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Preaching Motherhood and Womanhood from the Christian Pulpit: Information Dissemination and Use

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ABSTRACT

The sermons clergy preach every Sunday can provide tremendous insight into current religious thinking about motherhood and womanhood. A database of sermons preached by clergy from a sample of Christian churches in the United States was searched for sermons given on Mother's Day 2014. A grounded theory approach explored how clergy framed these constructs. Results show that although clergy tend to frame these concepts in stereotypical ways, there is great complexity in how this is done. Clergy use a variety of information sources to preach on the roles of women and mothers, providing insight into the very construction of these roles.

KEYWORDS

Information dissemination and use; religious sermons; gender; feminism

Introduction

Christian institutions have a tremendous and diverse body of knowledge dealing with the constructs of motherhood and womanhood. Awareness of that body of knowledge is constrained to that of historical or media accounts of prominent clergy and theologians. Little research has been conducted to look at the current information that is disseminated weekly in churches through clergy sermons. These sermons can provide tremendous insight into current religious thinking about these constructs. An examination of the information sources used to discuss these constructs can also reveal important considerations of clergy when seeking out information for these sermons.

The religious sermon has a large audience. Although one estimate of weekly church attendance in America showed that 37% of Americans attend church weekly (Lipka), even more conservative estimates using time diaries indicated that approximately 24% of Americans attend church weekly (Brenner 33). A January 2015 population estimate from the U.S. Census Bureau showed approximately 320 million people in America's resident population. This means that on any given Sunday, anywhere from 76 million to 118 million people attend church. At a vast majority of these churches, people will hear a religious sermon. Although it is not the purpose of the current research to estimate how many of these individuals pay attention to

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the sermon, the sheer numbers highlight the importance of sermons in distributing religious information. Understanding how these sermons deal with gender, then (a concept with potentially serious implications for behavior and social equality) becomes vastly important.

Literature review

Gender constructions

Research has long addressed the social construction of gender: “The past 30 years of gender scholarship have made sociologists aware that gender is one of the central organizing principles around which social life revolves” (Berkowitz, Manohar, and Tinkler 133). The current study asks how gender is constructed in religion through the specific channel of the religious sermon.

Research into gender stereotypes has been divided into functional and social-role theory perspectives. The functional approach argues that women are biologically more invested in parenting and, therefore, have more inherent traits for caring (Abele 775). Men are more biologically invested in fights for food and mates than women, and thus have more traits related to determination and assertion. Those following the social-role theory argue that these stereotypes exist due to the “sex-specific division of labor” (Abele 775). As such, gender stereotypes develop based on observed behavior (Eagly and Steffen 736). Thus, the social-role theory approach to gender stereotypes assumes that expectations about motherhood are based on divisions of mothers into certain social roles that tend to be more communal. This is in opposition to the view that mothers inherently have these traits because of their motherhood.

An operationalization of these stereotypes follows Bakan’s outline of *agency* and *communion* as the two primary manifestations of all living beings (15). Agency refers to a living being’s individuality and “manifests itself in self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion” (Bakan 15). Communion refers to a living being’s participation in something larger than itself and “manifests itself in the sense of being at one with other organisms” (Bakan 15). This can be seen as either a formation or a lack of separations, as well as a desire to control or cooperate. The ideal is that these manifestations are always in balance: “Moderation or balancing of agency *with* communion therefore provides a proper goal of the individual throughout life” (Bakan 236). These “Big Two” remain a valid means of understanding gender construction, as they were the center of a special issue of *Social Psychology* as late as 2013 (Abele and Wojciszke 61).

Literature suggests that communal traits are typically identified with women, especially as they are viewed as having fewer leadership traits (Scott and Brown 239; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 795). They are indicated by “selflessness, concern with others, and a desire to be at one with others” (Eagly and Steffen 736). Valerie Saiving argued that the biological role of women as mothers is integral to the

formation of these gendered social roles: “The processes of impregnation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation have a certain passivity about them; they are things which *happen* to a woman more than things that she *does*” (31). The current study seeks to determine if this definition of the makeup of gender stereotypes as *communal* and *agentic* is still in use by clergy.

Shannon Davis found that religious affiliation and practice did not impact the gender ideologies of adolescents: “Messages within religions regarding gendered roles may be secondary to cultural images, parental socialization, and lived experiences” (1037). However, this was noted as likely due to weak ties of adolescents to religion. She suggested that over time, religion might become a “primary source of teaching regarding gender” (1037). It becomes important, then, to analyze the content of these religious messages.

Research Question 1: How do clergy conceptualize womanhood and motherhood from the pulpit?

Religious information and constructions of gender

The following section will outline two primary sources of information about gender roles that are specifically religious: the Bible and theological tradition. This (a) identifies where the sermon might fall into a religious individual's sources for information and (b) identifies a place from where the sermon itself likely draws information.

