



Great Souls, Great Prayers

Fred B. Craddock

By Bob Hill

(The following is an adapted portion of a chapter from a manuscript begun during a sabbatical in the summer of 2010.)

It just may be that church historians will assess Fred Craddock's singular endeavors – beginning with *As One Without Authority* and culminating with *Preaching* – as the decisive movement in the rescue and renewal of the discipline of preaching for the church in North America at the end of the 20th century.

Augmented by years of study, his own innate gifts, and the disciplines of his own academic specialty, Craddock is a master story-teller. Craddock's fame in this regard was nurtured first by his family and culture of origin which were and are richly steeped in storytelling traditions. As a Christian he is further convinced that Biblical stories inspire our stories.

The homiletic Craddock which developed throughout his career as teacher and preacher – and for which he is justifiably renown – is normally called the “inductive” preaching method, as distinct from the deductive methods most widely championed in previous generations in the 20th century. The “inductive” approach uses inference, suggestion, and partial directives to lead and move listeners/learners/readers/worshippers to conclusions upon which they will decide.

In line with his inductive approach, Craddock regularly uses indirect strategies, choices, stories, and recollections, to convey information and prompt inspiration, frequently moving from the particular to the general, from the individual to the group, from the congregation to the entirety of the Church.

Craddock is a person of natural, disarming humility. His humble beginnings provide hope for all whose origins were/are in poverty, and his father and mother, and their differences with regard to church involvements, give hope to all whose parents are not in one accord with regard to religion.

Craddock's loyalty to the gospel and the Church Universal – in all of its ecumenical manifestations, and specifically to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) – is founded on his storied encounters with the Church's consistent, though not unsullied, history of embodying the grace of God. While he would probably not be comfortable with a description of himself as “a high-churchman” he obviously has a “high” view of church, as evidenced in his life-long honoring of the Church's capacity to transmit love, care, and empowerment.

Gracious to the point of over-solicitousness, Craddock practices what he preaches and preaches what he practices on a daily basis: “*The final work of grace in the human heart is to make us grateful.*” (*)

Contrary to what Phillip Reiff called the “triumph of the therapeutic,” Craddock believes that the life of faith does not resolve around how any of us, collectively or individually, feels. Thus the prayer he prays daily: “*Gracious God, we are grateful for a way of life and work that is more important than how we feel about it on any given day.*” (*)

Doubt, questioning, and perhaps, occasionally, ennui may invade one's soul, even among the most faith-filled, stout-hearted of Christians. So Craddock counsels, be prepared for challenges to your faith along the

way: *"First off, ask yourself, if you are in a desert or a dry place, if it is a question of faith. It is possible that even [among the most active of Christians] that we can have a problem with our faith. If it is, let the congregation carry you into faith again.... Get some tough devotional materials to use."* (**)

\A statement about faith, prayer, and/or Biblical interpretation can be viewed, Craddock holds, as with a gemstone, from several different angles. *"If it can't be told from at least two different perspectives, it probably isn't of God."* As one person recollected from a preaching lecture Craddock once gave, *"As you do your exegesis, turn the coin over, that is, consider how an opposite interpretation might be true. God's word has density, complexity."* (*)

Craddock has always believed there is a need for a time of quiet reflection every day. We may use such occasions for remembrance, assessment, musing, and pondering the implications and meanings of life's events.

On occasion, in sermons or in teaching, and possibly in prayer, the use of "personification" for certain activities, rituals, and/or themes can be strikingly and powerfully meaningful.

Craddock has consistently counseled people of faith to choose a key Bible verse or selection of Scripture for their lives. Craddock's key verse is Luke 6:35c *"... for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."*

In his story-telling, preaching, and teaching Craddock's rhetoric is winsomely humorous. He seems to find the lighter side in nearly every situation. His own self-effacement – regarding his short physical stature and voice – can sometimes be comical, and it makes for strong, sympathetic connections with his audiences. While he takes God and the gospel very seriously, he takes himself less so.

There is in Craddock's demeanor and theological expressions a hesitancy to invoke the supernatural (what might even be called the "magical") power of God, even in service of someone else's benefit. Rather, his encounters with God are moments of waiting, discovery, always leading to gratitude. *"Sometimes my study moves into prayer – at the moment of discovery. Not that I petition God for a meaning of a text, but that as the text unfolds, there is a discovery and I offer a prayer, usually a prayer of gratitude for an insight.... I don't make a lot of petitions for myself in my prayers, though perhaps I really should.... I pray more as an intercessor for others; I have lists of people I pray for regularly.... In my preparation for preaching I set aside Friday afternoon and Saturday for a time of entering into a mood, a meditation mood; I don't go to parties or to a lot of social events on those days; I'm trying to prepare myself and seeking God's guidance so that I will be an adequate instrument.... During the week I read in the morning, sometimes moving through a book I've discovered that I ought to pursue what I naturally resist.... An encounter with Albert Schweitzer altered my approach to scripture.... Hermann Diem, professor of systematic theology, once asked me if I had read Kierkegaard, and I suppose that was a very significant, radical turning point for me.... In the end, I suppose gratitude is the main substance of my prayers, yes, gratitude."* (***)

