

## ONE YELLOW SERMON

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### A Look Back

In 2015 I published an autobiographical essay in *Homiletic* as a case study to raise questions about the meaningfulness of ritual in the face of human suffering and the difficulty of planning and preaching for interreligious worship. I recounted the occasion of my maternal grandfather's funeral and its peculiarities with regard to balancing the incorporation of Chinese Mandarin and Buddhist elements into a United Methodist funeral liturgy. The essay contained a copy of my grandfather's funeral liturgy as crafted by me. The liturgy included "Asian elements" such as readings from Psalm 23 and the Amitabha and Heart Sutras in Mandarin and English translation. In the article, I reflected upon my liturgical decision-making and the service itself in retrospect by appealing to Don Seaman, John McClure, and Tom Long to talk about how imperfect ritual could still maintain integrity as a movement of solidarity with the Other as constituted by humanity and the Other as an indication of God.

### Summary of Seaman, Long, and McClure

I explained how Seaman saw the Levinasian concept of "useless suffering" through the faithfulness of Holocaust Ghetto Rabbi Kalonymos Shapira (1889 – 1943) who continued to preach and perform priestly practices including the sharing of *tish* and the study of Torah even after losing his only son, his daughter-in-law, his brother's wife, and his mother following the invasion of Poland in 1939. I found Seaman's overarching argument that ritual could not be reduced to relieving insufferable suffering a provocative departure point for suggesting that Shapira was able to continue in his ordained office because God abided with him in his tragic circumstances. In a June 27, 1942 *derashah*, Shapira writes, "For this reason everything a Jewish person says or does is, at the level of his inner soul, directed to God. For his soul knows that there is nothing beside Him, that all is divinity; so whatever the soul does or says is directed to him." I then transitioned from the theological anchor so apparent in Shapira's own explanation of his "useless suffering" toward insights from *Otherwise Preaching*, where McClure presents a homiletic ethic and anthropology where self-erasure and commitment to recognizing and serving others through our preaching become primary ways in which the totality of Infinity becomes perceivable. In an attempt to link the specificities of Christian theology with Long in *Accompany Them with Singing* provides more accessible Christian language to describe that Infinity as God, and as I circled back to my grandfather's funeral (which as needs to be mentioned was in no ways comparable to the circumstances of Shapira), I suggested that a healing from God arrived in spite of our insufficient attempts to address grief that exceeds categories of meaning and facilitate multicultural ritual with theological integrity.

### Pó Pó's Sermon

In April 2016, my maternal grandmother passed away. Below, I present the sermon that I preached at her funeral. I examine it as an artifact to add another dimension to my engagement with the liturgy of my grandfather's (and her husband's) service, where I explored the

complexities of interreligious worship and the concept of “useless suffering.” In the following pages, I want to bring the sermon into conversation the “spiral-form sermon” structure devised by Eunjoo Mary Kim in *Preaching the Presence of God* to explore how my message constitutes Asian American preaching.<sup>1</sup> I also want to raise questions about intercultural proclamation and Asian American identity by appealing to my sermon as a departure point for homiletic considerations that extend beyond the particularities of my grandmother’s service and my family circumstances. I hope to continue conversation about the complexities of interreligious and intercultural worship, with particular attention to homiletic craft.

### **Eunjoo Mary Kim**

Kim describes the spiral-form sermon as an indirect form of preaching that draws stories and anecdotes from the preacher’s Asian American experience as a way of building harmony with listeners and leading them to a focal spiritual point as guided by the Holy Spirit. Each movement in the sermon operates like a spiral cycle that winds down using “indirect, holistic, conversational, and meditative” elements as inductive levels that lead to an eschatologically-oriented conclusion involving “self-realization” and “action” as approached by engagement with narration of Asian American identity.<sup>2</sup> At first glance, Kim’s spiral-form sermon looks like another permutation of inductive preaching as expanded and finessed by Fred Craddock’s *As One Without Authority*.<sup>3</sup> The “Asian-Americanness” of her method, she suggests, becomes most apparent in what she describes as the dialogical character of the sermon and the particular content of the stories and anecdotes. Below I examine the stories and anecdotes that give the message of my grandmother’s funeral a distinctive Asian American character, and weigh whether the dialogical mood Kim sees as idiomatic of Asian American preaching within the spiral-form sermon also took place during my preaching.

