

Michael P. Knowles. *Of Seeds and the People of God: Preaching as Parable, Crucifixion, and Testimony*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015. 263 pages. \$28.20.

Michael Knowles has written a remarkable book. He combines in his writing and research a deep interest in a critical interpretation of the scriptures, a lover's quarrel with homiletic theory and method, and strong desire to see the scriptures fund the theological work of both. For all of this breadth in what he wishes to accomplish in his three-part book, in which preaching is understood as parable, crucifixion, and testimony, his singular vision of preaching points to grace—both for hearers and preachers who too easily succumb to the fiction that success is up to them.

The first part of the book begins by trying to retrieve the deep connection between the language of seeds in the parables as part of the wider scriptural tradition and the mysterious promise of God. Knowles' close reading of the language of seed yields more than just grist for the mill of revisiting the parables for preaching. Instead, Knowles argues that the language points to a pervasive sense of God's providential grace. We cannot read parables, or think about preaching for that matter, apart from the parabolic disclosure of seeds as mysterious manifestations of the working of God's grace whether we sow or not, whether we sleep or wake. In doing so, Knowles reminds readers that the parables cannot be read as free-floating, a-contextual stories, but as sprouting from a Jewish world shaped by scripture where seed and promise are part of God's surprising work of fecund, providential grace.

The second part then turns to crucifixion as a key way for understanding preaching. Again, Knowles' knowledge of Biblical texts shines through. This theme is a familiar one, especially for those conversant with Knowles' other work. Preaching is "shaped by the cross." Preachers attuned to matters of rhetoric and success may wish to check these at the door of proclamation. Preaching is cruciform.

The third part then makes a signal contribution to considering preaching as testimony. Knowles is careful to acknowledge how this language of testimony has functioned in contemporary homiletic theory, connecting it in particular to the work of Tom Long on witness and Anna Carter Florence on testimony. What is most rewarding, however, is to read the testimonial literature again through Augustine, Barth, Brueggemann and Ricoeur. It is, to my mind, Knowles' re-reading of Ricoeur's understanding of testimony that represents his most important contribution to homiletic theory in these pages. A revisiting of Ricoeur's work on testimony may help testimonial homiletics move even deeper. Along the way, Knowles' also continues his careful turn toward a critical reading of scripture, now connecting the dots between the three parts of the book: seed language meets crucifixion meets testimony in the parabolic "U" of theological experience: descent, death, and resurrection in the biography of the preacher as failure, not successful manager and mediator of the sacred. This third part is supplemented nicely with searching questions for the reader and homiletic examples of the preacher himself. I appreciate Knowles because he seeks to do his work as what I would call a homiletical theologian. Knowles' work, for me, is amazing to the degree he integrates theology, scripture, and (to a degree) homiletic theory in his seedy, cruciform, parabolic vision of preaching and the preacher.

There are things I disagree with, too. I would contest at least part of Knowles' reading of Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*. Augustine does not mind "plundering the Egyptians" when it comes to using rhetoric, whereas Knowles occasionally gives the impression that any such move is tantamount to managing God or God's Word. At times Knowles freely acknowledges

the ambiguity of our work as preachers, but sometimes his desire to contrast the human and divine aspects of preaching leads him to an overly binaried way of thinking. It is important to remember that in the Reformation there were at least two ways of appreciating the relationship of the *capax*: with Calvin the finite was *incapable* of bearing the infinite; but with Luther and his more sacramental interests, the finite *was* capable (*finitum capax infiniti*), at least in connection to the promise as grounding the means of grace in Word and Sacrament.

That said, these are mere quibbles. Michael Knowles has made an important theological contribution to our work as preachers and theologians of preaching. He, of course, would fail to take credit for that. In the end, he would just point to grace.

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