

Symposium:
Barbara Brown Taylor

Preaching to Fans: Barbara Brown Taylor Fandom and the Possibilities for Mainline Aesthetics

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Barbara Brown Taylor continues to shower the Christian spiritual tradition with gifts in the form of memoirs, essays, sermons, creative writing, and preaching resources. Yet I find myself drawn to a more indirect production: the Barbara Brown Taylor fan. I am struck by the way Taylor negotiates the delicate terrain of preaching to fans given the long and mostly messy relationship between preaching and celebrity. And more than that, I am captivated by the fans themselves and the impact they are having on the aesthetics of mainline preaching. Largely reflecting the demographics of mainline Protestantism, these fans include vast numbers of men and women, clergy as well as laity, and people who, for a variety of reasons, sit on the fringes of the church. In varying ways, these fans of Barbara Brown Taylor are shaping the church's conception of a good sermon.

At the outset, let me say that I identify with the fans. Each time I hear Barbara Brown Taylor preach I, too, make the joyful walk back to my car with a handful of brilliant phrases that will be my manna for weeks to come. I still feel the electricity in the room before she preaches. So, in keeping with scholars like Joli Jenson, I break with the academic tendency to pathologize fans or assign them passivity. In more charitable light, fandom emerges as the appreciation of an

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aesthetic and is characterized by three primary movements: textual discrimination, productivity, and circulation.¹

We see this discrimination, productivity, and circulation among Barbara Brown Taylor fans when the blogger chews on a sermon nugget *ad infinitum*, when a preacher mimics her style, when the hospice chaplain shares a Barbara Brown Taylor sermon with a caregiver who cannot leave his wife's bedside to go to church, and when a line from a sermon is offered as counsel for a specific individual or tweeted generically to the world. In every case the fans discriminate, appreciate, and produce, even creating texts of their own in the process of reinterpreting and re-presenting Taylor's content.²

In subtle and direct ways fans affirm and circulate Taylor's voice, that is, her persona, endearing quirks, and poet-sage manner of holding authority. Fans circulate her eloquence and optimism, her conceptions of the beautiful and constructions of the meaningful life, and her canon of art and literature. All of these factors contribute to an aesthetic. In this sense, a Taylor sermon becomes a "worlding," or rather, an experience "that is happening, that is unfolding and projecting itself, through human becoming, into a future."³ Further, by circulating her work, fans make aesthetic judgments and mold conceptions of a good sermon in the mainline church. Beyond vivid imagery, elegant prose, and a close reading of the text, the good sermon is one that honors inner freedom and foregrounds wonder. Conveying a deep sense of comfort in God's abiding love is also essential.

Given Taylor's gifts as a preacher, it is no surprise that fans are so eager to share her messages. Yet sometimes it is hard to know exactly what fans are doing when they re-present some aspect of Taylor's work. Is the act of sharing simply the initiation of a dialogue about how spiritual thriving might be imagined? Or is the act of sharing also sometimes indicative of more—such as embracing a proclamatory voice? Motives on the part of fans vary but the net effect of this public validation is an increase in Taylor's influence and notoriety.

¹ Sue Brower, "Fans as Tastemakers: Viewers of Quality Television," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 163–184, 180.

² Brower, "Fans as Tastemakers," 180–181.

³ Dominic Griffiths, "The Poet as 'Worldmaker': T. S. Eliot and the Religious Imagination," in *Poetry and the Religious Imagination: The Power of the Word*, ed. Francesca Bugliani Knox and David Lonsdale (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 162.

Yet Taylor openly resists fame that stems from preaching the gospel. “When you get through preaching, the only name on anyone’s lips should be the name of Jesus Christ,” Taylor imagines Paul telling a group of famous preachers. She sides with Paul in refusing to “dazzle” the Corinthians “even if he could, so that their faith would rest not on his wisdom but on the power of God.”⁴ Taylor often demonstrates this desire to avoid the limelight in her public life as well as her preaching. While at a dinner where Taylor was one of a few honorees, her seating card was misplaced and another guest took her seat. A shuffle ensued at the table reserved for dignitaries to make space for her, but Taylor quietly seated herself with a few international guests who had clearly never heard of her. The episode made a strong impression on those who were present, and increased the respect many fans have for Taylor.

While Taylor appears to navigate the world of celebrity preaching without absorbing its toxins, it would be going too far to suggest fans have no impact on her. Like any experienced preacher, she rides the energy in a room and recognizes the congregation’s role in shaping the preacher’s voice. Listeners routinely affirm some forms of expression over others and in doing so, they tune the preacher’s ear and sense of a fitting message. Taylor has publicly acknowledged this dynamic, noting that fans help her “edge the discussion along.” She credits them for helping her “ask questions everybody’s asking but perhaps had not yet put into words” and express “things people thought but have been too afraid to say.”⁵ Clearly, fans enrich her composition process and influence her content.

On occasion, fans have pushed too far and encroached upon territory Taylor considers sacred. As a result, she has been led to request certain parameters. For example, she prefers face-to-face encounters because she considers preaching an embodied experience. And while radio allows a reasonable amount of intimacy, video seems to undermine the sacredness of her encounter with listeners who are physically present.⁶ The firm, healthy boundary here would also suggest

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, “In Weakness and Much Trembling: 1 Corinthians 2:1–5,” in *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1998), 133.