The Bible

A long line of feminist research has argued that the Bible emerges from and is interpreted by patriarchal cultures. This is seen in the nineteenth century with Elizabeth Stanton's *The Women's Bible* and the argument that the Bible is based on the idea “that woman was made after man, of man, and for man, an inferior being, subject to man,” which has led to “the Bible [being] used to hold [women] in the ‘divinely ordained sphere,’ prescribed in the Old and New Testament” (iii).

These arguments have continued. Phyllis Bird argued that Old Testament laws depict women as a “legal nonperson ... most [laws] do not even acknowledge her existence” (56). They are depicted as inferior in a society dominated by men. Esther Fuchs, in a literary analysis of representations of motherhood in the Hebrew Bible, argued that although motherhood is highly respected in the Bible, the mother figures themselves “attain neither the human nor the literary complexity of their male counterparts” (138). This takes away from the humanity of the mother figure. Women are also rarely mentioned by name in New Testament accounts. In an attempt to address this lack of humanity for female biblical characters, Jackson argued that the Bible, and its subsequent interpretations, “flattens out” the description of Jezebel in 1 and 2 Kings as a “caricature” of “the other” (245). She must be given more attention as a “character” if we are to fully understand her complexity (249).

Sharon Ringe argued that the church's interpretation of the Bible tends to fit its ecclesiastical needs as it views the Bible from its own privileged positions (69).

The Book of Revelation's depiction of God on the throne has been likened to a bodybuilder, as God poses with power and in silence, and the book itself is "encumbered by the exaggerated masculinity of its deity" (Moore 40). Paul Hanson argued that the primary use of male metaphors to describe God is not by accident, but rather by "a society driven to choose male metaphors by virtue of patriarchal structures predicated upon sexual inequality" (Hanson 317).

Christian feminists, then, must find ways of accounting for this reality if they still place authority in Scripture (Fiorenza 1). Peggy Day noted that feminist readings of the Bible require "acknowledging the patriarchal, or at least androcentric, bias of biblical texts" (300). Sakenfeld outlined three approaches to this new reading of the Bible: (a) reinterpreting to a more positive depiction of women, (b) allowing for a criticism of the Bible so that it becomes, itself, a means of critiquing patriarchy, and (c) using the Bible to learn about the experiences of women in patriarchal societies (5–18).

Theology and tradition

It is not difficult to note how Christian theology has traditionally followed the gender roles mentioned earlier. Martin Luther wrote that "if a mother of a family wishes to please and serve God, let her ... care for the family, let her educate and teach her children, let her do her tasks in the kitchen" (in Ruether 295). Most discussions of motherhood introduce the concept of sacrifice. This self-sacrifice is a virtue in Christian thought. Saiving argued against Niebuhr and against theology's depiction of sin as self-assertion and pride (35–38). She argued that women are too self-sacrificing and could actually benefit from pride. The self-sacrifice and forgetting of individual concerns (considered a virtue in Christian theology) can actually cause women to be distracted, diffuse their purposes, and cause them to be unable to prioritize. Saiving argued that Christian conceptions of sin are dominated by masculine experiences, which are vastly different from feminine experiences (35–38).

Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker argued that Christianity "has been a primary—in many women's lives *the* primary—force in shaping our acceptance of abuse" (37). This is due to the image of Christ as self-sacrificing. Thus, self-sacrifice is a Christian virtue: "To be of value, we should likewise sacrifice ourselves" (37). Brown and Parker call for a reconsideration of a God of sacrifice, echoing the calls by Isabel Heyward that Jesus died because he "despised the blasphemous notion of a deity who likes sacrifice, especially human sacrifice" (168). Thus, "we are not here to give ourselves up willingly to be crucified for anyone's sake, but rather to struggle together against the injustice of all human sacrifice, including our own" (Heyward 169). Theology also conceptualizes God with a masculine bias as "King, Lord, Master, Judge, and Father" (Pagels 293).

Research Question 2: How does the *information* used by clergy when describing characteristics of women and motherhood intersect with the actual *content* of these characteristics?

Methods

Qualitative content analysis

Sermons were retrieved from a database of sermons archived at the Center for the Study of Information and Religion (CSIR). The CSIR database indexes more than 14,000 full-text sermons prepared and delivered by more than 200 clergy members from a variety of Christian Protestant denominations since 2008. Because the database relies on full-text sermons available on the Internet, it does not include many Catholic homilies, as texts of these tend to be in audio-only format. Thus, it is not representative of all Christian religion in America but still includes sermons preached in a variety of contexts. This database was searched for sermons given on Mother's Day 2014, and all retrieved results were included in the final sample of ninety-three sermons. This number of sermons representing one year is considered sufficient for the level of detailed qualitative analysis in the current study. These ninety-three sermons were first searched for instances of the words "mother," "mothers," "women," "woman," "children," and "kids." The search for women and woman was added because the research was interested in the conceptualization of motherhood in the context of gender stereotypes. Thus, it was interested in both motherhood and womanhood.

