The people’s preaching class: Fred Craddock in retirement

by William Brosend in the March 4, 2015 issue

BOOKS AND MUSIC: The Craddock Center seeks to enrich the lives of people in southern Appalachia through programs of service and cultural enrichment. Photo courtesy of the Craddock Center

Sometime in the late 1980s I was presenting a paper on my dissertation when I noticed that the most important person in postwar American preaching was sitting in the first row. I had the opportunity to meet Fred B. Craddock later, and that day changed my life.

During the 1960s and ’70s Fred Craddock reshaped preaching in mainline pulpits through two of his books: *As One Without Authority* (1969) and *Overhearing the Gospel* (1978). The world of homiletics has embraced, resisted, and grudgingly revisited the message of these books. They remain among the most important works on preaching in the last 60 years, and their wisdom undergirds most of today’s best preaching.

A few months ago I went to Cherry Log, Georgia, to talk with Craddock and find out what he has been doing since his retirement from Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. I also wanted to find out about the work of the Craddock Center, which was established to carry on his passion for preaching the gospel in words and deeds.

“What was your vision for the Craddock Center when it was created?” I asked.

“We did not have any vision,” Craddock said. “It was all by accident, by need.”

He told me about his life growing up in Humboldt, Tennessee, and about the impact of the Great Depression on anyone born into rural poverty. He tells this story in *Reflections on My Call to Preach*. His preaching, he says, has always been "semiautobiographical."

"Ours was a family of words," Craddock told me. "There were three books in our home: the King James Bible, *The Billy Sunday Story: The Life and Times of William Ashley Sunday*, and Shakespeare's works. My father was a storyteller, and the language of Shakespeare thoroughly infused his speech. My mother set the world to music, making up songs and ditties, accompanied by her guitar or harmonica—that softened the hard edges of our lives. My oldest brother Bill was the editor and publisher of two newspapers in Tennessee; Alvin worked as layout editor for the *Journal of the American Medical Association*; Roland started as a reporter in Memphis, with a colleague across his desk who wrote the novel *True Grit*. Words everywhere."

"In high school I wrote a 75-page paper on Shakespeare. It wasn't for a class; I just wanted to write it. The teacher asked why I did it, then handed it around and said, 'Look at this, a student who knows what he wants to do.'"

But Craddock did not know what he wanted to do. He suspected that he was being called to be a minister, but like pastors and priests before him he could not imagine that it was his call. The ministerial task that he feared the most was preaching.

The call to ministry turned out to be stronger than his resistance, and there was a small college in the family's tradition—Johnson Bible College (now Johnson University)—that, like the better-known Berea College in Kentucky, allowed him to pay for his tuition, room, and board by working on the college farm. Berea was only 19 miles farther away from Humboldt, but "geographical fright"—crossing the state line, something he had never done—kept him from considering it.

He thrived at Johnson and went on to Phillips Seminary, the Disciples of Christ school in Enid, Oklahoma. He graduated in 1953 and went to Vanderbilt Divinity School to earn a Ph.D. in New Testament. His dissertation on Colossians was written under the direction of Leander Keck and Lou Silberman. He returned to Phillips to teach.

Where in all this was Craddock the preacher being formed? As sometimes happens in small denominational seminaries, Phillips Seminary asked Craddock to teach outside his field—in this case, a course in preaching and the literary criticism of the

New Testament. Craddock admits that the class was a failure. The students complained that at the end of the class they were further away from the pulpit than when it started. The class he taught on the subject was the first class in preaching that Craddock had ever been in.

Craddock took a leave at the University of Tübingen, with the aim of studying preaching. “As you can imagine,” he said, “it did not go well.”

Professor Hermann Diem at Tübingen, on learning that Craddock was there to study preaching, told him to go home and read Kierkegaard. In those days, Craddock said (quoting the great biblical scholar Ernst Käsemann), “preaching was mocked as a ‘bastard discipline.’”

Craddock did read Kierkegaard, and he was struck especially by this line from the 19th-century Danish theologian: “There is no lack of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking, and it is something one person cannot communicate directly to another.” This theme became the center of what became Craddock’s Beecher Lectures in Preaching at Yale, which were published as *Overhearing the Gospel*.

Craddock’s point was that preaching should focus not on preacher, text, or sermon, but on the listener and on “gaining a hearing” for the gospel in a culture that thought it already knew what the gospel was about. He argued that the way to gain a hearing for the gospel is by communicating indirectly. The “something lacking” in a Christian land is “something one person cannot communicate directly to another.” Preachers were invited to shift from trying to prove a point to putting the listener in a dynamic conversation with the text. There was room for the preacher to ask questions—and room for the listener to draw his or her own conclusions.

As one just beginning to preach Sunday after Sunday in those days, I found Craddock’s move from deductive, expository preaching to inductive, narrative preaching to be a great personal blessing. The move probably saved preaching from irrelevance.

