Something Else Is Lacking: Remembering Fred B. Craddock

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An unpopular war begun under false pretenses still raged. Gains on civil rights for persons of color, especially African Americans, were being undermined by white supremacists, and equal rights, pay, and protections for women were systematically denied. Once-cherished institutions were widely distrusted and regularly attacked, while protests for or against any and all of the above were common, often accompanied by violence. It sounds painfully familiar, but I am thinking about a half-century ago, not last week. Only those in their sixties or older can credibly claim to remember the sixties, 1963–1974, from the Beatles to Watergate. Like other institutions at that time, the church struggled to find its way, and the available evidence suggests that like today, preachers in the Sixties struggled to find their voices.

At this most unpromising season in the life of the nation and the church came a most unlikely figure from a largely unknown institution, the Graduate Seminary of Phillips University, who proceeded to turn homiletics upside down. From Humboldt, Tennessee to Enid, Oklahoma, by way of Vanderbilt Divinity School, famously short of stature and fairly squeaky of voice, Fred B. Craddock changed *everything* about preaching at a time when nothing less would do. Too many preachers were opinionated, arrogant, and boring, seen as defenders of institutions and mores that needed to be abandoned or overhauled, and so predictable even the youngest in attendance knew what was coming—time for the missionary story; now a quote from St. Paul; here comes the poem! Can't we just pass the plate and get out of here?

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While his opinions were strong, he was the opposite of arrogant and never, ever boring. Like so many others, I was privileged to count Dr. Craddock a mentor and friend, though my admiration was such that I could never call him Fred, much to the amusement of just about everyone else who knew him. He died in early March 2015, and my debt to him was and is far from paid. Yours probably is not either. By remembering his work, especially the pivotal *As One without Authority* and *Overhearing the Gospel*, we can remind ourselves of just how great that debt remains. We will get a little help from the sixties—a Pete Seeger song, originally by Qoheleth but made popular by the Byrds in 1965, "Turn, turn, turn."

Turn One: Toward the Listener

For as long as we could remember preachers began their sermon preparation by asking, "What do I want to talk about this week?" Little got in the way of that question, not the lectionary, nor the liturgical calendar, until Fred Craddock pointed out how arrogant, ridiculous, and counterproductive that starting point was in *As One without Authority* and *Overhearing the Gospel*.[1] The first turn preachers need to make is from the self to the listener. It is interesting to note that in Dr. Craddock's textbook *Preaching*, the chapter on the listeners comes before the chapter on the biblical text, which is followed by a chapter titled, "Between Text and Listener."[2] This is not an abstract debate about the use and misuse of the first person singular in preaching. This is about the preacher's fundamental orientation throughout the preaching process: inward or outward?

The turn to the listener was one part "new hermeneutic," one part Søren Kierkegaard, and one part intuition. The goal, after all, was not to say something, but to have something heard. And because the greatest distance in the church is the distance between the pulpit and the first pew, it was up to the preacher to bridge the distance. Craddock's intuition was that the real challenge for the preacher was not to have something to say that was worth hearing, but to say it in a way that it could truly be heard. In *Overhearing the Gospel* he

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[1] Fred B. Craddock, *As One without Authority* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1971); Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1978).

[2] Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1985).

was particularly concerned with those whose hearing had been dulled by repetition, who were familiar with the dance, if you will, but had long since consigned themselves to observing the moves and steps of others. Tom Long has rightly pointed out that this is no longer our problem, and yet the opening line in the quote from Kierkegaard at the heart of *Overhearing the Gospel* still rings true: "There is no lack of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking, and this is a something which the one . . . cannot communicate directly to the other."[3] We may no longer deceive ourselves about living in a Christian land, and biblical and theological illiteracy is rampant, but there is definitely *no lack of information*. Just Google it if you don't believe me.

Start, though, with the listeners, and ask how they are likely to hear the lessons for Sunday morning. What do they need to know to make sense of Paul in Corinthians? Can the reading from Isaiah be treated without attention to its context, or does that need to be unpacked? And these are not just technical and exegetical questions, important as they are. What about the lives of the listeners? Who has been sick, who is getting divorced, who just buried their mom? Who just learned the cancer is in remission, who is getting married next month, who graduated from school, and with honors no less? In *Preaching* the reader is asked to imagine she or he does not know anything about the listeners, to create a distance and respect where overfamiliarity may have creeped in. It is a useful exercise, because sometimes preachers assume knowledge of the listeners they do not actually possess. We have to ask.

