



CRADDOCK
STORIES



“When I was in my late teens, I wanted to be a preacher. When I was in my late twenties, I wanted to be a good preacher. Now that I am older, I want more than anything else to be a Christian. To live simply, to love generously, to speak truthfully, to serve faithfully, and leave everything else to God.”

—Fred B. Craddock



CRADDOCK STORIES

By Fred B. Craddock

Edited by Mike Graves and
Richard F. Ward



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Fred and Nettie Craddock,
εὐχαριστοῦμεν

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Acknowledgments

It has been said that some things are too important to do alone, like church, for instance. Of course, some projects are too big to do alone, like this collection. Therefore, we wish to thank the following: Jon L. Berquist, for his patient and perceptive editorial eye; our graduate assistants, especially Nicole Finkelstein-Blair and A. J. Ballou, who transcribed hours upon hours of Fred Craddock's sermons; the various churches, seminary librarians, and regional offices of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for all their help in securing tapes of sermons; our families, who encouraged us along the way; the faith and learning communities of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City and Iliff School of Theology in Denver, who support us; George Nikas and Marilyn Schertz of CST Media; and the saints of the Cherry Log Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), who so graciously welcomed us into their community of faith.

Introduction

There is a preacher I know who has a clay figurine called “Pueblo Storyteller” in her study. You may have seen this figure before, as it is quite prolific these days. “Pueblo Storyteller” is showing up in homes everywhere, near fireplaces, in living rooms, libraries, dens, and on mantles. He is the creation of Helen Cordero, a Native American potter of the Cochita Pueblos who, in 1964, wanted to honor the memory of her grandfather. Known among the Cochitas as a gifted storyteller, Santiago Quintana wanted the traditions of his people preserved, especially in the memories of the children. “Come children, it is time!” And the children would gather around him to listen to his stories of the people, Cordero remembers.

She has captured this image in clay and painted it in the colors of earth and sky. The Storyteller’s eyes are closed, but the mouth is opened to a round “O”. His eyes are closed because all storytellers have to keep a steady gaze on their inner worlds of memory, perception, and imagination; his mouth is open in order to transport others through the medium of sound, language, and imagery. Children are attached to the Storyteller in various places and exhibit a variety of emotional attitudes and facial expressions—one is crying in the cradle of his arm; one is sleeping in his lap; one is climbing to the top of his head; and another is listening peacefully on his knee.

We, of course, could be any one of them. Or we could sit in the Storyteller’s place. As preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are entrusted with stories others have been telling for ages and will be telling for ages to come. Do we attach ourselves to these gospel stories, or have they attached themselves to us? No matter. In either case, we sit in those holy spaces they create, and there we laugh, weep, rest, or remain restless.

We also look deeply into our own hearts in order to tell our stories of faith—to give an account of those places where we too have encountered the living Christ. This is why Fred Craddock has been the “Storyteller” for many of us. We cling to the stories he tells, not simply because they comfort us, make us laugh or cry, or leave us scratching our heads. We cling to them because we hear in them both dissonance and harmony between our stories and the stories of God.

It is not surprising that the “Pueblo Storyteller” sits very close to the Craddock books on this preacher’s shelf. We certainly know Fred as a teacher of preachers. Fred opened the door to “inductive” preaching for a generation of preachers and revived the work of many who had been preaching for a long time. This method of preaching changed many

preachers' thoughts about the ways that narrative material is brought into the service of the sermon. Simply put, an inductive method of preaching starts in the middle of human experience and moves from there to conclusions about the gospel. It is counterpoint to another method of preaching, "deductive," which states a truth in the form of a general proposition or conclusion, then breaks it down into points, instructions, and conclusions. In deductive preaching, stories and anecdotes are brought into service in the sermon to illustrate the points, little adornments that help dress the sermon up for church. Fred shows us that stories have a different sort of work to do in proclamation. What we experience in Fred's stories is the revelatory power of the gospel even while its wisdom remains hidden from the world.

Fred's homiletic has proven to be a capstone in the homiletical household for more than three decades. Even so, a good many preachers and other folk scratch their heads and say, "Craddock? I think I have heard *about* him but can't say that I ever heard *him!*" To read through the stories in this book is certainly not the same experience as hearing him tell them. It is our hope, however, that by reading through them you can catch a glimpse of Fred Craddock. We have attempted to capture elements of the oral style in which Fred speaks. Read the stories out loud and listen to the rhythms of "ordinary" speech that have extraordinary power—to reveal and conceal, to comfort and convict, to delight and teach. For those of you who read these stories for the first time, we hope that you will find him here, pointing to places in his life where the truth of the Christian gospel broke through into the clearing. Others will be "listening" to these stories again. That is the nature of stories—they live to be told and retold in God's loop of memory and imagination.

