersey State Suffrage Association, chaplain of the Northeastern Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, and chairman of the regional department of the NACW. She served as president of the New Jersey AME Zion Women’s Home and Foreign Missionary Society...and Women’s Christian Temperance Union organizer and lecturer.” Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 106.

“nice young man” whom they would pay; and then she would be reassigned to another poor problem church.

Before Randolph was born, two women had been ordained in the Protestant church. Antoinette Brown was ordained a minister by the Congregational Church of South Butler, New York in 1853. Ten years later, Olympia Brown was ordained by the Universalist Church. Despite the historical precedent of female ordinations, women who felt called to be pastors had to prove the authenticity of their call by demonstrating their preaching effectiveness in order for their inward call to be fully endorsed by the ordaining body of the church. After much struggle and sacrifice, Florence Spearing Randolph demonstrated her preaching gifts and their efficacy. She became one of first women ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church, the first black denomination to grant women suffrage (1876) and full clergy rights (1894).

While most women of the nineteenth century continued to preach as evangelists, itinerants or missionaries, what distinguished Randolph from the relatively few ordained female preachers at the time was that she preached from a church pulpit, with the full authority of the office of minister. Her last “problem church” actually became her “crowning achievement;” she served as minister of Wallace Chapel AME Zion Church in Summit, New Jersey for twenty-one years, and as pastor emeritus until her death at the age of 85 in 1951.²⁰ In many respects, Randolph was a pioneer, “expanding opportunities for women in the church through her achievements.”²¹ With the authority of the ordained office, Randolph preached a gospel of justice and love, with a focus on taboo topics of gender and racial equality, summoning all to answer the call to make a better world.

Strategy and Tactics

Given the seemingly fixed dictates of social convention, Randolph adopted the technique of the time, “fighting fiercely and furiously” in her public attacks on racism, sexism and colonialism.²² Although her public presence was strong and direct as she worked on behalf of women’s suffrage and temperance, she was accepted by many men because of her feminine demeanor. Says one reporter for the *New York Age* (1905): “Her sermons, lectures and public addresses are all the more attractive and impressive because of the modest womanly manner in which they are delivered. In the pulpit, or on the platform, she is always a woman, and when she speaks [she] has something to say.”²³ This public persona served her well throughout her career. Her radical claims were wrapped in modesty. Randolph was respectful of the established authority. She did not seek to overthrow the authority, but to simply enlarge the scope of authority to include women. Hers was not a revolutionary as much as a reform movement. Her tactics included dressing as a woman and showing respect for the existing authority. Once she was accepted as an insider, she used her voice and authority to advocate change.

To counter the institutional resistance to her call to preach, Randolph sought to “adjudicate the oppressive tendencies as well as the liberating possibilities inscribed in the biblical texts.”²⁴ In a culture in which the institutional church and its normative biblical

²⁰ Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, 101, 05.

²¹ Bettye Collier-Thomas, “Minister and Feminist Reformer: The Life of Florence Spearing Randolph” in Weisenfeld and Newman, *This Far by Faith : Readings in African-American Women's Religious Biography*, 181.

²² *Ibid.*, 180.

²³ “The Rev. Mrs. Florence Randolph, Evangelist,” *New York Age*, Aug. 31, 1905”, Randolph Collection, in Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, 106.

²⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways : Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 177.

interpretation had authority, she demonstrated the value and purpose of the biblical witness in the contemporary struggle for liberation and justice for all God's children. In her pulpit rhetoric, her strategies included: using her public voice to speak truth to the powers of the church;²⁵ utilizing tactics that seemed to conform, but claimed agency to transform taboo;²⁶ re-inhabiting authoritative tropes²⁷ and re-scripting women's ecclesial roles;²⁸ engaging in a conversational rhetoric that was invitational and communal;²⁹ and re-constructing false perceptions of call with an alternative narrative of female preachers that she embodied in the pulpit, preaching a liberating word.