Start with the listener and ask their questions, not just of the text(s), but of life and death, angels and principalities, things present and things to come.

> To everything there is a season
> and a time to every purpose under heaven. . . .
> A time to be born, a time to die
> a time plant, a time to reap. . . .

What season is it in the lives of those who will listen to this sermon?

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[3] Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 9.

Turn Two: No Points, No Poem

The second turn is methodological, and it is and was the most profound of the turns Craddock called for, the turn from deductive to inductive preaching. Deductive preaching begins with the conclusion, "My topic today is the never-failing love of God," and hopes to heaven the listeners will stay interested even though the preacher has given it all away in the first sentence. Noting that in deductive preaching the "introduction is already pregnant with conclusions," Craddock writes,

> Induction alone is being stressed for two reasons: first, in most sermons, if there is any induction it is in the minister's study where she arrives at a conclusion, and that conclusion is the beginning point on Sunday morning. Why not retrace the inductive trip taken earlier and see if the hearers come to the same conclusion? . . . A second reason for stressing inductive movement is that if this is done well, one need not often make the applications of the conclusion to the lives of the hearers. If *they* have made the trip, then it is *their* conclusion, and the implication for their own situations is not only clear, but personally inescapable.[4]

The inductive turn follows naturally upon the turn to the listener, because it takes the listener seriously as a partner in the preaching act and expects the listener to do some of the work, to make the connections and imagine the applications. It recognizes that if the pulpit has any authority left in it, it is a mutual authority born of listening, so that meaning is made together, not determined by the preacher and graciously shared with the listener. If those days were not quite over in the sixties they certainly are today.

Beyond advocating for preaching inductively, Craddock is muted when discussing the form of the sermon. No four pages, no loop, not even a homiletical question. Instead, in his textbook Craddock encourages the preacher to create a form, which is itself a very inductive move.

> Creating rather than selecting a form involves delaying that which is the concern of every preacher, acquiring a structure

[4] Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 57. Some words were changed to reflect the more inclusive reading found in later editions.

> or outline for the sermon. More exactly, it involves subordinating the quest for a form to another interest, one more vital to lively and effective preaching. Instead of asking, What is a good outline I can use for this message? one asks, What is the major communicative burden of this sermon? In other words, What has to be done in order to get this message heard?[5]

Much could be said here, from noting that the discussion of form comes 182 pages into a 222 page book, to recognizing that Craddock calls on the preacher to create her or his own sermon form in an *introduction* to preaching. I do not know and did not ask Dr. Craddock if suggesting a more specific method for crafting an inductive sermon was pedagogically too deductive, though I suspect it was. One learns to preach by preaching, experimenting with forms on the way to finding those congenial to listener, text, and occasion.

The inductive turn was not a turn toward chaos. There was "a time to build up, a time to break down" and "a time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together," but not a time to simply discard structure. Instead of structure there was intention; instead of a fixed method there was purpose. Think of Long's focus and function statement, or ask, Where is this sermon headed? The preacher believes she knows where the Holy Spirit wants the sermon to go and crafts the sermon with the end in mind throughout. But she does not get to the conclusion until the end of the sermon. It was a novel proposition when first made in 1971.

Turn Three: The Stories We Tell

After turning to the listener, and turning to induction, Craddock asked preachers to make another turn. The third turn follows readily on the first two and is the closest thing to method one finds. There are even two chapters in *Overhearing the Gospel* with the word *method* in their titles, the first and the last, though the reader will look in vain for a discussion of "how to do it." Instead, "Concerning Method" is about Kierkegaard, and "The Method of the Teller" about Augustine, Milton, and Stanley Fish, with a dash of Ricoeur.

What Craddock gives us is a reminder that confrontation begets resistance, not change, and that people often hear best when they

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[5] Craddock, *Preaching*, 182.

are *over*hearing. Stories, not diatribes, move mountains. And while narrative may be out of fashion with homileticians, it is not with those listening to sermons.[6] What is needed is indirection, as natural an outgrowth of the inductive turn as the inductive turn was an outgrowth of the turn to the listener. The quote from Kierkegaard mentioned above ended by claiming that the "something" lacking is "something that cannot be communicated directly one to the other." The best way to communicate the gospel, Kierkegaard and Craddock argue, is indirectly. What preachers need, what listeners want, is story. So Craddock included stories in the Beecher Lectures that became *Overhearing the Gospel*.

