

Preaching as Communion: The Power of the Sermon in the Black Churches of New Orleans

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Abstract

Through the word by word parsing of a sermon given in a Black church in a neighborhood in New Orleans, this paper examines the role of preaching as 'communion' in the African American Church. It further investigates the contribution of 'comfort' the buildings provide as their architectural arrangements free communicants to celebrate their identity. Finally, consideration is given to specific opportunities and problems that could arise when communicants are displaced from their built environment, as was the case during the pandemic.

The paper illustrates that through 'willingness to suspend disbelief' (as in the consumption of the body and blood of Christ) congregants are transformed by the sermon. This powerful example demonstrates that human activity occurring within an architectural setting can promote spiritual practices highly attuned to cultural and community specificity. It thereby reinvigorates the notion of 'communion' related to community and even to commodity. Architectural theorists have long determined commodity to be among the 'trinity' of excellence in architecture.¹ However, it seems that in the absence of a building, as in the pandemic, even heavily supported ritual online cannot sustain these spiritual practices.

Sermon as Communion

Communion or the celebration of the Eucharist is often considered to be the most important ritual in a Christian liturgical service. Symbolic elements and words from the story of the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples during Passover are depicted in Biblical stories, words of which are repeated in the liturgy. The Last Supper event is also depicted by artists and composers including Leonardo da Vinci and Andrew Lloyd Webber.² These have been reproduced and analyzed multiple times.

Few depictions of Jesus are to be found in the sanctuaries of the Black Churches in New Orleans. However, when images of Jesus are present, these are often depictions of the Last Supper. These interpretations of the Passover event are often found accompanied by commemorative cornerstones, plaques, and photographs of church leaders. Furthermore, in the Black Church, depictions of the Last Supper celebration often show Christ and His imperfect brothers portrayed as Black figures (see Figure 1).

The presence of Last Supper as the only images of Jesus in the Black churches of New Orleans might indicate the importance of communion. Yet, communion is not celebrated therein at every service³. It might be argued that in the Black church, the sermon is celebrated more forcefully and

¹ See Vitruvius.

² Leonardo da Vinci's painting The Last Supper was painted between 1495 and 1497. Jesus Christ Superstar was written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice in 1971.

³ Author's pre-pandemic field investigations of the architecture of 100 Black churches in New Orleans, Louisiana.

more often in the liturgy than the 'breaking of the bread'.⁴ In fact, the sermon might be considered as the 'communion point' in weekly celebrations; the crescendo that brings the people together in the church and brings the community together to support the 'spiritual work' of the congregants in a culturally specific way.⁵

As in the communion ritual which repeats the singular story of the Last Supper, in sermons, themes from the Old Testament are often relayed over and over. As the story of the Last Supper 'sets the table' for the eucharistic communion in a Christian liturgy, the preacher's sermon shares a story that is told and retold to provoke prayerfulness and the promise of action. The preacher draws upon culturally specific imagery from the Biblical story to represent triumph and redemption or forgiveness of sins. Because these stories have been told many times, the stories are understood by all.

Architectural Settings of the Sermon

In religious liturgies, stories are repeated to articulate important moments of the service. Often religious buildings also are configured to relay a story or even to allow its reenactment.⁶ Both rituals and architectural settings reflect cultural specificity in the Black church. Certain stories or themes are often repeated as the subject of sermons because they resonate with prominent events in the life of the community.

In the sermon discussed herein, the preacher analyzes the meaning of a story from the book of Samuel. Point by point he overlays the Old Testament tale with the story of a recent problem in his own community. Word by word, the sermon reveals the power of the preacher's oration to connect culture, liturgical meaning and the space of the church. The parsing of the sermon uncovers a resonance between the protected spatial 'world' of the church and locations in the Biblical text on which the sermon is based.

Through sharing the sermon, the author argues that animated by the oration which is the crescendo in the service, the church interior dematerializes. Led by the preacher's compelling discourse, congregants are taken from the precarious New Orleans neighborhood to the threshing floors of a town in the Holy Land featured in the Old Testament⁷. The threshing floor itself has multiple meanings in Biblical texts. It is the place where community gathers. It is the place where grain is harvested and chaff discarded. As such, it is a metaphor for the separation of good and evil; another major theme in communion. In this particular sermon, the ecclesiastic space is simultaneously superimposed with both Biblical city and neighborhood street corners where problematic events have occurred.

In the face of a history of struggle, the disruption of community cohesion, and the dissolution of many families, Biblical stories of redemption provide continuity.⁸ Analysis of the sermon supports the argument the architecture of the churches can both house and embody cultural memory in the community. However, it is also argued that when the architecture is removed from the human activity that occurs within, the community is in danger of dissipating as well. In the face of struggles like natural disasters, segregation and redlining, the Black church reconstituted itself. Its architecture resumed its traditional form based on liturgies. However, the pandemic raised a different set of rules. 'The church' was not simply displaced by the CoVid pandemic; the dispersion caused by social distancing and lock-down also prevented reconfiguration from

⁴ Author's fieldwork, New Orleans.

⁵ Authors fieldwork.

⁶ See Male.

⁷ II Samuel, Old Testament.

⁸ See Hubbard (2003), Raboteau (2001) and Alexander (2010), for example.

occurring. The community of one church rallied during the pandemic because of the accessibility offered by online services. However, in the absence of people, the building itself fell into disrepair and disuse. The church is currently under threat of being closed; its cultural memory and sense of communion remains under threat.

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Fig. 1 The Last Supper with Black Figures – painter unknown- from fieldwork in a New Orleans Church (photo Jill Bambury)



Fig. 2 Reverend Banks Armchair Preaching on a Sunday Afternoon, Greater Full Gospel Church, New Orleans (photo Jill Bambury)



Fig. 3 Late Pastor John Raphael in New Hope Baptist Church, New Orleans (photo Jill Bambury)