

Fred Craddock

Luke 1:1-4

November 11, 2018

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Last week, when I began this sermon series on Preachers You Should Know and Why, I spoke about Billy Graham and his style, a pure and simple proclamation of the gospel. I had the sense that all the people in the congregation knew of or about Billy Graham. And I heard some great stories! Someone had answered the phones at a Billy Graham crusade, someone knew a close associate of Billy Graham, someone knew Graham himself, many had gone to one of his crusades and remember him well.

Today, I am preaching about **Fred Craddock**, and I suspect many in the congregation have **not** heard of **him**. (Show of hands?) Let me share with you a bit about him and his style, and what we can learn from it. [PUT UP PICTURE OF CRADDOCK] And, we will tell some stories, as is most appropriate to Craddock.

Fred Craddock was born 1928 in Humboldt, Tennessee.¹ As a child, he had a terrible case of whooping cough, and his mother gave him up to God. Fred recovered. The family lived on a farm, but lost it in hard economic times, and moved into town. Fred and his sister had to take small jobs as young children to help make ends meet.

During these years, the Craddocks were helped by both country and city people. A group of women from the local church reached out to the family and helped them tremendously. At this time Fred and his mom started going to church. At church camp one year, Fred determined he would be a minister. When he told his mother this, she told him the story he didn't know until then, that she had dedicated him to God when he was an infant. In addition to this early dedication, Craddock combined what he received from his parents; his father was a great story teller and his mother was a woman of great spirituality. Fred learned from both of them well.

Fred went to Bible college and seminary, and served as a pastor. He went on to advanced degrees, where he focused on preaching. He

¹ Mike Graves and Richard Ward, "Craddock Stories."

also taught preaching. He wrote a number of books. He was a small man with a unique voice, so he knew the burden was on him to learn to well and faithfully. He had a great saying on this: “Just because I’m a **wren** doesn’t mean I can’t preach an **eagle** message. Of course I can. Is that a lack of integrity if I preach something bigger than I can even feel, if I preach a message that I haven’t even grown to? That’s not a lack of integrity. That’s accepting the call. That’s what it is because there’s too much at stake to do otherwise.”² In retirement, he served as a pastor in rural Appalachia. He died in 2015.

Fred’s preaching style was to tell the story of Jesus and to tell stories. He connected the story of the Bible with the story of each person’s life, and in his time, this was a kind of revolutionary style. It differed from the “three points and a poem” style of traditional preaching. Further, his sermons were a times themselves one story, or in then, he told many stories.

Here's a great short example of how this came together. Here is one of his stories. *“My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my*

² Fred Craddock, “The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock.”

father didn't go. He complained about Sunday lunch being late when she got home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, 'Church doesn't care about me. Just wants another name, another pledge. That's the word for it, right Preacher? Pledge? That's all they want - another name on the rolls, some more money in the bank.' I guess I heard it a thousand times. One time my father didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital. He was down to 73 pounds. They'd taken out his throat and told him it was too late. They'd put in a metal tube and burned him to pieces with X-rays. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak; couldn't eat. I looked around the room, flower pots on all the windowsills, a stack of cards nearly two feet deep on the bed. Even on that fold-out tray you eat on in your hospital bed - a flower. Every one of them from a person in the church. He couldn't speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. He wrote: 'In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.'

'What is your story, Daddy?' I said. 'He wrote, 'I was wrong.' Craddock continues, "The way you get into God's story is to say, 'I was wrong. I need a better story.' You may have a lousy story, even a horror story, and

*it holds you back and cripples your joy. It's time for you to say, 'I was wrong.' Or you may think you have a good solid story and say, 'In my story I always earn what I get. In the end - you always get what you deserve in life.' Well that's not true. That's a crummy story. You are wrong. It is never too late to have God change your story. Think about it. We call it grace."*³

Friends, think about the Bible story, the grand narrative. We were created; we all fall in some way like Adam and Eve; we are brought back to life, but it is changed. At times, we may fall into slavery; we are brought out of it by God. We wander in the wilderness; we find our Promised Land. We find Jesus and listen; we are Peter or Judas or the woman at the well or Mary Magdalene or Lydia or Paul. Our story is in that story, somewhere or everywhere. We are the elder brother or the prodigal son. The Bible is the story of our lives.

When Craddock preached, people were drawn in. They listened to him as he told stories, just as Jesus told stories in parables. He didn't have to say, "The moral of the story is." Instead, they heard it, they felt

³ Newsletter of First Central Presbyterian Church, Abilene, Texas.

it, they knew that the story was the story and it was theirs. “Yes,” they would say, “I have been there.” Also, when he told a story from his life, that wasn’t what they thought of---what they thought of was a similar story from their lives.

Our text for this morning begins to tell the story, the story of Jesus. Luke tells the story to Theophilus, a name that means literally, “a lover of God.” The story goes on until Jesus ascends into heaven to be with his father. Luke is Part I; Acts is Part II. Acts begins with that ascension, goes on to tell the story of Pentecost, then the Acts of the Holy Spirit through the apostles to grow the church of Jesus Christ. It goes on through Paul’s house arrest in Rome, and then the New Testament begins with his letters. The story of the church continues there and here, today, and the end is given in the final book of the Bible Revelation.

Listen to some of Fred Craddock’s stories as he tells of the continuing story of Jesus and the church.⁴ Here’s one:

⁴ Mike Graves and Richard Ward, “Craddock Stories.”

