Coming to our Senses: Multisensory Ministry

Name:
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SECTION 1: THEORY
Theory: Chapter 1 - Scripture
Chapter 1: Scripture

Throughout scripture, people encounter God or express their faith using multiple senses.

The next three pages offer specific examples of multisensory experiences in scripture. Read the following passages and underline, highlight, circle, or make notes each time you find one of the senses.

Following these examples, you will find a list of passages that you can look up and explore on your own at home.

What other passages involve multiple senses?

Throughout the session, if any passages intrigue you, or the sensations in the passages spark your curiosity, be sure to jot them down so you can experiment with engaging those senses in your own context.
7 And they shall take of the blood, and strike it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses, wherein they shall eat it.
8 And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it.
9 Eat not of it raw, nor sodden at all with water, but roast with fire; his head with his legs, and with the purtenance thereof.
10 And ye shall let nothing of it remain until the morning; and that which remaineth of it until the morning ye shall burn with fire.
11 And thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste: it is the LORD's passover.

And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service?
27 That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the LORD's passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses. And the people bowed the head and worshipped.
And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again. And the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee. And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God.

And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake:

And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?
23 For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread:
24 And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.
25 After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, this cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.
26 For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.
27 Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.
Try this at Home...

Read the following passages, and note which senses are engaged.

Genesis 18  (Abraham’s Visitors)

Genesis 27  (Jacob and Esau)

Exodus 16.13-26  (Manna and Quail)

Exodus 30.1-10  (Burnt Offerings)

Psalm 34  (Taste and See)

Isaiah 6  (Call of Isaiah)

Luke 19.1-10  (Zacchaeus)

Acts 2.1-15  (Pentecost)

I Peter 2  (Milk of the Word and Stumbling Stones)

Revelation 4  (Every Creature)
Chapter 2: Experience

The multisensory experiences in Scripture influenced Christian practice throughout the ages. In particular, the rituals surrounding the celebration of the Eucharist have drawn on passages like Revelation 5 in engaging the senses.

The following pages offer a very brief outline of the complex history of the Reformed tradition and its approach to the senses.

Prior to the Reformation, Christians engaged the senses in many ways in worship. In the 1500’s, Reformers like Karlstadt questioned the rituals of the church, and its understanding of art in particular.

Subsequent generations gradually reconsidered the role of art and the senses in worship, leading to significant liturgical, architectural, and practical changes.
“In the fourth chapter of the Apocalypse, where a description of heaven is so graphic a replica of the Holy Sacrifice as to preclude the possibility of the resemblance being accidental. In any event, the verisimilitude is so striking that the Christians, at the end of the first century, hearing the passage read would discern all the dominant features of the Mass, at which they were about to assist. The bishop seated on his throne at the end of the church in the apse surrounded by his twenty-four white-robed presbyters; the lamps burning before the Divine Presence; the chant of the Sanctus taken up by the elders; the Eucharistic praises for the blessing of creation and redemption; the descent among them of the central figure, the lamb "standing as it were slain," were the sacrosanct scenes enacted before their senses, the reality of which was hidden behind the veil. Is it a strain on the verities that much of the ritual was molded on this description? Unless these ceremonies already existed their significance would have been lost on the disciples of St. John.”

Christmas, 1521

On December 25 Karlstadt entered a packed Schloßkirche in laymen's clothes, preached a sermon, offering communion in both kinds* to all who desired (including heads of the civic community and the church), whether or not they had confessed, eliminating references to sacrifice and elevation of the host, and speaking only German.

* - Bread and Cup

Karlstadt on Imagery

“Images bring death to those who worship or venerate them. Therefore, our temples might be rightly called murderers’ caves, because in them our spirit is stricken and slain. May the Devil reward the popes who thus bring death and destruction upon us.”


