

Fred B. Craddock. *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. 305 pages. \$23.98.

Fred B. Craddock, Dale Goldsmith, and Joy V. Goldsmith. *Speaking of Dying: Recovering the Church's Voice in the Face of Death*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012. 220 pages. \$17.58.

On March 6, 2015 Fred Craddock passed away leaving an indelible mark on the world of preaching. He had written numerous books and commentaries and contributed many articles to a variety of journals. The one book that most set him apart in the field of homiletics was his 1971 volume, *As One Without Authority*. This review is a way of expressing a small token of appreciation for his contribution to those who teach homiletics and to those who preach. I review two fairly recent volumes he produced or helped to produce, one of them a collection of sermons and the other an aid to assist preachers in the task of ministering to the dying.

The Collected Sermons volume contains fifty-two sermons plus three eulogies. Reading these sermons, for me, was like taking a pleasant trip down memory lane. Many of the stories, images, phrases, and rhetorical strategies I have heard before and are permanently etched in my mind. Yet I never tire of hearing them. They inspire me to be a better preacher and teacher.

I first discovered the work of Craddock in the early 1980s while preaching fulltime for a church in Oregon. In trying to responsibly meet the weekly challenges of preaching, I was desperate for help. I turned to *As One Without Authority* and liked what I read but still did not know how to craft that kind of sermon. So I started collecting tapes of his sermons and over the next decade or so listened to close to 200. I learned from them and they challenged me. Reading the sermons in this book made me realize how much Craddock's sermons influenced my preaching.

Craddock organizes his sermons according to the biblical texts they address. The first nine sermons are based on Old Testament texts. Twenty-six come from the Gospels, six from the book of Acts, and the remaining eleven from the Epistles. The transcriptions of the sermons include Craddock's delightful introductory comments to his audience demonstrating his keen awareness of the people to whom he was speaking.

In the introduction to the book Craddock reminds the reader "that these sermons were prepared to be heard not read" (xii). He explains, "you are reading speaking" (xii). Of the fifty-five sermons, only one was in manuscript form before it was preached. Ten of the fifty-five were included in previous works, four from the collection found in *The Cherry Log Sermons* volume (2001), four from the revised edition of *As One Without Authority* (2001), and the remaining two from two other sources.

The sermons reveal the classic preaching style of Craddock with humor, delightful surprises, new insights into the text, crisp refreshing images, and powerful personal stories. As Craddock says in the introduction, there is a "surplus of meaning lurking in every good sermon as in every biblical text" (xiv). These sermons not only reveal Craddock's rich understanding of Scripture, they also reveal, as Barbara Brown Taylor observes in the foreword, "someone who noticed a lot about ordinary human life on earth" (ix). His keen observations about routine events in life populate his sermons as he describes conversations, meal times, family activities, friendships, and life transitions.

In addition to all of these qualities is his ability to use language and craft words into memorable phrases and images like "concrete clouds" and "soft scoops of grace." Phrases that pepper the landscape of the sermons that just naturally flow from his mouth include some of the

following: “The final work of grace is to make one gracious” or “anyone who can’t remember past his or her own birth is an orphan” or a line extracted from a poem by Emily Dickinson “we’re sweeping up the heart and putting love away.” One of my favorites is “there is no way to modulate the human voice to make a whine acceptable to God.”

The sermons contain no dates, places, or details. Taylor in the foreword argues that this is a positive quality, “it means the reader of this volume is not in charge. You are a guest here, not a host” (vii). While I do believe such a posture releases imposed constraints on the sermons, at the same time identifying special times and occasions for some of the sermons can aid in an even deeper appreciation and understanding of them. Some of the occasions are fairly obvious. The sermon entitled “Familiar Questions, Strange Answers on Luke 13:1–9, appears to be preached shortly after the terrorist attack on 9/11 (165–169). It is a powerful sermon that calls for restraint, repentance, and an acknowledgment of God’s patience with us. If I didn’t know that context, the sermon would not have had the effect on me it did. The three eulogies at the end of the book are given a specific context. Without knowing that, these sermons would also have had less impact. I believe that would be true as well of a few of the other sermons whose contexts are not identified or at least not obvious.