The current research utilized qualitative content analysis to analyze these sermon texts. This allowed the researcher to take the large, unstructured body of text and provide meaningful structure to it. Although a preliminary review of the literature was conducted prior to analysis, the bulk of the literature review was completed after analysis. This ensures that the data drive the findings rather than any a priori assumptions of what pastors may say regarding mothers and womanhood. This is especially important with the topic of gender, as it can be easy to assume what pastors may be saying. Texts of sermons were copied into Nvivo and coded in multiple phases, following the approach of Grounded Theory outlined by Glaser and Strauss. Sermon texts were first coded for general low-level concepts, and every phrase was conceptualized. A second coding looked for relationships among these low-level concepts. A final coding looked for overarching categories under which several concepts could be conceptually grouped.

Although counts were provided, these offered only a preliminary outline of patterns and areas of possible significance. Morse (180) suggested that these counts enhance the precision of the research. The current research followed a true qualitative approach that goes deeper than these initial numbers to interpret the patterns indicated by these numbers (Morgan 112–21). This allows the researcher to go beyond the *manifest* and countable features of the texts to infer what these features might mean (i.e., the *latent* content [Morse 179]). Thus, the current research is concerned with both the text itself and what the text is interpreted to say (Graneheim and Lundman 111). In other words, both word counts and coding categories are displayed in the results. The addition of exact excerpts from the sermons gives credibility to the latent analysis (Graneheim and Lundman 110). Counts of

words and phrases provide insight into potential patterns, which were investigated further using the three-stage qualitative content analysis.

Because the study was interested in the use of previous categorizations of gender, attention was paid to coding based on operationalizations of communal and agentic. A communal traits scale includes items that measure high levels of kindness, helpfulness, emotional nature, self-devotion to others, warmth toward others, understanding, awareness of the feelings of others, and gentleness. Agentic traits are typically identified with men, and are indicated by “self-assertion, self-expansion, and the urge to master” (Abele 1979). An agentic traits scale includes items that measure high self-confidence, feelings of superiority, ability to make decisions easily, overall levels of activity and independence, the ability to stand up under pressure, and a desire not to give up (Abele 1979).

Sample

Of these ninety-three total sermons, fifty-seven sermons in the sample did address mothers and women to a substantial degree. These fifty-seven pastors did discuss the motherhood of *women*, but they also discussed the motherhood of God and of the broader immediate family and church community. These categories are mutually exclusive in that a pastor preaching about motherhood in one category did not speak about it in another category. As such, these categories represent a singular emphasis in each sermon that pervades the entirety of how each pastor discussed the motherhood concept. Preliminary demographic information was noted from the database about gender and denomination. These were analyzed to see if trends in gender and denomination existed. Of the ninety-three sermons, sixty-eight were given by males, and twenty-five were given by females. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the religious denominations represented in the sample. Table 2 shows a breakdown of the counts of each of three primary categories in the sample, along with a percentage indicating the average coverage of each sermon accounted for by that category. This provides an initial indication of prevalence for the discovery of patterns.

Table 1. Counts of denominations represented in sample.

Denomination	Number of sermons
Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA)	28
United Methodist	11
Presbyterian Church, USA	11
Episcopal	10
United Church of Christ (UCC)	8
Disciples of Christ	7
Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS)	6
Mennonite	5
Baptist	3
Lutheran (not ELCA or LCMS)	2
Christian Reformed	1
United Church Canada	1
Total	93

Table 2. Counts of the general categories coded in the sample.

Category—The motherhood of ...	Number of sermons	Average coverage of each sermon
The created family	9	5.16%
God	11	10.65%
Women	37	16.02%
Total		57

Table 3 provides a breakdown of the general categories of the thirty-six sermon topics that did *not* address motherhood. Of these thirty-six, ten were from female clergy, and twenty-six were from male clergy. According to the Revised Common Lectionary, Bible verses for May 11, 2014 were from 1 Peter 2, John 10, Acts 2, and Psalm 23. Because of the Psalm and John verses, it was often referred to as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” Of the thirty-six sermons not about mothers or women, only four sermons did not use a Bible verse from the lectionary. Interestingly, however, these four sermons still addressed similar topics to those sermons that used the lectionary. Pastors spoke on topics of church and community, contentment, the exclusivity of Christ as the only way to heaven, faith, hope and outreach, and the importance of listening to Jesus as the shepherd.

