

Preaching outside the box

Donyelle McCray takes readers on a tour of the edges of homiletics, exploring Black Americans' gospel proclamation in various forms.

by [Andrew Wymer](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue
Published on October 14, 2025

In Review



Is It a Sermon?

Art, Activism, and Genre Fluidity in African American Preaching

By Donyelle McCray
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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

In a world beset by war, genocide, systemic discrimination, and climate catastrophe, we need good news. Donyelle McCray, who teaches homiletics at Yale Divinity School, offers the opportunity to hear and see the embodiment of good news emanating from marginalized voices—especially Black women, laypeople, artists, and activists. In her work, McCray invites us to be ever curious, critical listeners for the whispers of the Holy Spirit, to look and listen beyond the dominant boundaries of what constitutes a sermon and who can be a preacher. She critiques how restricted and exclusive the concept of the sermon has become, with strict presumptions about when and where it should occur, who should do it, and what form it should take.

Is It a Sermon? takes readers on a tour of the edges, the “shoreline of homiletics” where Christian proclamation shares porous and fluid boundaries with other expressions of good news. Exploring the sermonic proclamation of Black American artists and activists in gospel song, quilting, dance, spirituality, and literature, McCray expands readers’ awareness of the rich legacy of Black proclamation of the gospel and stokes the imagination to consider diverse and overlaid genres in expressions other than the traditional pulpit sermon.

At these edges, McCray presents five case studies of Black artists’ proclamations, highlighting sermonic dimensions and overlaps with traditional preaching. Each case study is richly descriptive as it teases out the unique homiletic themes communicated through alternative mediums and forms. The singing of Mahalia Jackson, merging gospel song with sermonic testimony, provides a fruitful site for examining the fluid relationship of song and preaching. The quilting of Rosie Lee Tompkins and Harriet Powers, who visually interpret the scripture using texture and color, proclaims a message beyond orality and aurality. Sister Thea Bowman’s dance demonstrates a shift from cognitive to kinesthetic knowledge. Howard Thurman’s spiritual writing and practice shows a proclamation that doesn’t just talk about but leads folk to experiencing God. The literature of Toni Morrison, and in particular her creation of parables, models the integration of ancestral wisdom in proclamation.

This volume follows from a school of thought in homiletics that includes scholars such as Lis Valle-Ruiz and Chelsea Yarborough, who are pushing the boundaries of what is understood to constitute preaching. McCray’s work contributes uniquely to this conversation through its visibility, its expansive engagement of an array of art forms, and its accessibility to a broader audience. This is deeply human theology written in a winsome manner to open a range of potential readers’ awareness to deep creative and divine possibility.

By expanding our awareness of the overlap between preaching and various mediums, this work also has the possibility to fundamentally alter our definitions. What is a sermon? What is preaching? These are not the questions McCray sets out to explore in this book, but she creates ample space for readers who might wonder if there’s a cohesive center by which they can define preaching more broadly. Those who ask such questions will quickly find in the book various characteristics that open new, unexplored possibilities for how we might understand what preaching is.

Attention to power courses through McCray’s writing. There is so much at stake in who can be called to preach, whose expressions are considered sermons, and which communities’ ancestors and ways of knowing are recognized as respected sources and authorities in religious life. Whether or not an artistic expression is a sermon has significant implications for the way we think about power, authority, representation, and access. This book is crucial at a time in which an immense number of Christian churches still exclude marginalized people such as women, queer people, or disabled people from their pulpits.

This book is also crucial because the place of the church in our culture is rapidly changing. McCray offers a vision of preaching in which the allegedly stark divisions between sacred and secular are not so clear. Her vision shows that there is immense creative possibility in attending to the interplay of proclamation and culturally relevant artistic mediums.

McCray leaves readers with a haunting conclusion, in which she charts trajectories for future decolonial discourse in homiletics. Against the backdrop of White supremacist preaching practices in the United States, she offers up resources for engaging historical hybrid practices of preaching in Black American contexts and a grounding question for evaluating sermonic creativity and adaptivity: “What is it about the gospel that demands this particular expression?”

This question reverberates with me because it speaks to Black hybrid practices while also gesturing beyond them. For those of us in pulpit-centered traditions, McCray’s question has broader implications as it relates to forms, media, and ethics in our own context. What is it about the gospel that demands a Sunday morning pulpit sermon? Is there anything about the gospel that demands a sermon that is silent about racism, heterosexism, ableism, or systemic poverty?

Maybe McCray’s title question needs to be asked of sermons that never venture beyond the pulpit, sermons in congregations where one must have a dominant social identity to be ordained, or sermons that adhere strictly to traditional forms. Maybe it needs to be asked of any act of pulpit proclamation that is not deeply grounded in the pursuit of liberation: Is it a sermon?