These fifty-two sermons represent some of the best of Fred Craddock and I assume represent a year’s worth of preaching though obviously delivered over a couple of decades or more. As those who read and listen to Craddock’s sermons already know, there are many more. The classic sermon, of course, from Romans 16, “When the Roll is Called Down Yonder,” brooks no rivals. Just a few of my other favorites that I have not seen in printed form include, “The Embrace of Necessity” (Philippians 1:19–26), “Why Aren’t There More Exits in Church?” (Hebrews 6:1–12), “Would You Live in a Place Where There Were No Churches?” (Revelation 21:22–27), and “When Clouds Return After the Rain” (Ecclesiastes 12:2). It simply demonstrates the depth of wisdom and gifts Craddock possessed.

The death of Janet Goldsmith, a pastor, beloved sister, daughter, and student inspired a book of a different kind, *Speaking of Dying*. She was a former student of Craddock’s who died of cancer in 2002 at the age of thirty-four. This book was written out of the context of a church that did not know how to minister to her as its pastor during the final days of her life. It created an exigency in the minds of these writers to alert pastors to the unspoken problem of ministering to the dying and better preparing them to meet the challenges of the occasion. The book initially surveys ten churches in Southern and Midwestern states whose pastors had died and how these churches handled or rather mishandled their end of life days. The opening chapter recounts “the dramatic stories of ten dying pastors whose end-of-life days were lived out not only ‘on the job’ but also in the grip of terminal illnesses lived in full view of their death-denying congregations” (xviii). The results are abysmally disappointing (11). Not only were the pastors unsupported but the churches as a result also suffered (13). The common denominator among all ten churches “was a failure to communicate honestly and substantively within a context provided by the Christian tradition” (17).

Chapters One and Two lay out the problem of churches who may live by faith but when it comes to the process of dying fall far short. Basically what the authors found churches doing was outsourcing the final stages of life to other care professionals. Chapters Three through Six cover various theological perspectives and resources that preachers can call on to assist them in bringing about a more healthy and faithful response to the dying process. These include developing a theology of dying, pastoral guidelines for speaking to those dying, and preaching on death and dying. Chapter Seven offers testimonies from ten individuals throughout the history

of the church who faced death with courage, faith, and graciousness (e.g., Ignatius, Thomas a Kempis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, etc.). This chapter serves as a counter to the ten churches earlier described who were unfaithful in their responsibility to the dying. The final chapter, Chapter Eight, provides a framework for practicing strategies for end-of-life issues within the church——“A Good Dying” as they title the chapter.

Chapter Six, “Preaching on Death and Dying” is where Craddock’s fingerprint is most evident. He offers suggestions to preachers for effective ways of preaching on death and end-of-life issues. His suggestions are grounded primarily in New Testament texts except for a brief mention of the power of the lament psalms. The suggestions include the following: assume your congregation wants to hear about death; think through your own theology of death; steep your words in Scripture; and lead in lament. Typical of Craddock’s biblical insights, after probing Jesus’ perspective on death from the Gospel of Luke, he makes the following observation: “Luke apparently believed eulogies should precede rather than follow death” (136). He follows this up by giving several examples of this practice from Luke.

Reading *Speaking of Dying* and then reading the three eulogies at the end of *The Collected Sermons* volume provide a small window into Craddock’s theology and approach to end of life matters. What stands out in these sermons is the highly metaphoric language used. In the eulogy delivered after the death of his brother, he personifies the quality of doxology. Doxology becomes a living and breathing entity that carries the freight of his message. In the eulogy to a young girl, the image used is the “Angel of the Chosen” who God uses to identify very special people on earth to raise very special children. And Craddock writes the final eulogy in the form of a poem. As we grieve the loss of this great man who has had such a tremendous impact on all of us, we say to each other with the same words he used to comfort others, “we are sweeping up the heart and putting love away.”

Dave Bland, Harding School of Theology, Memphis, TN