Because of the prevalence of the lectionary, it could be inferred that pastors who did not address mothers or women already had a lectionary sermon ready regardless of the day (Mother’s Day) that it happened to fall on. Pastors may have had difficulty fitting the Mother’s Day theme into their sermons. Pastors could have also decided not to address Mother’s Day for a number of different reasons. The current analysis cannot provide a reason for not addressing women or motherhood, but the analysis of topics covered instead does provide important insight.

Results

This section will discuss the results of the qualitative content analysis of these sermons and how they defined motherhood, broken down into (a) the motherhood of the created family, (b) the motherhood of God, and (c) the motherhood of women. This will help answer RQ1: How do clergy conceptualize womanhood and motherhood from the pulpit? The results of how these categories intersected with types of information used by the pastor will be examined. Also, a separate analysis of

Table 3. Counts of the general topics covered in sermons not addressing women or motherhood.

Topic	Lectionary	Number of sermons
Importance of church and community	Yes	6
	No	3
Contentment	Yes	2
Exclusivity of Christianity	Yes	1
	No	1
Faith	Yes	1
Hope and outreach	Yes	11
Listening to Jesus	Yes	11
Total		36

the Bible as an information source to support a non-traditional characterization of women will be proposed. These two analyses will aid in answering RQ2: How does the *information* used by clergy when describing characteristics of women and motherhood intersect with the actual *content* of these characteristics?

The motherhood of the created family

The qualitative content analysis revealed that some pastors extended the discussion of motherhood to include individuals other than a biological mother. One pastor noted the story of a family that invited individuals living far from their own families to join them at Christmas in order to be part of “their created family.” Such an understanding of the broader immediate family and church community will be addressed in this article as *created family*. Of the fifty-seven sermons that did address motherhood, nine discussed the motherhood of the created family. Of these, three were preached from female clergy, and six were from male clergy. In these nine cases, motherhood was defined as the responsibility of more than the biological mother. None of these sermons on the created family defined motherhood in agentic terms. Instead, they defined it in communal terms. Discussion of this communal role accounted for an average of 5.16% of each of these sermons (Table 2).

The church itself was described as a “mother that is in the pains of childbirth that is bearing you and every believer into the kingdom of heaven.” This motherly support of the church has a long history: “From the earliest Christians until now, we have been gathering together to support, strengthen, and mutually encourage one another’s faith.”

Many of these sermons addressing the created family dealt with children. On Mother’s Day, these clergy took time to *admonish* the role of others in the raising of children, as pastors gave advice or pushed individuals within this created family to do certain things for children. A congregation was told to “care for every little hurt [and] ... be vigilant to catch any kind of injury or emotional challenge.” This admonishment was particularly focused on growing children up in the Christian faith, as the created family was called to “provide that spiritual and physical nourishment so they grow into the child of God they were destined to become.”

The motherhood of God

The results of the content analysis found that clergy also noted the motherly qualities of God. These pastors were clear to communicate that God had no specific gender: “God is neither woman nor man, but God is Spirit.” One pastor noted that the common assumption that God is male has created “whole traditions in which to be a woman is to be forever considered a second-class status.”

However, the traits of God tend to be bifurcated along lines similar to the social roles of communal and agentic. One pastor noted, “All things are possible through Christ Jesus who strengthens us and leads us and stirs us and mothers us.” Thus, the mothering nature of God is distinct from the leadership and strength of God.

One pastor specifically addressed the two roles of God, noting that the motherly quality of God “counters the more terrifying aspects of God’s lordship and fatherhood.” Of the fifty-seven sermons that did address motherhood, eleven discussed the motherhood of God (Table 2). Of these, four were from female clergy, and seven were from male clergy. References to God as mother accounted for an average of 10.65% of each of these sermons (Table 2).

Of these eleven sermons describing the motherhood of God, none expressly used agentic language. One pastor did refer to the motherhood of God as a leading force, but it was leading only as a precursor to a more nurturing nature: “Our tender Mother Jesus can lead us easily into his blessed breast through his sweet open side.”

Communal

Thus, the sermons that discussed the motherhood of God did so in communal terms. The caring motherhood view of God is noted in the Old Testament, as noted by one pastor: “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.” Another pastor described God “sprinting like a mother ... to heal our wounds.” When described as mother, God is a comforting figure, especially in the face of fear: “God, like a mother, comes to her fearful children and says ... I am here when you are afraid.”

Next to comfort, the most common example noted of God’s motherhood is God’s love and sacrifice: “God is like a loving mother.” One pastor noted that the analogy between God’s love and a mother’s love makes sense because both are personal: “The love God has for us is a very personal kind of love.” This love is noted most extensively through the sacrifice of God’s son, Jesus Christ: “Our Good Shepherd—the Lord Jesus—has laid down His life for us, going to whatever extent was necessary to bring us back into His fold.” Thus, the self-sacrificial nature of God is afforded to God’s motherly nature rather than God’s fatherly nature.