### **The context**

The funeral was held in a funeral home along a state highway in San Jose, California. Two funeral service workers (one white male and a female of color) supervised the occasion and helped with details including help with audio, flower arrangements, and coaches for the trip to the burial site. I presided. Around thirty people attended and with the exception of a handful of persons who were friends or co-workers with my relatives, the rest were family. The burial took place after the funeral service in a Catholic cemetery about 15 miles away.

### **The Sermon**

Title: “Qi shui and Ping guo zhi and Fan qie chao dan”

[*Soda and Apple Juice and Scrambled Eggs and Tomato Reduction*]

#### **Paragraph or “cycle” 1**

**In my earliest memories with Pó-Pó [a mandarin designation for maternal grandmother] I remember running around the kitchen table when Gong Gong [a mandarin designation for maternal grandfather] and she lived on Leyland Park Drive. I always loved visiting them in California. I loved that house because it had**

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<sup>1</sup> Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God: A Homiletic from an Asian American Perspective* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God*, 123-26.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority, revised edition* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001).

stairs and two stories. And I got used to the aroma of moth balls wafting throughout. I'd do whatever little kids do in their grandparents' kitchen. I'd scurry and skip, hide under the table and squat beside chairs. Looking through glass sliding doors that led to the deck in the back yard, I'd study Gong Gong smoking a cigarette and pruning his roses. Then, when I was almost hypnotized, I'd hear, "Lao San!"<sup>4</sup> Her voice was loving, but loud, like the horns that blare outside of my apartment in Manhattan today.

### Paragraph or cycle 2

**"Ni yao bu yao qi-shui [Would you like a soda]? Wo hai yo ping-guo zhi [I also have apple juice]. Ni e ma [Are you hungry]? Wo gay ni fan qie chao dan [I can offer you tomato and egg reduction]. I'm a mater-hater, but I couldn't get enough of her scrambled eggs and tomato reduction (fan qie chao dan). She also made this mean tofu and ground pork soufflé (hongshao dofu).<sup>5</sup> I'd blink, smile, and nod. And I'd eat. I was always eating, and it was magical. In the morning it was dou jiang [soy-bean milk] and you-tiao [fried dough stick]. The rest of the day it was experiencing one Chinese delicacy after another for the first time. The food wasn't the only thing new. I learned that qi shui meant sprite and ping-guo zhi meant apple juice. I learned dou jiang long before I knew how to say "soy milk." I loved visiting Pó Pó, because it was new every time.**

### Paragraph or cycle 3

Even now, though I may never set foot inside that Leyland Park house again, though Gong Gong quit smoking long ago and I will never see him cut a rose again, and though the Chinese food I eat most often is made by strangers in restaurants, and I don't get as excited as I used to about visiting California (no offense, but I'm true to the South and East Coast), **I'm still discovering something new from my Pó Pó. I just learned that her name was Liao Fong Tsai.**

**I know her name. I can call her name like she did mine. I also just learned my Ah-ma's name (Liu zhang xiu zi). She passed away only a few weeks ago. She was as much of a wizard in loving me as Pó Pó was.**

### Paragraph or cycle 4

In the Gospel of John, chapter 10, Jesus describes himself as a shepherd who calls his sheep by name to enter a gate that leads to a safe pasture where life is lived abundantly, like Pó Pó calling me by name, "Lao San!," "Zi-ping!"<sup>6</sup> and leading me to see and experience life in more ways than I could possibly imagine.

### Paragraph or cycle 5

And we can all remember her calling our names, right? Uncle Rick and Aunt Ching Ching, Mom and Dad, Jiu ma [eldest aunt] and Da jiu jiu [eldest uncle], Xiao jiu jiu [youngest uncle] and gway wen fay [younges, and chien gwo gieh. Can you hear her?