Praying with Fred Craddock: Suggestions for Use

Day 1: Pray for the particular needs of someone you know intimately and care for deeply. Imagine how those needs are paralleled in the lives of persons living in Afghanistan, Chile, China, Nigeria, Finland, Canada.:

Day 2: Begin your day by praying the prayer with which Craddock begins his day: *"Gracious God, we are grateful for a way of life and work that is more important than how we feel about it on any given day."*

Day 3: Ask yourself if you are in a desert or a dry place, pertaining to the strength/weakness of your faith. (*Remember*: Even among the most active of Christians it is possible to experience a problem with our faith.) If you are in such place, request support from your pastor and congregational leaders, and allow the congregation to carry you into faith again:

Day 4: Focus on a key Bible Verse for meditation and study. In the meditation and study, offer prayers of thanks for the insights that are granted. Consider treasuring a central verse (perhaps reading it as a “favorite verse”) as a guideline for the living of your faith each and every day. :

Day 5: From time to time, “turn the coin” over in your prayers, asking God for guidance and grace enough to pray in ways that, seemingly, may be contrary to your normal way of praying. If you are praying for health and security for your closest family, try praying for the health and security of persons you have never met. If you give thanks to God for the plentitude you have experienced in this past week, attempt a prayer of thanks for the stretch of want and need that you also experienced on another occasion. Or try the following prayer: “*We pray, O God, that You will provide bread for those who know hunger and injustice, and for those who have bread, we pray that You will provide a hunger for justice.*”

Day 6: Consider an aspect of faith, an idea garnered from your Christian journey, a notion from the vastness of Christian tradition which might be “personified” in your life. Pray that such a “personification” might visit and/or accompany the members of the church, the leadership of the denomination, your own family on a daily basis :

Day 7: Pray this prayer of petition for yourself: “*I pray that at the end of this day, O God, I shall have sufficient humility, gladness, and joy to offer then a prayer of gratitude to You, for the blessings of people, places, activities, and material things that have come my way.*”

NOTES

* The quotes from Fred Craddock are recollected from over two decades of hearing and learning from one who is a master homiletician and legendary preacher and who has become to the author an exemplar and friend. Sometimes the occasions of Dr. Craddock's wisdom were gleaned while he was a guest lectureship, speaking engagement, or preaching moment at Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri. On other occasions, Dr. Craddock's sagacious insights were personally gathered while attending his guest appearances in Disciple venues, at seminary lectures, General Assembly events of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and/or other church services.

** The specific origin of this quote has been lost, but it echoes a similar statement by Craddock at the Pension Fund Breakfast at the time of the World Convention of the Churches of Christ, in Long Beach, California, 1991.

*** From a phone conversation with Dr. Craddock, August 1999.

FOR FURTHER READING

Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1971, rev. 1974 and 1979)

Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001)

Fred Craddock, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001)

Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978)

Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985)

Fred Craddock, *Reflections on My Call to Preach: Connecting the Dots* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009)

Brief Biographical Timeline – **April 30, 1928**, born in Humboldt, Tennessee; **April 23, 1941**, baptized at Central Ave. Christian Church in Humboldt, Tennessee; while attending Johnson Bible College in Knoxville, Tennessee, serves Glen Alice Christian Church and Post Oak Christian Church; **1948**, ordained a minister of the Christian Church at Central Ave. Christian Church; **June 9, 1950**, marries Nettie Dungan in Central Ave. Christian Church; **1950**, B.A. degree from Johnson Bible College; **1953**, B.D. degree from Phillips Graduate Theological Seminary, Enid, Oklahoma; serves pastorates in Custer City, Oklahoma; **1953-1957**, teaches at Johnson Bible College; **1957**, begins work on Ph.D at Vanderbilt University; serves as pastor in Columbia, Tennessee; **1961**, joins Department of Religion faculty at Phillips University; **1964**, receives Ph.D. in New Testament, Vanderbilt; **1965**, moves into seminary faculty position at Phillips, eventually holding the chair of Darbeth Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament; **1968-1969**, post-doctoral study at Tübingen, Germany; **1976-77**, post-doctoral study at Yale; **1979**, becomes the Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament in the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia; suffers from Guillain Barré Syndrome, eventually recovering fully; **1993**, retires from Candler; **1997**, with 80 other members helps to found and serves as first minister of Cherry Log Christian Church in Cherry Log, Georgia; **2001**, Craddock Center is founded in Cherry Log, Georgia, in honor of Fred and Nettie Craddock with the simple mission of “Enriching Lives through Service,” for the people of Southern Appalachia, especially the poor and children; has served widely as lecturer, preacher, keynoter throughout the U.S.; has delivered the Lyman Beecher Lectures (Yale), Scott Lectures (Claremont School of Theology), Adams Lectures (Southeastern Baptist Seminary), Schaff Lectures (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary), Cole Lectures (Vanderbilt), Westervelt Lectures (Austin Presbyterian Seminary), Smith Lectures (Lexington Theological Seminary), Mullins Lectures (Southern Seminary), Earl Lectures (Pacific School of Religion), Clayborn Landers Lecture (Central Baptist Theological Seminary, KC, KS); currently the Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament, Emeritus, Candler School of Theology, and Minister Emeritus of the Cherry Log Christian Church, in Cherry Log, Georgia; Dr. Craddock and his wife Nettie have a daughter and a son.