The motherhood of women

Content analysis found that clergy most often referred to the motherhood of women. This was not restricted to biological mothers: “A woman does not have to be a biological mother to make a difference in your life and be a living example of the love of God to you.” Thus, in these instances, motherhood is indicated as a characteristic of women in general. Of the fifty-seven sermons that did address motherhood, thirty-seven discussed the motherhood of women (Table 2). Of these, eight were from female clergy, and twenty-nine were from male clergy. Table 4 shows the sermon counts of the subcategories within the broader concept of the motherhood of women.

Agentic

Of the thirty-seven sermons that noted the motherhood of women, ten sermons used agentic language, with an average coverage of 28.31% of each sermon (Table 4). Of the total sermons given by male clergy, 31% used agentic language to discuss

Table 4. Counts* of the subcategories of the motherhood of women coded in the sample.

Sub-category	Number of sermons	Average coverage of each sermon
Agentic**	10	28.31%
Self-assertion	8	7.03%
Seemingly communal	7	9.59%
Communal	32	14.13%
Teaching	18	11.9%
Caring	13	5.57%
Emotional expression	10	6.9%
Self-sacrifice	11	9.16%
Pain	24	12.49%

*Most sermons cover more than one category.

**Parent nodes are in bold.

motherhood and women. They did not necessarily do so exclusively, but at least part of their sermon used agentic language to describe motherhood and women. Of the total sermons given by female clergy, 38% of women used this agentic language.

Self-assertion and personal efficacy. Of the ten sermons using agentic language to describe the motherhood of women, eight sermons discussed, in particular, the self-assertion and personal efficacy of women and mothers. A female pastor noted the political self-assertion of her daughter in efforts toward passage of the Women's Economic Security Act. Here, women and mothers are remembered for their work and self-sufficiency: "As a place—this very church—that employs some 20 women ... it matters to you I know that we are a place that honors women's work." Another male pastor noted the self-sufficiency of a woman who "ironed and typed for people to supplement the family's income." When told later in life that she had severe arthritis, the mother "courageously ... moved three children under the age of 18 to Arizona." This supports the findings of Rosette and Tost that at higher leadership levels, women are actually viewed as more agentic than men (226).

Another male pastor noted the personal efficacy of "the single mom who meekly tumbles into welfare because she's exhausted from working three minimum wage jobs just to put food on the table," and the self-assertion of "illegal immigrants, just trying to make a better life for her children, who ends up living under the constant fear of arrest and deportation."

Seemingly agentic

Often, clergy would indicate the leadership or boldness of mothers and women in general, but this would often be in the context of communal roles. Thus, although seemingly agentic, the descriptions were more representative of communal traits. Of the thirty-seven sermons that noted the motherhood of women, seven sermons used this type of language, with an average coverage of 9.59% of each sermon. Of these seven sermons, three were from female clergy, and four were from male clergy.

Leadership is not always an indication of agentic roles because one can be a leader in communal efforts. For example, one female pastor noted the important work of a fellow female ELCA pastor. This work could be characterized as communal as she

highlighted servitude: “She is a pastor who particularly seeks to serve those who have found themselves outside the boundaries of more traditional Christian expressions.” One male pastor noted the work of a woman in “leading an effort to make prayer shawls for people.” What was highlighted was the woman’s sacrifice to provide people with a “gentle touch” even in her old age. Another male pastor noted the leadership role of women in the church: “Women and mothers are at the forefront of so much of the good work the church is doing in the world.” However, this role was defined by a story of missionary efforts in Burundi. The missionary agency he referred to “employs women and mothers at work to build community, address poverty, and advance the gospel.” In Burundi, “mothers fight for the preservation of family and relationship.” Thus, the leadership work is still communal as a social role.

Similarly, some pastors referred to the strength and boldness of mothers but did so in terms of their communal role, especially in child rearing. A male pastor noted, “Most mothers are fiercely devoted to their children and have a natural instinct to love and fight for them.” One female pastor noted the inviting nature of her own mother but added, “Woe to you if you hurt one of her children!”

Communal

Women and mothers were more often described in communal terms (e.g., caring, nurturing, gentleness, and a general awareness of the feelings of others). Of the thirty-seven sermons that noted the motherhood of women, thirty-two sermons used this type of language, with an average coverage of 14.13% of each sermon. Of the total sermons given by male clergy, 93% used communal language to discuss motherhood and women. They did not necessarily do so exclusively, but at least part of their sermon used communal language to describe motherhood and women. Of the total sermons given by female clergy, 63% of women used this communal language.