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<sup>4</sup> Lao San is an identifier for the third son of a family.

<sup>5</sup> This is actually a mistranslation that will be discussed later in the essay.

<sup>6</sup> Zi-ping is my "Chinese first name."

Can you feel the sound and fury of her voice? **That sounds something like what the Gospel of John is describing.**

### **Paragraph or cycle 6**

Jesus calls his sheep by name, and the writer of John hopes that hearers of his message will see themselves as those sheep. Like Pó Pó, Jesus calls us by name. Only death does not silence him. And neither do death nor the distractions of this life prevent us from hearing him. Instead, he promises to lead us to a place where death, and crying, and pain will be no more. Like my childhood with Pó Pó, everything is new when we receive the love and mercy that he offers, even if we cannot quite comprehend what he means by those things. “Come,” he calls to us. “Come.” The Spirit says. “Come.” Jesus offers everlasting life to us right now on earth as it is in heaven. Like Jesus, Pó Pó gave me a glimpse of that kind of love that lasts forever in her affection when I was a kid. I can still hear her voice and the call of Christ as clearly today, even though she’s gone. Can you? Amen.

### **Sermon Analysis**

In paragraph or cycle 1, I begin with narrative self-disclosure. Most of the funeral attendees are relatives while a handful of those in attendance are family friends. Most will remember the house of my grandmother to which I refer. Therefore, I am inviting the audience on a trip down memory lane.

With respect to Kim’s spiral-form sermon homiletic, the first anecdote about playing in my grandparents’ home is not exceptional. There is nothing particularly Asian American nor “American American” about it, except perhaps that I locate the house in California. The interjection of my grandmother calling for me – Lao San! – in the final sentence, however, signals that the sermon has a particular cultural flavor. The mention of my grandmother calling me also lines up with what Kim describes as “indirect communication.” By indirection communication, Kim describes a style of preaching that “leads them [listeners] to a realization of truth” by intimation “rather than to the accumulation of information.”<sup>7</sup> I introduce a familiar exchange that my relatives and other audience members would be able to easily imagine and hear, clairaudiently – a grandmother calling her grandson – as an opening to make way for a concluding remark about the mystery of Jesus calling us at the sermon’s conclusion.

In paragraph or cycle 2 the bilingual features of the sermon become more pronounced. I add more memories of exchanges in Mandarin because English was not her first language and because English is not the first language for many of the funeral attendees. My grandmother’s life began in a village of southern prefecture Zhejiang, China. Her mother tongue is Wenzhounese, a dialect of Wenzhou, China. Born in Jackson, Mississippi, I learned English with a southern accent. Mandarin is therefore ironically and actually not the first language for either one of us. Yet in her kitchen, our exchanges articulated the multiplicity of Asian American identity.

I introduce memories of food because the table is a locus of household bonding within Chinese families, as it is in so many other cultures. Yet in the typical grandmother and grandson interactions here, where food items are shared and named for the first time, I am also implying something cross-culturally and theologically significant in the way that I relay the bilingual nature of those encounters. I am implying something about how the rhythm and tonality of the

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<sup>7</sup> Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God*, 121.

exchanges with my grandmother say something about who she and I were with one another, and also who we as a gathered assembly are in the current time during a service where we celebrate her life and mourn her death.

While soda and apple juice are fairly common household beverages, my recollection of the scrambled eggs and tomato reduction and the tofu casserole describe particular Taiwanese dishes that my grandmother made with culinary expertise. Yet more profoundly for my listeners, I am recalling the timbre, pitch, and rhythm of her voice with the hope that the audience also hears my grandmother. They may not recall hearing her ask if they would like apple juice or scrambled eggs and tomato reduction (though my brothers and cousins probably do). Yet as I share my memories of my grandmother's voice, I intend for the audience to hear who she was for them, and how their identities are linked to the life she lived, and how even in her death, something about what we all heard in her voice and saw in her life still speaks to us now. The continuity of her voice and questions about its meaning operate as mnemonic and conceptual aids to consider cosmic questions that I will later pose about Christ.