Not all experts on preaching today endorse Craddock’s approach, but their own preaching style often gives them away. For example, when Thomas Long, who holds the same chair in preaching at Candler that Craddock did, gave the DuBose Lectures at the School of Theology, Sewanee, in 2012, he began by saying that “narrative preaching is taking on water”—but then proceeded to tell stories that argued

otherwise.

He directly challenged the quotation from Kierkegaard that inspired Craddock: “There is no lack of information in a Christian land.” In our day, it can be argued, there is a widespread lack of biblical and theological knowledge.

Nevertheless, the second half of the quotation remains unchallenged—“something else is lacking, and it is something one person cannot communicate directly to another.” Craddock’s homiletic is based on communicating—through story, anecdote, and questions—something that cannot be communicated directly, and that insight remains crucial.

Craddock’s limitations as a preacher are well documented. He is famously not tall, his voice is too high-pitched and only gets higher, and he refuses to leave the pulpit. His gestures consist of knocking the pulpit once or waving his hand over his head and saying, “Whew.”

How did he become a towering figure in preaching? He mentioned to me three things that I think answer this question—tradition, liturgy, and character.

His preaching is first of all biblical. “I never stopped being a student of the New Testament. All through my career I worked on something that was different from what I had done before. I stepped out of the grasp the apostle Paul had on me in graduate school by studying John. Then I concentrated on the parables. I always kept some kind of little exegetical fire going, because I never knew where it would take me.”

Tending the exegetical fire, reading deeply, doing more than preparing the next sermon was to Craddock “not really a method, but a discipline. A discipline of study that allowed the method to more or less take care of itself.” It is a discipline he has not abandoned; he is still working daily in his study even though he’s decided at age 86 that his preaching and teaching will likely be in print, not in person.

The context of the liturgy is a second characteristic of Craddock’s preaching. He comments, “I was walking down a sidewalk in Decatur, Georgia, on the way to the church where I was to preach when I met an acquaintance sitting at an outdoor coffee shop. We chatted and she asked me to join her, but I said that I needed to get to church. I invited her to join me, but she held up her Sunday paper and said, ‘This is my Bible,’ and then her coffee cup, ‘This is my communion.’”

“I think the days of that nonsense are ending. I believe that our traditions are going to return with strength, both to the Eucharist and to carefully crafted sermons that will demand to be published and reread after they are heard.” He knows that coffee and the Sunday *Times* are not sufficient. He also knows that the church has work to do. “The question,” Craddock has often said, “is not whether the church is dying, but whether it is giving its life for the world.”

Character is an obvious but tricky characteristic. On this point Craddock turned to Pope Francis and toward the everyday work of ministry. He expressed the hope that we are near the end of the era of the “church of Oprah,” with its focus on the inner life of the believer, and “back to a focus on the love of God and love of the neighbor.” Oprah Winfrey’s personal example includes starting schools in Africa and other notable acts of charity and generosity, but the church of Oprah begins and ends with self. “If the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others,” Craddock asks, “might that not be a proper starting place for the proclamation of the Son of Man?”

Craddock’s answer to this question led, after retirement from Emory, to his desire to teach preaching to people in Appalachia who could not afford to attend seminary. When he and his wife, Nettie, moved to Cherry Log, Craddock let the word get out that he would be available at no charge for a weekend of preaching and teaching in the small towns of North Georgia, East Tennessee, Western North Carolina, Kentucky, and West Virginia. Only those without a seminary diploma should attend.

These sessions would start, he said, “with a scripture and a sermon by me. Then [participants] would tear it apart, and we would talk about how to put it back together—what had I missed in the biblical text, or what had they missed or regretted in my sermon. Then I would preach it again, and as likely as not they would say, ‘I really liked it better the first time.’ I would use some of those methods in my teaching today if my life was going in the other direction.”

When the Craddocks were planning the move to Cherry Log they had not taken into account a search for a church home. There was no church in their tradition anywhere nearby, and while they enjoyed visiting the Methodists or Presbyterians, they did not find a home among them. Eventually some people in the area from the Disciples tradition asked Craddock if he would lead them in worship. One service led to a service once a month, then to services every other Sunday until eventually Cherry Log Christian Church was founded. It was easy to draw a crowd—the church

put up signs on the highway in the old Burma Shave style, “Fred—Crad dock—preaching—this—Sunday.” Forming a church was something else again. “Anybody can draw a crowd,” Craddock said. “But to what purpose?”

The Craddock Center was founded in 2001 to meet the needs of the children in a nine-county area. Its work, said Craddock, “turned Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs at least sideways, if not completely on its head.” It assumes that children need books and music as well as food and shelter.

Craddock’s legacy is not just the Cherry Log Christian Church, the Craddock Center, and his many articles, books, sermons, and presentations. That part is obvious. A less obvious part is the impact that is being made by the thousands of preachers who have read his works, heard his preaching, listened to his lectures, and sought to pass on in their own way his wisdom and delight in preaching.

Read the sidebar article on the Craddock Center.