Teaching. The teaching role of mothers was the most often discussed behavior of communal mothers. Of the thirty-two sermons that noted the communal motherhood of women, eighteen sermons discussed the teaching role of women in this communal role, with an average coverage of 11.9% of each sermon. One pastor tied mother’s day in with the Festival of the Christian Home and the nurturing that occurs there, noting that both are “about honoring mothers and considering what we pass down from one generation to another.” Another pastor noted, “Faithful mothers don’t just give advice and reprimands. Their unconditional love and encouragement and affirmation gives us the kind of guidance through life that we need.”

Caring. Pastors also referred to the caring nature of mothers. Of the thirty-two sermons that noted the communal motherhood of women, thirteen discussed the general caring nature of women in this communal role, with an average coverage of 5.57% of each sermon. An often-used description of this was the mother as shepherd from Psalm 23. One male pastor kept a picture of the Good Shepherd to remember

his wife's grandmother, "as a reminder of her love and care." Another pastor used the shepherd metaphor to describe the calming of mothers: "a new mother calming her newborn; giving him a serenity and peace that enables him to close his eyes into a deep sleep."

Emotional expression. One key aspect of communality is emotional expressiveness. A few pastors noted an interesting emotional fragility in mothers. In retelling the story of Ruth in the Bible, one male pastor noted, "Ruth is driven not by logic, but instead by loyalty and love." Another pastor included *Women's Weekly* in a listing of "false teaching" that included "the *Book of Mormon*, *Watch Tower*, *Koran*, astrology, [and] the *Women's Weekly*." The inclusion of a women's magazine in such a list suggests a kind of emotional weakness in women for more idle thoughts. This emotional description of women and mothers was noted in ten sermons, with an average coverage of 6.9% in each sermon.

Closely related to the emotional expressions of women and mothers is an unbri-dled optimism: "There is perhaps no place more overflowing with unwavering opti-mism than the maternity ward." One pastor noted that this is inherently female: "Generally speaking, a mother is in a unique position to see a child's strengths, to believe in her child's future, to hope for the very best that child can be." This opti-mism extends to the proud feelings of a mother for her children, as mothers are described as being proud of even the small things. One pastor retold the story of a man whose mother hung his adult accomplishments on the refrigerator: "In her eyes he was still in kindergarten bringing home his prized artwork."

Self-sacrifice. Many pastors noted the self-sacrificial nature of mothers. Pastors praised women for their sacrifice and even called them into it: "To take on the role of mother will bring with it great joy as well as great pain ... every sacrifice will be worth it for Mothers." Of the thirty-two sermons that noted the communal mother-hood of women, eleven sermons praised or acknowledged the sacrifice of women, with an average coverage of 9.16% of each sermon. This was considered an inherent part of motherhood: "Mothers are giving also. It's in their nature—a basic part of their DNA." This came manifestly from a male pastor: "Does a mother not willingly sacrifice her own comfort, pleasure, welfare, body, and life for the child she carries within her? And then, after birth, does she not continue to sacrifice her own com-fort, pleasure, welfare, body, and life for the new life the Lord has blessed her with?" Another pastor noted Mary the mother of Jesus, who "serves as a reminder of the servant role that is motherhood."

Mothers are characterized as inherently service-oriented, due in large part to their devotion to Jesus. One pastor noted of a mother, "She followed Jesus through this all by serving her family and her neighbors, resisting the urge to speak ill of others, and accepting gracefully the suffering that came her way." This service is limitless, as it is based in love: "For yes mothers are special; their love is unique as they'll do practically anything for their children."

Pain. This self-sacrifice caused pain and struggles, but pastors reminded mothers that it was worth it: “Children can bring us a little sorrow, but they also bring us a whole lot of joy!” Twenty-four sermons included a reference to the pain and struggles of women and mothers, accounting for an average of 12.49% of each sermon. This was often tied to the larger pain of parenting: “Children can be a challenge, and heartbreak, and an opportunity for unneeded and unwanted worry.” Pain was also noted as a general part of life for mothers: “Whatever you suffer, you suffer because [God] permits you to suffer.” Child labor was used often to discuss the suffering that leads to joy: “New life always comes first from darkness—many mothers are familiar with darkness in a special way, as we confront dark fears in the delivery room, as pain consumes our bodies, as fear and anxiety constrict the throat, as the mother turns inward, to tap those secret reserves of strength she never knew she had.”

Information sources used

In this study, sermons were also coded according to the information sources referred to by a pastor throughout the sermon. These included the Bible, current events, church doctrine, experts, pop culture, stories, and unique insights. Table 5 provides a breakdown of how often these sources were used in the sample. The Bible and unique insights were used most often. Bible references included both the reading of Scripture and any direct reference to Scripture in the sermon. Unique insights refer to any time a pastor provided his or her own insight not expressly guided by an external information source. This information is likely the result of at least passive exposure to external information, but such information is not credited in the sermon. This could be described as *gut instinct* or *personal reflection*.