In *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics*, Perry Link muses upon the rhythmic qualities of Chinese language as it is used in civic and political contexts, with some attention to everyday speech. Perry notes how 2+2 and 1, 1-2, 1-2-3 syllabic patterns appear upon street signs, slogans, and salutations. Link has his hunches about how Mandarin meter contributes to elements of meaning like communal, cultural, and informational memorability, syntactical completeness, organization of labor, and intent of the speaker. Yet he also admits that it is difficult to specify what the meaning of spoken meter is, like trying to make sense of what metered speaking means in rhythmic expressions of language, such as poetry.<sup>8</sup> Link also suggests, though he writes about this negatively, that meter in language can facilitate separation from the "harsh world" and lead to consciousness of "transcendence, sublimity, and religious experience."<sup>9</sup> A transcendental implication is operative within the memories I share of my grandmother's voice.

For paragraph or cycle 3 I retrieve the memories of my grandmother's home and her cuisine and pivot them toward how I learned my grandmother's name. I mention also my paternal grandmother who passed away a few weeks earlier. I had just learned both of their first names following their deaths. While that may surprise some readers, it is not unusual for Asian Americans to lack that knowledge. In *Chineseness Across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States*, Andrea Louie, in a study of third-generation Chinese Americans finds the frequent dilemma of a "cultural incompleteness" amongst her participants. She recounts how a respondent named Susan knew of the English version of her grandmother's name because she often visited her, but did not know the names of her paternal grandfather or "any of her great-grandparents' names."<sup>10</sup> Rather than feel embarrassment or shame regarding my cultural incompleteness, I highlight that missing knowledge in the sermon and use it to propel the theme of "learning what is new" from my grandmother. That additional framing of

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<sup>8</sup> Perry Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013), 82–85.

<sup>9</sup> Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese*, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Andrea Louie, *Chineseness Across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), 110. A popular writing about this phenomenon can also be found at Jeanette Ng, "So I Don't Know My Grandmother's First Name," *The Odyssey*, June 7, 2016. <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/dont-know-grandmothers-first-name> Though Louie's study involves a third-generation Chinese American woman, I am considered first or second-generation as the first generation of my family line born in the United States.

newness is also a move of indirection that foreshadows the eschatological point I will make at the end of the sermon.

In paragraph or cycle 4 I make a transition to the gospel. Most of my relatives are culturally Buddhist. They would have little familiarity with the gospel of John. I chose the passage because it was the assigned lectionary reading for the following Sunday. I made the connection between Jesus and Pó Pó as an act of homiletic inculturation. I wanted to provide the attendees a foothold for understanding who Christ is as one who summons us.

In paragraph or cycle 5 Because many of the attendees were children of the deceased they would also be able to here Po Po calling them and perhaps that sonic memory might also help them imagine the calling of Jesus. Again, in this section, I am trying to mine meaning not only from the cross cultural exchange taking place in the mandarin calls of my grandmother, but also from the recollected sound of her voice. I want the audience to connect the sound of her voice to a theological claim that I am making. With similarity to how Link describes his analysis of metered Mandarin having the capacity to enable connection from this world to a transcendent realm, I am drawing upon the speech of my deceased grandmother to bring closer into earshot for my relatives and family friends the summoning of God.

For paragraph or cycle 6 I try to connect the characters hearing the voice of Jesus in the gospel of John to those who are in attendance at the funeral. I also contrast the call of Jesus, which continues eternally, with the voice of Pó Pó that we can now only remember following her death. I speak about how death and mourning do not drown out the call of Jesus. I refer back to my childhood memories and make a connection to the renewal that Jesus offers. I parallel the voice of Jesus with the voice of Pó Pó in order to help the attendees conceive of what the voice of Jesus sounds like. I make a slight eschatological move by mentioning the comfort that Jesus offers.

