

Fred Brenning Craddock. *Reflections on My Call to Preach: Connecting the Dots*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2009. 128 pages. \$19.99

For the countless preachers and teachers of preaching who over the past forty years have come to admire and even devour the work of Fred B. Craddock, this new little book comes as a precious gift. It is a memoir of the first years of his life, ending on the day he enrolled as a freshman at Johnson Bible College in Kimberlin Heights, Tennessee, a few miles outside of Knoxville.

Actually, it is not a memoir, at least not the moving, probing, soul-wrenching kind that his former colleague at Candler, Roberta Bondi, gave us a few years ago. That is why Craddock calls this a reflection, or just “reflections.” This is a quick, delightful read, set down just as he would present it in his inimitable lectures, serious and moving one moment, then cracking a good line sure to result in the most satisfying kind of laughter. We do, in fact, get to know the early formative influences on his life in these pages, at least those from the poverty-ridden years of his childhood and teens.

There is a narrowness to his “theme” that he works hard to overcome, though. Craddock was obviously asked to write a book about his “call” to preach. But in the rather intellectualized tradition of the Disciples of Christ, one tends not to “experience” the identifiable “call” that many other traditions more or less assume. As a result, Craddock ends up telling not about a “call,” as such, but the story of how he came to study for the ministry, having his heart set on becoming a preacher.

As many know by now, no one can spin a story better than Fred Craddock can. Here are stories we have not heard as well as several that, in both his books and his sermons, we have heard before. Here is the surprising story of that B. in Fred B. Craddock, an ancestral tale worth the book itself. Here, too, are the stories of his diphtheria in infancy and the malaria – “the only in my family to get it” – of his youth. It was during the isolation of his malaria that his father presented him three formative books of his life: a King James Bible, a biography of Billy Sunday and *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*.

Here are the stories of his father, the alcoholic, some of which we have heard in the sermons, and his mother, unexpectedly “the pacifist;” stories of his siblings, his brothers and sister, of his living in an overcrowded house, and, even then, his diligent search for places of quiet and solitude, places to conjure and imagine.

Here are his stories of going to church and Sunday School, including reflections on his teachers, including one influential teacher who married a man named Manning and moved to Mississippi. She later bore a son named Archie, who became father of Peyton and Eli. Here, too, are stories of the church where first he preached a sermon, five minutes long and so brutally interrupted by that “mentally and emotionally challenged man” that Craddock was sure he would never preach again.

Since my favorite Craddock sermon is “When the Roll is Called Down Here,” I was fascinated to read again here a story that is in that sermon, one about his summer camp experience imagining being a martyr: “ready, aim, fire!” There was something charming about discovering that the story was based in reality. That conjured camp Wikki-Wikki of the story was, in fact, Bethany Hills Christian Camp not far from Nashville, a place where Craddock was not only a camper as a child but later a staff member as well.

What is most unexpected about the book is that in the midst of these “reflections” Fred Craddock is ever the teacher, even if we must overhear the lessons in the storytelling itself. In

this book he muses knowingly on the nature of memory and remembering. There are examples here of humor and laughter, a subject that some of us have long wished him to discuss in more detail. There is, of course, material here for a full course in “storytelling” itself, homemade chicken soup storytelling.

And, yes, there is much here on the nature of a ministerial “call,” particularly the kind that emerges from circumstances and not as a voice from the clouds.

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