Stories included both personal stories about a pastor’s family or life, as well as stories recounted from other sources (e.g., the Internet or other people). An expert source included the mentioning of a well-known author or pastor with the expressed citation within the sermon. Pop culture included music and art, and current event references included things taken from news sources. Church doctrine sources included reference to saints in the church, church creeds, and so on. Table 6 provides a breakdown of how often each source was used when addressing the main categories noted in the current study.

Table 5. Breakdown of the use of information sources by pastors.

Source	Number of references	Percentage of the total
Unique insights	92	27%
Bible	84	25%
Stories	69	20%
Experts	47	14%
Current events	20	6%
Pop culture	14	4%
Church doctrine	14	4%
Total	340	100%

Table 6. Breakdown of the use of information sources by pastors according to coded category.

Category	Information source	Number of sermons	Average coverage of each sermon
The motherhood of the created family	Bible	0	—
	Current events	0	—
	Church doctrine	0	—
	Expert	2	0.88%
	Pop culture	0	—
	Story	2	7.6%
	Unique insights	8	3.7%
The communal motherhood of God	Bible	4	6.82%
	Current events	0	—
	Church doctrine	2	16.4%
	Expert	0	—
	Pop culture	1	2.8%
	Story	0	—
	Unique insights	8	6.4%
The agentic motherhood of women	Bible	5	5.32%
	Current events	1	13.5%
	Church doctrine	1	3.48%
	Expert	2	2.67%
	Pop culture	0	—
	Story	3	7.05%
	Unique insights	3	5.54%
The communal motherhood of women	Bible	11	6.18%
	Current events	1	1.97%
	Church doctrine	3	8.61%
	Expert	7	5.63%
	Pop culture	7	7.55%
	Story	16	11.22%
	Unique insights	13	6.44%

The Bible as source for feminist interpretation

As noted in the review of the literature, the Bible is typically viewed as patriarchal. Those pastors wanting an agentic interpretation of the Bible did so in a few different ways. Evidence of the three approaches noted earlier can be found in the current sample (Sakenfeld 5–18).

First, most pastors engaged in reinterpretation. One male pastor argued, “The New Testament Jesus and Paul both treated women with a sense of dignity, respect, and equality that defied the cultural norm of their day.” This assertion has been challenged by theologians (Ringe 69).

Second, other pastors, rather than attempting to reinterpret the Bible, engaged in a critical reading of the Bible, allowing it to inform their current non-stereotyped views. Ten clergy spoke of the injustices toward women that were the norm in biblical times. This topic accounted for an average of 7.4% of each pastor’s sermon. One male pastor noted that the story of the adulterous woman being brought before Jesus in the Gospel of John highlighted a double standard in biblical culture: “To have an act of adultery, you have to have two actors. Only the woman is brought before Jesus. So there are lots of questions about the scene.” A female pastor noted the female slave following Paul in the Book of Acts. The name of this woman is not noted in the account, according to the pastor, because “she is treated as disposable to the story.” She goes on to argue, “It is important to register a sense of injustice and even outrage at the idea of a person as disposable.”

Finally, other pastors engaged in using the Bible to note the harsh reality for women in Old Testament times, using it to learn about the experiences of women. One male pastor noted that the account of Naomi in the Book of Ruth highlights the harsh realities for a woman with no husband or children: “Leaving Naomi a broken woman, no longer a mother, no longer a wife, which means for her in her society that she has no bearing, no support, no structure, she is left adrift.” Another male pastor lamented, “The simple reality is [women] are not often talked about or in many cases even remembered.”

Discussion

Stereotypes

In answer to RQ1 (How do clergy conceptualize womanhood and motherhood from the pulpit?), most clergy in this sample utilized the agentic and communal constructed stereotypes of gender, and they attribute them primarily to biology—and so following a more functional perspective. They discuss women as more communal, and yet suggest that this is due to biological traits given from God. Even when clergy used agentic terms of self-assertion and personal efficacy in mothers and women, a closer analysis of the context of this usage shows that these qualities are noted mostly in times of despair (e.g., poverty, health issues). In other words, it is asserted that women and mothers are only agentic when they have no other choice.

When the eleven pastors referred directly to God as a mother, they did so in communal terms. None spoke of God as Mother in agentic terms. To say God is mother is to say, for these pastors, that God is communal. Although God’s communality is theologically necessary given the need for relationship with God, it is worth noting that pastors made motherhood conceptually distinct from the agentic qualities of aggression and directness. This is an important distinction in that for pastors, there was nothing agentic about motherhood.

The importance of this finding is that these pastoral messages (if they are as central to a religious person’s understanding of gender as they might be [Davis 1037]) could inoculate religious individuals from changing their views about gender that often result from an observation of women in agentic leadership roles. These individuals would likely not see women as agentic even in these roles, going against findings that suggest individuals change their gendered perceptions based on these roles in leadership (Rosette and Tost 221–35).