Chapter 2: Experience

Christmas, 1886

Then, in their white and gold vestments, the sacred ministers came silently to the high altar, attended by crucifers, thurifers and acolytes, and stood silently waiting. Suddenly came the bells striking the hour of midnight, and with the last clang the great organs and the choir burst into a melodious thunder of the incense rose in clouds, sound; filling the church with a veil of pale smoke; and the Mass proceeded to its climax with the offering of the Holy Sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ. I did not understand all of this with my mind, but I understood.


Cram’s 1935 ELPC

It is a simple fact that in half an hour, by the addition of a Crucifix and six candles on the Communion table, the church could be prepared for a pontifical High Mass, either of the Roman or the Anglican rite. Everything else is there: the broad and deep sanctuary with its canopied clergy and choirstalls, its ten-foot altar of inlaid marbles, lofty reredos with John Angel’s supreme bas-relief of the Last Supper, and statues of saints, the richly carved stone pulpit on one side, the equally elaborate lectern on the other, the full complement of stained glass windows showing Christian history from Creation onward, and the symbolism of the carvings in stone and wood. It would have surprised and even horrified Doctors Calvin and Knox in their day, but we are permitted to believe they are better informed now.

How do you approach the arts in your ministry?
Scripture and our common experience as Christians both demonstrate the significance of multisensory experiences to our faith.

With these examples in mind, it can be helpful to examine additional sources of information about how multisensory experiences work and how to create them.

Scientists from a variety of fields have explored the impact of our senses on the ways we learn and remember. In particular, social scientists have studied the ways humans learn, resulting in a wide variety of categories of learning styles.

Though recent research has called the conclusions drawn from learning styles into question, the debate surrounding them offers insights into how we learn.

The following pages demonstrate some of the various categories of learning styles, the response to learning styles in research, and some ways to think about how our memories work.
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“Perhaps the most thoroughly investigated of the learning styles are those involving perception, the process most intimately associated with learning. Educators usually refer to the channels through which perception occurs as modalities: vision, audition, and kinesthesia. The channels most efficient for processing information are referred to as modality strengths.”


“For taking in our environment we use our senses - sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell. In academic learning we usually use our sight, our speech and our hearing with less importance placed on taste, touch and smell. No student or teacher is restricted to only one mode for communication intake and output. Some like to use all their senses at once by experiencing their learning and we name this a Kinesthetic preference.”

“…over 90% of teachers in five countries (the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Turkey, Greece, and China) agreed that individuals learn better when they receive information tailored to their preferred learning styles… We observed this strong belief even though literature reviews over the last 30 years have concluded that most evidence does not support any of the learning styles theories.”

“The teacher tries a few different ways of explaining it but to no avail. Finally, she draws a diagram, and the idea clicks. It is natural for the teacher to conclude, “Ah, this student must be a visual learner.” But perhaps any student would have benefited from the diagram because it was an effective way to communicate that particular idea. Or perhaps the student needed to hear just one more explanation. Many accounts of the sudden insight are possible, but the confirmation bias would lead to an interpretation that supports one’s existing beliefs.”

“Memories can also be stored in different senses. There is a difference between remembering what things look like, what they sound like, what they feel like, and what they taste or smell like.”

“The more other information you can associate a particular fact with in your memory, the more pathways you can use to find it. In fact, there is evidence that information is represented in memory as a network of associations among concepts, even if we do not purposely make those associations.”


“Memory, then, is not like a single filing cabinet. It is more like Velcro… Your brain hosts a truly staggering number of loops. The more hooks an idea has, the better it will cling to your memory.”

Think of memory like a city filled with intersections, not a long street of houses. The more roads you can build to an experience, the more likely you are to revisit it.
What senses do you favor in your ministry?
Section 2: Practice
Chapter 4 - Sound
“Compared to a visually trained (V) group, the audio-visually trained (A-V) group showed faster learning on visual trials across the ten training sessions, suggesting that multisensory training promotes more effective encoding of information and/or better retention of learning than unisensory training.”