A family is out for a drive on a Sunday afternoon. It is a pleasant afternoon, and they relax at a leisurely pace down the highway.

Suddenly, the two children begin to beat their faith in the back: “Daddy, Daddy, stop the car! There’s a kitten back there on the side of the road!”

The father says, “So there’s a kitten on the side of the road. We’re having a drive.”

“But Daddy, you must stop and pick it up.”

“I don’t have to stop and pick it up.”

“But Daddy, if you don’t it will die.”

“Well then it will have to die. We don’t have room for another animal. We have a zoo already at the house. No more animals”.

“But Daddy, are you just going to let it die?”

“Be quiet children, we’re trying to have a pleasant drive.”

“We never thought our Daddy would be so mean and cruel as to let a kitten die.”

Finally, the mother turns to her husband and says, “Dear you’ll have to stop.” He turns the car around, returns to the spot, and pulls off to the side of the road. “You kids stay in the car. I’ll see about it.” He goes out to pick up the little kitten, who is just skin and bones, sore eyed, and full of fleas. When he reaches down to pick it up, with its last bit of breath the kitten bristles, baring tooth and claw. Hisss! He picks up the kitten at the neck, brings it over to the car, and says, “Don’t touch it. It’s probably got leprosy.”

Back home they go. When they get to the house the children give the kitten several baths, about a gallon of warm milk, and intercede: “Can we let it stay in the house just tonight? Tomorrow we’ll fix it a place in the garage.”

The father says, “Sure, take my bedroom, the whole house is already a zoo.” They fix a comfortable bed, fit for a pharaoh. Several weeks pass. They one day the father walks in, feels something rub against his leg, looks down and there is a cat. He reaches down toward the cat, carefully checking to see that no one is watching. When the cat sees his hand, it does not bare its claws and his; instead it arches its

back to receive a caress. Is that the same cat? It couldn't be the same cat. It's not the same as that frightened, hurt, hissing kitten on the side of the road. Of course not, and you know as well as I what makes the difference.

Not too long ago God reached out a hand to bless me and my family. When God did, I looked at that hand; it was covered with scratches. Such is the hand of love, extended to those who are bitter.

Here's another story:

When we were in Europe, in Germany, studying for a year, I'd been down to Zurich in Switzerland, several days from my family in another country. I was overwhelmed with a sense of melancholy. I was lonely. I got on the train and grabbed a sandwich. On the German trains I would usually try to get a place in a compartment where there were already several people so I could just be at the fringe of the conversation. My German was not very good. I mean, how many times can you say, "Auf Wiedersehen" and make it fit in, you know? But that compartment was full, the next compartment was full, the next compartment was full, and the next compartment... Well, in the last compartment there was one

elderly woman, I figured out that if I went in there, that's two, that gives me 50 percent of the conversation. Could I handle it? I had no choice. "Is this place free?"

She nodded. I sat down. She was staring out the window. "Nice day."

She turned and smiled. I worked up another German sentence, a real profound like, "Will we get there tonight?" She turned and smiled. "you going home?" She turned and smiled. I thought, Boy, I know more German than she does. I grew more bold and said, "I'm going to Stuttgart." She turned, smiled. I said "Where are you going?"

She said, "Rostach." Rostach? Rostach was in Community German, the other side, DDR. Communist Germany. (This was a long time before the wall came down.)

I said, "Are you a Communist?"

She said, "No, I'm a Christian."

I said, "I'm a Christian."

She looked at me. I said, "I'm from America."

She said, "Yes, I know." We began to talk.

I said, "What's it like to be a Christian in Communist Germany?"

"What's it like to be a Christian in America?" she said, "My grandchildren call America the happy land."

I said, "Well, it's not too happy lately." It was in the late 1960s, and we had assassinations and terrible things. I said, "America's not a happy land now."

She said, "Oh yes [it is], because in America you don't throw old women away."

I said, "what do you mean?"

She said, "When I got my papers to visit outside Communist zones for one month to visit my grandchildren, I said to the office What if I don't come back? And he said, "Oh you'll be back, you have family here. But even if you don't, who cares? You're just an old woman."

I said, "Well no we don't do that in America." She had a music box she'd bought. You twisted it, and as it unwound it played Silent

Night. She twisted it, it began to play, and she sang it in German. She said, "You sing a stanza."We had a wonderful time.

I had that old sandwich I had bought, and my stomach was growling. I was hungry, but I didn't want to eat my sandwich in front of her. I didn't know what to do. Finally I thought, I can at least share the sandwich. Then I ran up against another problem: It was a German sandwich, and the bread was extremely hard. You probably know about German sandwiches. I couldn't get it into two. I'm breaking it over my knee, trying to get the sandwich in two so I can share, and finally when it broke, I pulled a part of it to hand to her. I hadn't noticed, but in the meantime she had peeled an orange and was extending to me half as she received half of sandwich. Half a sandwich, half an orange. We talked of being Christian in German and in America. We got to Stuttgart.

"God go with you."

"And God go with you." I could've sworn we had communion on the train.Since I was with her, I have been in 200 churches, I suppose, and the first thing I do when I go to a church is study the menu. I find it the same in every church. One half sandwich, one half orange;

it's the Christian way. It thought of her tonight. In fact I thought about her so much that I got to thinking how far it is from Springield, Missouri, [where I am tonight] to Rostach, German. Do you have any idea how far that is, how many hundreds, how many thousands of miles it is? From Springfield to Rostach. Do you know how far it is? I checked the atlas. It's across that table. That's how far it is.

Amen.