Such a qualitative analysis of sermon content provides deeper insight into how these stereotypes may play out in religion, and it also helps account for differences. For instance, the percentage of the male clergy who used communal language (93%) was much higher than the female clergy who used this language (63%). These results suggest that women clergy may play an important role in changing opinions on these stereotypes as women clergy employ more agentic language and use less stereotypical descriptions of women. Also, when women were attributed (by both male and female clergy) with leadership successes, they were described in more agentic

terms. This supports the findings of Rosette and Tost that at higher leadership levels, women are actually viewed as more agentic than men (226). Thus, although the overall findings of the research suggest that a religious person deeply connected to religious messages could impact their ability to change their views of gender issues, this provides one important means of mediating this phenomenon.

Information use

In answer to RQ2 (How does the information used by pastors when describing characteristic of women and motherhood intersect with the actual content of these characteristics?), the findings suggest that clergy wanting to provide a non-stereotypical portrayal of gender must utilize religious information in specific ways. When discussing these communal traits of God, pastors often used the Bible. If the writers of the Bible purposively choose masculine metaphors for God (Hanson 317), then to describe God as communal (traits not typically considered masculine) would require that pastors do something different with the Bible. This study shows that pastors, rather than criticize the Bible or use it as an example of what not to do, must reconcile the need to see God as communal with the agentic ways in which God is portrayed in the Bible.

When discussing God as mother, pastors relied more heavily on unique insights, rather than the sources of the Bible, stories, experts, current events, pop culture, or church doctrine. This represents a rhetorical strategy of explanation or introduction of personal insights allowing pastors to engage in biblical reinterpretation without alienating the congregation likely unfamiliar with the discussion of God as communal. This represents an important fourth way of interpreting the Bible in a feminist way: by bringing in additional non-biblical sources.

When pastors discussed the motherhood of women, they used a wide variety of sources. The use of the Bible to conceptualize women and mothers in communal terms reinforces the patriarchy of the Bible. It was interesting that pastors could also find biblical sources to support an agentic description of women and mothers when, in contrast, the literature suggests that the Bible portrays women and mothers as communal. This again confirms that pastors often engaged in reinterpretation of the masculine language from the Bible. This could also be a reason why pastors often used stories in this sample along with Bible verses. If the Bible does not provide an agentic description of women, a story given alongside a biblical reading can make it appear agentic. This reinforces the need to see a fourth means of portraying the Bible as a feminist text by using other information sources.

Another method used by clergy in this sample (either deliberately or not) was to discuss the communal traits of women and mothers in agentic language. Of the seven sermons that used this pseudo-agentic description of women, three were female clergy. It could be that this represents an attempt, not to reinterpret the roles of women, but to place the already socially established role at a higher level of importance. These clergy are trying to speak about traditional roles in less traditional language rather than attempting to change the role itself. The finding suggests that the

goal of these clergy is to argue that although women are still communal, the characteristics of communality should be seen in society as a more important set of traits.

Self-sacrifice

The findings of the current study resonate with the concerns of previous researchers that women and mothers are asked to sacrifice too much (Saiving 35–38). Women in this sample are praised for their giving up of their own comfort for their children. This is directly tied to a motherly role bestowed upon women from God, as this sacrifice becomes part of the servant role of motherhood, a role that women were actively and deliberately called into from the pulpit. Pastors often discussed the pain and struggles of women and mothers, but it was mostly indicated as part of the self-sacrifice of communality. Thus, although pastors often shared concern for the pain and struggles of women in society, this was not done as a means of noting a lack of social justice. Rather, it was noted as a mark of pride, a key part of what it means to be a mother. This acknowledgment of the pain a woman feels combined with the assumption that the suffering of such pain is virtuous seems to diminish any goals of empathy by these pastors. It is important to note that the discussion of self-sacrifice tended to come more from male pastors, while discussions of the pain of women came from both male and female pastors. This latter discussion of pain without the virtuous notion of self-sacrifice (noted by many of the female pastors) seems not to have the same diminishing impact on goals of empathy.

Conclusion

The Christian pastors in this study tended to relay a stereotypical construction of women as communal. However, the use of these stereotypes varies considerably according to a pastor's gender and situations described in their sermon. Those pastors attempting a non-stereotypical construction of women as agentic used a number of important information strategies. Findings are limited to the sample, but they reveal important aspects of how motherhood and womanhood are defined by clergy. It will be important to continue an analysis of such current constructions, rather than only relying on historical or theological accounts. Adding to the work of Davis (1037), the current study suggests that if religious affiliation is a primary source of teaching about gender, it is important that the content of the sermon narrative continue to be analyzed.

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