In other words:

Hearing along with seeing helps people learn more effectively than seeing alone.
Presbyterians focus more on sound than any other sense.

From the importance of preaching and reading scripture, to our intentionality about music in our worship, we pay a lot of attention to sound.

This is also true with our education, which often focuses on either lecture or discussion, both of which we experience through hearing.

It is no accident, then, that architects often designed our buildings to be sound machines. From the early Reformation focus on the pulpit, through the 19th century and the development of the science of acoustics, Protestant churches have made intentional provisions for hearing.

Architect George Kramer included an acoustic diagram in his book on Church architecture, which fits perfectly over his design for Christ Methodist Church (shown below). Eventually, electronic amplification allowed designs such as Cram’s East Liberty Presbyterian to focus less on acoustics while still allowing parishioners to hear.
“In the Ideal Church an ideal auditorium is essential, in which the minister should be able to see each member of the congregation, and of such shape that the audience is as compact as possible, and, so to speak, within the angle of vision. The speaker should be so located as to be within the closest personal sympathy with those he would instruct and lead. As the oblong, rectangular auditorium and straight pews do not secure this result, we must ascertain what will.”

George W. Kramer
The What Why and How of Church Building, 51
The illustration to the left applies George Kramer’s acoustic diagram to the design of Christ Methodist Church (Now First Methodist).

As you can see, the vast majority of the congregation is within the optimal zone to hear every word spoken from the original location of the pulpit in the center of the chancel. Reflecting on his own work, Kramer boasted:

“Plan No. 7 of Plate II indicates practically the plan of Christ Church Pittsburgh, the finest church of Methodism.”
The illustration to the left applies George Kramer’s acoustic diagram to Cram’s design of East Liberty Presbyterian Church.

The spots in the sanctuary that are best positioned to hear the voice of the preacher are interrupted by columns, and the vast majority of the congregation is outside the optimal area. That difficulty may be what prompted the following quote in May issue of the Presbyterian Banner in 1935:

“To facilitate the unity of activities within such a large church establishment, it is equipped with an electrical acoustical system which will carry the voice of the pator to every corner of the church room...”
What does worship sound like in your context?
Chapter 5 - Sight
Every act of seeing is an act of visual judgment. Judgments are sometimes thought to be a monopoly of the intellect. But visual judgments are not contributions of the intellect, added after the seeing is done. They are immediate and indispensable ingredients of the act of seeing itself.

Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye, Rudolf Arnheim

In other words:

The information we gain from seeing may not be the same as information we gain by reasoning.
Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.  

2 And five of them were wise, and five were foolish.  

3 They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them:  

4 But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.  

5 While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.  

6 And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.  

7 Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.  

8 And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out.  

9 But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.  

10 And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.  

11 Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.  

12 But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.  

13 Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.
Ancient Lamps

The lamps of Jesus’ time looked more like this than lamps in our homes, or even oil lamps in our minds. Seeing lamps like this offers an opportunity to explore the context of the passage by learning more about the history and culture around it. It also allows us to situate Scripture in the physical world instead of the world of abstractions or ideas.
When thou callest an assembly of the Church as one that is the commander of a great ship, appoint the assemblies to be made with all possible skill, charging the deacons as mariners to prepare places for the brethren as for passengers with all due care and decency. And first, let the building be long, with its head to the east, with its vestries on both sides at the east end, and so it will be like a ship.”

Apostolic Constitutions Book II, Section VII, LVII
4th Century

Chapter 5: Sight - Experience

Interior of a Wooden Ship’s Hull, Inverted, 1918

Rodman Street Baptist Church Interior 2018
Sketch your worship / educational space
What do the visuals of your context assume?
Chapter 6 - Smell
“The behavioral data revealed that participants rated odor cued OEAMs {Olfactory evoked autobiographical memories} as more pleasant and emotional and to induce a stronger feeling of being brought back in time than OEAMs cued by words. The phenomenological experience was to some extent reflected in brain activity as more limbic and temporal lobe activity was observed for the olfactory evoked memories.”