It is possible to understand the last movement in my sermon within the “consensus-oriented conversation” homiletic technique as outlined by Kim.<sup>11</sup> As Kim writes, “The preacher and listeners seek and deepen the meaning of the sermon and reflect on their communal spiritual journey in light of the Christian eschatological perspective” (125). Kim describes the consensus technique as a form of preaching that attempts to establish a “harmonious mood” so as to guide listeners into a mutual contemplation of a theological, or to use Kim’s descriptor, spiritual insight. Because the funeral attendees are mostly family, we already have a bond established. Though my family can in fact be quite unharmonious in our behavior toward one another, the last paragraph here does create invitational space for listeners to consider how Jesus calls (as depicted in the gospel of John) and whether that call can be heard within everyday life.

## **Conclusion**

Some readers may pause at the idea of those relatives of mine who are culturally Buddhist (incidentally, some are nominally Christian) hearing a message about the calling of Christ. As an ordained United Methodist minister (Elder) and an assistant professor of worship and preaching, I structured the content of the sermon the way that I did in order to maintain theological integrity with respect to theological outlook, but also with an attempt to maintain hospitality and a point of connection for listeners who may believe differently than I do.

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<sup>11</sup> Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999), 118ff.

## Kibria

Others may also question the methodology of this essay in general. Autobiographical and biographical investigation, however, has been a hallmark of Asian American studies.<sup>12</sup> Still, self-examination with regard to intellectual exploration of Asian American identity does have its limitations. One major one is wrestling with the expectation of cultural authenticity. I track my grandmother's funeral sermon alongside an Asian American homiletic from Kim and also highlight bilingual and dietary differences to distinguish the message as Asian American. Yet what is to be made of an expectation that an Asian American sermon ought to demonstrate how Asian American it is by appealing to such devices?

Sociologist Nazli Kibria borrows from Katherine Weston to describe that kind of cultural expectation or assumption as an obsession in U.S. culture with authenticity. One must prove their ethnic or cultural knowledge. Incidentally, I did not do so flawlessly. I mistakenly translate one food item in the sermon. In paragraph or cycle 2, what I called "*hong sao dofi*" -- the steamed egg and pork -- is actually "zhurou jidan." The mistranslation resulted as a miscommunication between my relatives and me in the preparation of the sermon. The error also shows the humorous complexity of sermon preparation between Asian American generations. What is problematic is that the ascription of authenticity upon the identity of another is often misguided and functions more like a stereotype placed upon the person that is based upon physical looks.<sup>13</sup> Of course the misplaced and misidentified expectation of ethnic authenticity also becomes "fertile ground for racial identity play."<sup>14</sup> The misidentification can be used strategically and politically or opened up to show the diversity of Asian American identity, or in this case the diversity of preaching beyond the racial binarism usually found in North American homiletics.

## Chang

Another limitation is the fixation upon identity as a foundation for American studies. As Asian American literature scholar Juliana Chang writes in "Interpreting Asian American Identity and Subjectivity," Asian Americans embody an identity crisis.<sup>15</sup> Chang shows how three seemingly different monographs in Asian American literature -- Tina Chen's *Double Agency, Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture*, Jennifer Ann Ho's *Consumption and*

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<sup>12</sup> Consider for example the following titles: Arar Han and John Hsu, *Asian American X* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2004). Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2014). Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Kibria, *Becoming Asian American*, 92. Kibria writes:

Foreignness" not only cast doubt upon one's membership and belonging as American, it also marked the operation of race as an identity marker by signaling *authentic ethnicity*. That is, the dominant society assumes that second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans, as "foreigners," have ties to a community and culture that is either located or rooted well outside the United States. These ties are assumed to be strong and genuine in character—authentic rather than contrived or fake. This assumption reflects what Weston (1995, 90) has called "a cultural preoccupation with authenticity in U.S. life."

See Katherine Weston, "Forever is a Long Time Romancing the Real in Gay Kin Ideologies" in *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis*, ed. Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), 90.