> It came to pass, there was a certain minister who preached to his little flock of "the world today," "modern man," and "the history of the race." A layman complained of not being addressed by the sermons, but his complaints were turned aside with admonitions against smallmindedness and provincialism. In the course of time the minister and the layman attended together a church convention in a distant city. When the minister showed some anxiety about losing their way in the large and busy metropolis, the layman assured him there was not reason to fear. With that word, he produced from the rear seat of the car a globe of the world.[7]

Stories made Craddock who he was and who we love. In *Reflections on My Call to Preach* he reminds us of the dedication of *As One without Authority,* "To my mother and in memory of my father / She taught me the Word, he taught me the words."[8] His was a family of stories, his father compensating for the many ways he was found wanting with rounds of stories, songs, and an introduction to the world's great literature. Humboldt, Tennessee is just this side of the middle of nowhere, and when it came time to go to college Craddock had his

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[6] Tom Long began his 2012 DuBose Lectures at the School of Theology, the University of the South by claiming that narrative preaching was "taking on water." He then powerfully and memorably told story after story for three lectures to argue the case.

[7] Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 30.

[8] Fred B. Craddock, *Reflections on My Call to Preach* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2009), 46.

heart set on Berea College until he realized that out of state, though it was only one state, was just too far from home. While he did not leave the mid-South, his parents and siblings helped him imagine and create worlds of meaning and wonder that followed him everywhere.

I cannot find the citation, but more than once Dr. Craddock said in my hearing, "The Holy Spirit rarely calls someone to ordained ministry in a voice loud enough for the whole family to hear." His call was clearer than most, if not to his brothers, and his path straightforward; yet he spent most of his ministry in a seminary, not a parish, until retirement, when he founded a church—Cherry Log Christian Church—and a ministry, the Craddock Center. Both are still going strong. Nevertheless, everywhere he went, each time he spoke, the listeners knew that he knew them, marveling at his insight into their world, their problems, their lives. He knew them as well as he knew his neighbors Abraham and Sarah, and the large brood born to their grandson Jacob, who lived down the street. At block parties he introduced you to dozens of friends, the Wesleys and the Luthers, uptight John and righteous Amos, the wealthy and the impoverished, the sick and the recovering. They walked around his sermons like they owned the place, and sometimes loitered near the sermons of others to see if they could lend a hand.

Jesus was at the center of it all, always. But indirectly, not in your face. Part of the Craddock magic was to insert, to insinuate the good news when no one was looking, so that the listener is left to puzzle over how that just happened. The stories do not make a point, the stories are the point; meaning cannot be separated from message, just as form and content cannot be separated in Craddock's approach to the sermon. As noted earlier, in *Preaching* he moves from discussion of all the many forms available to the preacher in scripture and tradition to the suggestion that the preacher is often best served by *creating* a form, one compatible with these readings and this audience.

> Perhaps this is the time to pause and address the objection that has probably arisen: namely, that this view of preaching calls for more artistic ability than most ministers possess. . . . Most ministers, however, possess more capacity for artistic expression than they realize. In many cases traditional instruction in homiletics has not encouraged latent gifts, with the result that the capacity was either not developed, or if it

> was, it found expression in areas other than preaching the gospel.[9]

Craddock understood that preaching was a craft, not an art, something that may be learned, honed, and improved, and that shortcuts born of a gift for gab or a facility with language run into dead ends sooner rather than later.

One last turn, to make things right. What we remember when we remember Fred Craddock are the stories, not noticing how exegesis and theology are embedded in what looks for all the world to be "Once upon a time." Like Jesus, Dr. Craddock loved hyperbole, metaphor, and the unlikely comparison. He had a wicked sense of humor. He made stuff up. There is a straightforward way for us to honor his memory and legacy: work harder at our preaching. Because good preaching only appears to be effortless. It is always hard work.

> The sermon, not finished yet, lingers beyond the benediction, with conclusions to be reached, decisions made, actions taken, and brothers sought while gifts lie waiting at the altar. Those who had ears heard, and what they heard was the Word of God.[10]

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[9] Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 151.

[10] Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 158.