Question of Voice (as a Public Preacher)

In nineteenth-century America, the era of religious revival sparked the rise of evangelical Christianity, and Christian preachers had a powerful voice that effectively shaped world views based on biblical and theological preaching. Sermons were marked by important characteristics: attention to the beauty and immanence of God; concern for the common people to make them better; and historical-critical biblical interpretation. The significance of such preaching was that it "furnished the thoughts and words from which a generation was able to construct their reality socially and thus to articulate for themselves the meaning of the new world in which they were living."³⁰

Horace Bushnell, Henry Ward Beecher, and Phillips Brooks all preached such sermons, especially naming the social problems they saw, such as slavery and the status of women. However, O.C. Edwards notes, "they were too involved in the rise of middle-class Victorian culture and an urban, industrial economy to identify the characteristic evils they entailed. It remained for the next two generations of preachers to help their congregations understand that these new social and economic arrangements had spawned human suffering that Christian conscience could not tolerate."³¹

By the 1870s, when America entered the "Gilded Age," the gap between the rich and poor widened, and social ills worsened, especially in cities where the living conditions for the poor were deplorable. As social reform organizations were created to address the needs of those without power or public voice, churches began to see their role in making the world better, and preachers began to proclaim a gospel with a call to put faith in action. Despite their good words and faithful ministries, the preachers of the Social Gospel (including Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch) have been criticized by later generations, particularly for their lack of attention to the whole range of social problems, especially concerning the issues of gender and

²⁵ Turner and Hudson, *Saved from Silence : Finding Women's Voice in Preaching*. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers : An Ethic of Preaching*.

²⁶ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*; Armour and St. Ville, *Bodily Citations : Religion and Judith Butler*. McCullough, "Her Preaching Body a Qualitative Study of Agency, Meaning and Proclamation in Contemporary Female Preachers."

²⁷ Saba Mahmood, "Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject," in Armour and St. Ville, *Bodily Citations : Religion and Judith Butler*, 180.

²⁸ Elaine J. Lawless, *Women Preaching Revolution: Calling for Connection in a Disconnected Time*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

²⁹ Donawerth, *Conversational Rhetoric : The Rise and Fall of a Women's Tradition, 1600-1900*.

³⁰ Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, 637.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 648.

race. Francis Willard was a venerable advocate of the Social Gospel who, in written and spoken rhetoric, argued for women preachers. As a white woman, however, she did not attend to the issue of race.

Black women preachers were able to perceive the contours of the socio-economic landscape that troubled the cause of African Americans. In “True to Our God: African American Women as Christian Activists in Rochester, New York,” Ingrid Overacker names the church’s role in confronting this evil:

Racism creates oppressive institutions and discriminatory practices that interfere with the African American response to God by limiting the ability of people to fulfill their human potential and therefore call. It is therefore the responsibility of African American Christians to create communities in which African American women, men, and children can learn who they are as God’s children and what they are capable of as individual human beings so that they can answer God’s call. It is the responsibility of the church to provide a setting for that community.³²

In the formation of such a community where all Christians can answer God’s call, preaching with compelling and effective pulpit rhetoric is essential.

Florence Spearing Randolph lived during the time of the “Gilded Age” and the “Social Gospel” movement. As a woman, her work in reform organizations were accepted and welcomed without question. But, her presence and authority in the pulpit were challenged. In response, she used her prophetic vision and homiletic voice to claim the power of the pulpit.

Response: Claim the Power of the Pulpit

*But God, with whom, there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, in His wonderful plan of salvation has called and chosen men and women according to His divine will as laborers together with Him for the salvation of the world.*³³
~Florence Spearing Randolph, “Antipathy to Women Preachers”

As a church pastor preaching weekly, Florence Spearing Randolph was engaged in the practice of writing sermons. Homileticians describe the four characteristics of the genre of sermon as: a truth claim for a certain time to a certain congregation, attention to the Biblical text, reflection on theological doctrines, and applications to the cultural context.³⁴ When preachers construct sermons, they seek to communicate with intentionality and clarity. Attention to each of the four characteristics increases the chances that the sermon will say what the preacher wants to say, and more importantly, improve the likelihood that the listeners will hear what the preacher intends for them to hear. Pastor Randolph’s sermons made truth claims by appealing to the authority of the Bible, her evangelical theology and the particular context of her community of hearers.

³² Ingrid Overacker as quoted by Edwards, Wendy J. Deichmann and Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, eds. *Gender and the Social Gospel*. (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 2003), 204..

³³ Florence Spearing Randolph, "Antipathy to Women Preachers" (ca. 1930), in Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, 127.

