

Gardner Taylor still a preaching exemplar: Among America's greatest contemporary pulpiteers

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He's 88 years old and technically retired. But Gardner C. Taylor still shows the preaching skills that have placed him on virtually every list of America's greatest contemporary preachers.

As a guest preacher in pulpits across the nation, Taylor continues to charm—and enlighten—worshipers as he has for more than six decades. But he says preaching is always a tenuous endeavor. “It is quickly lost,” he told the PBS program *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*. “It’s uttered, heard and sometimes lost. But it is the mystery of preaching that it survives, and that it has survived so much of our bad preaching.”

By most accounts, very little bad preaching can be traced to Taylor, who moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, after retirement.

“He almost single-handedly has elevated and made visible great preaching,” said Richard Lischer, who teaches preaching at Duke Divinity School in Durham. In addition, Lischer said, Taylor “is one of the first [African-American preachers] whose influence crossed over into the realm of white homiletics and white preaching.”

Taylor was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1918. He said that while he was growing up, he didn't want to follow in his minister-father's footsteps. “I wanted to be a lawyer, but no person of color had been admitted to the Louisiana bar, ever. And when I told an old family friend . . . that I wanted to be a lawyer, he said, ‘Where you gonna practice, the middle of the Mississippi River?’” Taylor recounted.

Taylor went to Oberlin College's School of Theology in Ohio, where he discovered he had his father's gift for speaking. “Both of my grandparents were slaves, and neither could read nor write,” he said. “But somehow he [his father] had this feeling for the melody of the English language, and I inherited it.”

In 1948, Taylor and his wife, Laura, moved to Brooklyn, where he was pastor of Concord Baptist Church of Christ for the next 42 years until his retirement in 1990. His eloquence led to national prominence.

“He manages to keep an enormous range of rhetorical skill under tight, disciplined control, so that when you’re listening to a Gardner Taylor sermon, you feel like something is about to break out, or explode,” Lischer said.

During the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, Taylor played a key role in raising money in the North to support the southern churches’ efforts. Together with Martin Luther King Jr., he pushed the black Baptist establishment to get more involved. That led to the founding of a new denomination, the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

Taylor and King often spent their vacations together. But Taylor says King never talked about his personal struggles. “I did not realize—I should have, I feel guilty about that—I did not realize the pressures this man was under,” Taylor said. “There were threats on his life constantly. He lived under that shadow day by day, and as I look back upon his years, I wonder how he managed.”

Lischer says Taylor was King’s “role model of how one employs scripture in order to use its great themes to preach the gospel of freedom for all humanity.”

Even after the civil rights struggle waned, Taylor remained actively involved in social issues and the political process. Looking back, he admits that he at times may have been too involved with Democratic Party politics. But Taylor also worries that many contemporary churches have lost their prophetic edge, focusing more on personal prosperity than on issues such as poverty and injustice.

“I think the church today in America partakes of the contemporary disease of ‘Let me alone, I want to get along, and I don’t want to be bothered with too many things,’” he said. “When the pulpit becomes an echo of the pew, it loses, I think, almost all of its reasons for existence.”

Taylor says that as he’s aged, his preaching has begun to reflect more about the frailty of human life. That was tragically brought home in 1995, when his wife of 55 years died after being hit by a truck. He has since remarried and settled in Raleigh, where he often can be found playing golf.

This past spring, when Taylor taught a preaching class at nearby Shaw University, he told the students: “You do not want to be known as a great preacher. You do want to strive for people to feel—when you have tried to preach—what a great gospel it is.”

-Kim Lawton, RNS