⁵ From “Barbara Brown Taylor: Round Two,” *Newsworthy with Norsworthy Podcast*, Interview with Luke Norsworthy, November 18, 2014, <http://lukenorsworthy.com/2014/11/18/barbara-brown-taylor-round-two>.

⁶ Norsworthy interview.

that Taylor guards against fans whose cravings for poetry threaten to trespass into a space that should be reserved for Taylor and God. Fandom has an underside and invasiveness might be its worst trait. The better expressions of fandom are conversational in character and even to some degree collaborative. In these interactions the fan supports Taylor's voice while claiming his or her own.

This emphasis on conversation and collaboration presents special issues for Taylor fans who want to imitate her in their own pulpits. Mimicry plays an important pedagogical role in homiletics. A salient case is Martin Luther King, Jr., whose preaching voice developed as he imitated Gardner Taylor, Howard Thurman, Sandy Ray, and J. Pius Barbour.⁷ Similarly, Fred Craddock alludes to this idea when he reflects on his own development as a preacher. After a period of mimicking his favorite preachers, he finally learned that each preacher is "called to instrumentation of the message" in a unique way. Only after embracing his role as a "piccolo" in the orchestra of preachers did he experience growth and make his contribution to homiletics more broadly.⁸ If Taylor fans draw on her model while fashioning their own voices in the chorus of preachers, all the better. A critical question follows: If the best Barbara Brown Taylor fans complement her voice rather than merely mimic it, what might this accompaniment entail? How does one complement a person who is making such a deep imprint on contemporary preaching?

I found a clue to this question while reflecting on an art installation entitled *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, a collection of silhouettes by Kara Walker.⁹ A silhouette may seem like an unlikely vehicle for gaining insight on preaching or accompaniment, but the form is driven by creative complementarity. The artist disciplines the viewer's gaze in a manner that allows hidden possibilities to emerge. In Walker's case, she uses Victorian silhouettes to offer exquisitely detailed narratives of the antebellum South. The silhouettes tell two histories at once, one idyllic and the other ghastly. The dialectic introduces an "underlying turbulence" that invites

⁷ Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁸ "Sermon Preparation with Dr. Fred Craddock," interview with Peter Wallace, *Day 1*, June 17, 2008, http://day1.org/1138-sermon_preparation_with_dr_fred_craddock.

⁹ Kara Walker, *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, Whitney Museum of American Art, October 11, 2007 to February 3, 2008.

(or even compels) the viewer to claim a role in this history and its continual unfolding. Viewers must reckon with a portrait or positive image as well as a negative, a “void completely filled with stuff.”¹⁰

Similarly, mainline homiletics borders a “void completely filled with stuff” and I see Taylor pointing to it when she alludes to the roles she is *not* fulfilling as a preacher. Most of these references take place outside the pulpit, when Taylor is speaking to fans. For example, Taylor explains that she is “not a dismantler,” but she appreciates William Stringfellow’s preaching voice.¹¹ She also celebrates the fact that there are congregations that engage in proclamation by dismantling the powers and principalities. And, while Taylor does not take the role of a Holy Fool like St. Basil the Blessed, she upholds this tradition and its reliance on ridiculousness in proclaiming the gospel.¹² Her references to dismantlers and fools demonstrate self-awareness, and a recognition that no singular voice can proclaim every dimension of the gospel. And further, she understands that her own preaching voice is bolstered by engaging complementary approaches.

I suspect that a more faithful and less consumerist mode of fandom would involve taking her suggested complementary voices more seriously. The mainline churches need Barbara Brown Taylor fans who hunger for her unique voice, and, *as a result of it*, also have an appetite for more dissident voices that allow the weak to address the strong or introduce fundamentally different notions of divine presence.¹³ They need voices that draw more heavily on the grotesque, in keeping with the theology of J. Louis Martyn, James Kay, and Flannery O’Connor.¹⁴ Taylor fans can shape mainline preaching best by

¹⁰ “Kara Walker: Preview of Season 2 from ‘Art in the Twenty-first Century,’” Art21 (2003), www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipd7ZjFcoo8; “Kara Walker at the MAC: 24 January to 27 April 2014,” Metropolitan Arts Centre, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QbXdPv-O1g.

¹¹ Norsworthy interview.

¹² Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Future of Ministry in the ‘Prophetic Tradition,’” *The Public Witness and Ministry of William Sloane Coffin, Jr.*, Panel Presentation at Yale Divinity School, April 29, 2005, New Haven, Connecticut.

¹³ Justo L. González and Catherine G. González, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 67, 75.

¹⁴ See J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1997), esp. “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages” (89–110) and “From Paul to Flannery O’Connor with the Power of Grace” (279–297); James F. Kay, “The Word of the Cross at the Turn of the Ages,” *Interpretation* 53 (1999): 44–56; and Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957).

examining the terms of their fascination with Taylor, celebrating her genius, and supporting her efforts to elevate these other methods of preaching. While it remains to be seen whether Taylor fans will bear this additional level of discrimination and productivity for the benefit of the whole, this more critical and complementary posture demonstrates fandom at its best and may well inch mainline preaching into a new day.