- The functional neuroanatomy of odor evoked autobiographical memories cued by odors and words. Neuropsychologia

In other words:
Smelling stuff causes stronger and happier memories than talking about smelling stuff.

Unlike visual information that gets processed in our large and wrinkly cerebral cortex, the first stop for olfactory information is an ancient part of our brain called limbic system. The limbic system is the seat of drives and emotions that we often find equally difficult to articulate.

Matthew 2.9-12

9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.
10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.
11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.
12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.
Frankincense and Myrrh
The picture above is Frankincense. While Frankincense and Myrrh both appear in many Biblical passages, they are not necessarily familiar smells in our cultural context. Passages like the one above present an opportunity to engage the senses in Bible study.
Free-Writing

What smells do you associate with your faith? Where could you use the sense of smell in your ministry?
Chapter 7 - Taste
“Memories can also be stored in different senses. There is a difference between remembering what things look like, what they sound like, what they feel like, and what they taste or smell like.”

“The more other information you can associate a particular fact with in your memory, the more pathways you can use to find it. In fact, there is evidence that information is represented in memory as a network of associations among concepts, even if we do not purposely make those associations.”


In other words:
Taste creates a different memory than the other senses. And the more senses you associate with an experience, the more likely you are to recall it.
Matthew 26.26-30

26 And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body.
27 And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it;
28 For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.
29 But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.
30 And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives.
“Take and eat,” Jesus said, passing the bread around. And everybody did, except for Philip, who went away hungry, for he was allergic to gluten.

Oh, wait, that’s not how the story goes!

There is no evidence to suggest that any of the disciples suffered from a wheat allergy, but lots of Christians do today. And that makes it challenging to come up with communion elements that everyone in a given Christian community can enjoy together. Yes, there are other ways you can handle the issue. You can of course have a little plate of gluten-free wafers on the side for those who need them. But somehow it just doesn’t match the extravagant spirit of the meal itself—those forlorn little wafers for the complicated ones in the shadow of the big crusty loaf blessed and broken for everyone else.”

The Quest for a Common Loaf. Angela Hancock, PTS Blog, 11/13/2013
Free-Writing

When do you use the sense of taste in your ministry? What opportunities are there for you to do so?
Chapter 8 - Touch
Given its perceptual power and the wealth of sensory information it affords us, the sense of touch has emerged as an understudied and perhaps underused teaching and learning tool.

Some indirect evidence of how haptics may improve learning can be seen in the technology’s increasing use in flight and medical training. Many military and commercial pilots now are trained in flight simulators, which require the application of force or pressure on the controls corresponding to that occurring during actual flight. Likewise, many kinds of haptic interfaces are used for medical simulation… It is thought, however, that in these training scenarios the advantage of the addition of haptics is its impact on a person’s kinesthetic memory (the ability to remember limb position, velocity, etc.).


In other words: We can learn through touch and movement in ways we are still studying.
I Samuel 17.40-46 (KJV)

40 And he took his staff in his hand, and chose him five smooth stones out of the brook, and put them in a shepherd's bag which he had, even in a scrip; and his sling was in his hand: and he drew near to the Philistine.

41 And the Philistine came on and drew near unto David; and the man that bare the shield went before him.

42 And when the Philistine looked about, and saw David, he disdained him: for he was but a youth, and ruddy, and of a fair countenance.

43 And the Philistine said unto David, Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves? And the Philistine cursed David by his gods.

44 And the Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field.

45 Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the L ORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied.

46 This day will the L ORD deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcases of the host of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel.
Sling Stone

Actual sling stones look and feel quite different from how we often imagine them. Holding a real sling stone may offer a new way to understand the story.
What physical feelings do you associate with your faith? How might you incorporate touch in your ministry?