

Symposium:
Barbara Brown Taylor

Introductory Comments

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There are many good reasons to attend to the work of Barbara Brown Taylor. One is instrumentalist: in short, if we could understand exactly what it is that makes Taylor so popular and so beloved, we could go some distance toward understanding the current American religious landscape. Taylor is read by all kinds of people, but two of her large constituencies are mainline church people, and those people for whom the mainline church is the church they identify with but don't attend. If we can understand why she is read by the people who read her, we would understand something important about the non-ecclesial desire for the gospel that seems to be present in a certain stratum of the American readership.

An even better reason to attend to Taylor's work is that she pays attention to her words. Her attention to language is, in the landscape of contemporary Christianity, almost unparalleled. This attentiveness is important at the level of craft: she is, simply put, a dazzlingly good prose-stylist, and her care for words is evident in all of her work, from sermons she wrote twenty-five years ago to the essay she wrote last week.

There is, nonetheless, a shift in how she is attentive to words, or, more precisely, in the words to which she attends. For many years—decades, even—Taylor wrote for mainline Protestants about the importance of using the tried-and-true terms of Christian speech, as she tried to ease us out of our skittish allergy to words like *sin* and

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incarnation. For example, in a 2002 essay on preaching Easter in the *Journal for Preachers*, Taylor wrote about preachers who try to preach Easter without ever “using the word, since ‘salvation’ has become one of the more problematic words in the Christian vocabulary.” During Easter, Taylor suggested, “it does seem possible for preachers—and all who care about the mystery of the word made flesh—to spend some time contemplating both the rich scriptural heritage and the fullness of reality contained in the word ‘salvation.’ What did it mean before Jesus was ever born? What did he think it meant, and what did it come to mean after he died? What kinds of experience does the word name? Beyond what salvation *means*, how does it *feel*? How would you explain it to a seven-year-old child?”¹ She seems to want us to think about what the word is and how best to use it, and she wants us to do this by contemplating mystery: there is something instructive for all of us in the seven-year-old child question. To explain salvation to a second grader would require both radical simplification and also the clarification of something essential.

But then a shift happened, in Taylor’s own Christian life and also in her writing—a shift away from advocacy for old Christian words. She notes this shift in her two most recent books, *An Altar in the World* and *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. In the first she tells of being asked to come give a talk at a church in Alabama. Her host asked her simply to “come tell us what is saving your life now.” Taylor describes feeling a kind of awed relief at this question, “as if he had swept his arm across a dusty table and brushed all the formal china to the ground. I did not have to try to say correct things that were true for everyone. I did not have to use theological language that conformed to the historical teachings of the church. All I had to do was figure out what my life depended on.”² And then in *Learning to Walk in the Dark*—which is, in its way, deeply Christian apophaticism—Taylor says that once upon a time she had a lot of reliable ideas about God, enough ideas to fill a cedar chest, but “the big chest I used to keep them in is something smaller than a shoebox now.”³ Taylor writes that the first thing to go for her was her certainty about the language of

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Easter Preaching and the Lost Language of Salvation,” *Journal for Preachers* 25.3 (Easter 2002): 18–25.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), xvii.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 138.

faith—the very words she had taught us for so many years how to say, *sin* and *salvation* and *prayer*, now held less for her. Her apophaticism begins exactly with a “keen awareness of the limits of all language about God.”⁴

By way of introduction to this troika of papers considering Taylor’s work, I would invite us to notice that Taylor’s reconsideration of Christian speech is precisely that—a reconsideration of Christian speech. I have suggested that Taylor is read by people for whom the mainline church is the church they don’t attend; in a parallel way, for Taylor speech has not tidily or even wholly evaporated. Rather, to the extent that she no longer uses tried-and-true Christian language, that language remains the language she doesn’t use. The shape of what she does not say anymore remains formative of what she now says. That is what makes her, not a self-help writer, but rather a twenty-first-century John of the Cross or Meister Eckhart.

⁴ Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 13.