³⁴ John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

The sermon genre employed by Florence Randolph was pulpit rhetoric. What makes a sermon a rhetorical act is that it “creates a message whose shape and form, beginning and end, are stamped on it by a human author with a goal for the audience.”³⁵ Pulpit rhetoric, then, creates a message that is truthful, Biblical, theological, and cultural, and with a specific goal. The goal or “function” is what the preacher intends for the sermon to do, for example: to teach, to challenge, to inspire, to comfort, to reassure, or to help.³⁶ Randolph was a teacher and a preacher, an evangelist and a pastor. With skillful exegesis of Scripture, explication of theology, and familiarity with her congregation and the events of the world, Randolph shaped a message that called her listeners to inward reflection and also to outward practices of justice and mercy.

Randolph made good use of her privileged pulpit position to summon those in power to use their privileged voice for good. On Race Relations Sunday (February 14, 1941), Randolph preached “If I Were White,” challenging whites to practice their faith: “If I were white and believed in God, in His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Bible, I would speak in no uncertain words against Race Prejudice, Hate, Oppression, and Injustice.”³⁷ Week after week over the length of her pastoral ministry, Randolph courageously claimed the power of the pulpit to preach a relevant and transformative word.

The rhetoric of one specific sermon addresses most clearly the question of women’s call to preach: “Antipathy to Women Preachers” (1930). This sermon not only contains the basic characteristics of a sermon (truth, Bible, theology and culture), but it also functions as a rhetorical act with the goal of changing the way people see things in regard to the taboo of women preaching.

In this sermon, Randolph engages a three-part rhetorical strategy. First, she names the taboo. She confesses, “There always has been and still is great antipathy to women preachers.”³⁸ She does not dismiss it or sugar-coat it but names it for what it is: antipathy. In so doing, she calls out all those who would try to hide their aversion behind their chivalrous claim to protect women and their virtuous nature, leading them, sweetly but sternly, away from the pulpit and back into the house.

Second, she argues biblically, so as to end debate over women preaching, using all the power of the pulpit to strongly challenge the way it has always been with the way God intended it to be: “But, God, with whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, in His wonderful plan of salvation has called and chosen men and women according to His divine will as laborers together with Him for the salvation of the world.”³⁹ Despite the conventional way of seeing women as domestic servants, she corrects the popular perception with a biblical worldview, providing numerous examples of women such as Miriam, Hagar, and Deborah, playing an active role as leaders and liberators.

Finally, she summons women to courageously and faithfully answer their call. The sermon recounts the call and charge to the women at the tomb who became witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection to go and preach the first gospel sermon without fear, because it is Christ himself who commissioned the women. Randolph names the women at the tomb the “first preachers of

³⁵ Campbell, *The Rhetorical Act*, 7.

³⁶ For more on “focus and function” of the sermon, see Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 99-116.

³⁷ Florence Spearing Randolph, “If I Were White” (ca. 1941), in Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, 129.

³⁸ Note how she uses antipathy, from Greek anti-pathos, when pathos is used by Aristotle to describe preacher’s appeals to listener’s emotions.

³⁹ Florence Spearing Randolph, “Antipathy to Women Preachers” (ca. 1930), in Collier-Thomas, 127.

the gospel.” She reminds listeners of Jesus’ words to the women: “Go quickly and take the glad news, preach the first gospel sermon, take the message.”⁴⁰ Clearly and cleverly, Randolph encourages women who are called to preach today to fear not, because God is in the call and in the work to which they are called. She reminds them that, just like the first women at the tomb, they are called by God, commissioned by Christ, and needed by the church. The message of the sermon then is: If you are called by God, then you must not fear, but you must answer the call to preach.

Conclusion

Taboos are difficult to overcome. In the nineteenth-century American, social convention and church canon presented obstacles to women inhabiting the pulpit. Women preaching was taboo. In order to effect change, women had to employ rhetoric in the political, social, and especially the religious realm. Powerful words in poignant rhetoric was the most effective weapon for all women—and continues to be so today in order to claim their right to place, authority, and voice.

Florence Spearing Randolph responded to the questions of her place as a southern black woman, her authority as an ordained minister, and her voice as a public preacher by claiming the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of her call, and the power of the pulpit. Given the seemingly fixed dictates of social convention, Randolph fought fiercely and furiously in her public attacks on racism, sexism and colonialism. With the authority of the ordained office, Randolph preached a gospel of justice and love, with a focus on taboo topics of gender and racial equality, summoning all to answer the call to make a better world for all of God’s people.

⁴⁰ Ibid.