<sup>14</sup> Kibria, *Becoming Asian American*, 94.

<sup>15</sup> Juliana Chang, "Interpreting Asian American Identity and Subjectivity" in *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 53 (4), Winter 2007: 867-75.

*Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels*, and Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi's edited volume, *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature* all focus upon questions of identity. Yet for Chang, the truth of identities "are always partly fictions of our own devising." In the light of her concern, my sermon above can be seen as both an artifact of Asian American identity and a construction of it.

Chang suggests that Asian American writing too focused upon the struggle between "Asian cultural tradition" and "American cultural modernity" may be oversimplifying and obscuring the fact that Asian Americans are racially marked as "nonbelonging to America."<sup>16</sup> That "nonbelonging" encompasses more than self-reflection, but also the need to understand and "interpret the trope of the Asian American identity conflict as a symptom of the contradictions and injustices of race and the US nation."<sup>17</sup> Transposing her thoughts about literature to homiletics, my sermon analysis is only a talking point within a broader conversation which must involve interrogations of the self and family and community, as well as experiences of migration, socio-economic mobility, political action, racial categorization, and the history of racism within and beyond the U.S. nation state.

Besides the gravitational pull of self-reflection, what also complicates widening the lens for thinking about what constitutes Asian American preaching is an evolution from "Yellow Peril" to "model minority" in Asian American culture. That movement complicates the positionality of many Asian Americans with regard to American racism. Anti-Asian prejudice of course still exists in the "achievement paradox" with regard to admission in elite universities, the exoticism of Asian American females, the limited attention to queer of color concerns from Asian American communities, and racism against Asian American males is arguably one of the most tolerated forms of prejudice in the United States. But the "honorary whiteness" or "white but not quite" status given to many Asian Americans makes pinpointing oppression not only more slippery but also a distinctive homiletic style.<sup>18</sup> Is much of Asian American preaching simply a variation of white Anglo-Saxon protestant proclamation with some appeal to bilingual and cross cultural anecdotes peppered in here and there to outline features of Asian American preaching?

It's hard to say. The question of variation could also be posed to canonized forms of preaching that have extensive literature behind them. Take for example, Black preaching. The slave ships of Charleston carried a significant population of Africans with a Kongolese Christianity spanning more than two centuries. Yet many more of the enslaved were converted to Christianity as part of an elaborate outworking of European colonialism in the new world that incentivized Christianization with the dangling possibilities of manumission.<sup>19</sup> Or consider Latino/a homiletics. Groups such as the Franciscans and Dominicans in the sixteenth century demonized indigenous religious practices like human sacrifice in order to suppress local religions

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<sup>16</sup> Chang, "Interpreting Asian American identity and Subjectivity," 875.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 875.

<sup>18</sup> For an introduction to the discrimination and exceptionalism of Asian American persons in the United States and our role as agents of empire, see David K. Yoo and Eiichuro Azuma, *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History* (New York: NY: Oxford UP, 2016), especially pgs. 6-7 and chapters such as "Empire and War in Asian America History" by Simeon Man, 253-66 and "Race, "Space, and Place in Asian American Urban History" by Scott Kurashige, 373-89.

<sup>19</sup> Sylvester Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (New York, NY: Cambridge UP, 2015), 129 - 133.



in Mexico and establish Catholic rule.<sup>20</sup> We could also keep going back in time to destabilize the very notion of white preaching. In any case, we still need to develop more careful methodologies for sermon design for the multitude of identities who are people of God. We still need to intellectually support particular modes of preaching for particular people.

But is preaching as we now know it at its root a white thing? Kim is right to diagnose the need for Asian American preachers to develop a new homiletical approach appropriate for their sociocultural contexts. I still propose that my grandmother's funeral sermon represents one attempt at a different approach. Yet do we also need to reconsider the historical and cultural grounds and biases supporting our differentiated homiletic voices? Do we also need more serious scholarly inquiry into what we hold in common – a confounding and unifying call from God?

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<sup>20</sup> Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2013, 109-11.