If you were to ask a preacher friend to tell you what her favorite Craddock story is, she might recall one of the stories compiled in this book. Or she might well say, "The one where I heard him for the first time!" For some it was at a conference in a large auditorium (with Fred standing on a box behind the pulpit!), for others it was in the sanctuary of a rural church; still others heard him for the first time in the chapel service at the seminary. Any one of Fred's listeners could tell you the way that he first "hooked" them into hearing—with a quip off the cuff, a self-deprecating joke, or the treble music of his voice. Or they might even tell you about the way he wrestled with a troublesome biblical text right before their eyes until it gave up its blessing. Sooner or later the talk will come around to the stories themselves. It is hard to think of Fred's preaching without recalling how stories punctuate his sermons. Some come from literature, many from the scriptures, but most from the canon of his life.

Whether Fred is stepping into the pulpit, behind the table, or onto the dais in front of the classroom, he becomes a storyteller. The arts of teaching, preaching, and storytelling enjoy a long, enduring marriage in Fred's ministry of proclamation.

Fred will nod when you use the adjective *inductive* to describe his preaching. He will certainly pause before answering the question: *Are you a "narrative" preacher?* That may surprise you at first. So many narrative or storytelling preachers claim Fred as a primary influence on their own development as preachers. Stories show up in Fred's sermons like the surprise appearance of old friends. However, narrative covers so much acreage in the field that it's hard to put a fence around it. You can easily get into a debate about what narrative preaching is and what it isn't and whether Fred is an example or not. Why bother with that? The point is that narrative has earned its place in the preacher's glossary because it has helped some of us find our way into the pulpit, some who might never have gotten there by any other way. It is also a way that we have been taught to think about our listeners. Storytelling is the way that all people give order and meaning to their experience.

In this book we have a particular set of stories that come from Fred's world. They are stories that have (as Fred himself might say) some "sweat on them"—the kind of sweat that breaks out on the back of a Tennessee farmer, the sides of the chalice at the table or the water bucket drawn from the well, the neck of the preacher in the Disciples' church, or the brow of the graduate student in the Vanderbilt library. We never tire of hearing them because they taste like salt—the kind of saltiness that Jesus talks about. You could describe the people that populate these stories as "the salt of the earth." They become so real to us in Fred's stories that they guide us across the threshold of grace. The lingering affect of Fred's own narrative material—his personal stories and recollections, the parables he lifts from scripture and everyday life, and his trunk full of literary images—has helped tune our ears to our own stories and train our eyes inward to see ourselves. The word that has the most resonance in the swirling world of stories we live in is the word that is formed on our lips and shaped in our hearts.

If you were to ask us what our favorite Craddock story is, we would tell you: "The one where we visited him at his home in Blue Ridge, Georgia," which is another story altogether.

Fred Craddock's Story

If you drive about two hours to the north of Atlanta on Highway 5, you come to a town called Cherry Log, Georgia. That's where Fred Craddock lives. The farther out of Atlanta you go, the more rolling and lush the hills become, eventually giving way to the Blue Ridge Mountains, the southernmost part of the Appalachians. Everywhere you look in this part of the state are hills covered with pines. Cherry Log is situated on Highway 5 between Elijay to the south and Blue Ridge farther up the road. Blue Ridge is where Fred gets his mail and where folks come from miles around to look for bargains in the antique stores.

Not so in Cherry Log! In Cherry Log there is The Pink Pig, a barbecue restaurant off to the right, where sauce-smothered pork is piled high on your plate. In Cherry Log there is also a church, Cherry Log Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It's not really on the highway. The short road off to the left winds up a steep hill, and nestled among the pines is the relatively new building, with an even newer addition. Every Sunday morning at 9:45 Fred teaches the forty or so folks who show up for Bible study. An hour later they stand to stretch and welcome those arriving for worship at eleven o'clock, usually about one hundred thirty folks in all.

On a hot weekend in July the two of us have come to visit with Fred and Nettie. We arrive on Saturday afternoon and go out to dinner that evening. Over the smells of pan-fried fish, country ham, fresh vegetables, homemade bread with apple butter, and sweet tea, we tell stories. And the stories come. And so do the desserts—freshly baked pies and cakes.

Afterward, we follow Fred and Nettie back to their home. The paved road off the highway gives way to gravel. Soon two lanes give way to one. We turn into the driveway and gasp. It is not so much the house, a lovely home of gray cedar, beautiful in its own right. No, it is the land and the house—and the water. It is all of them together! A river runs through it, well, not exactly, but close. The stone-banked creek cascades down the hill on the back side of their property and goes right under their home, a kind of bridge straddling the creek. It is gorgeous. Out back are several decks, some on one side of the creek, some on the other.

It is Nettie who tells us the story of the land, about the old mill that used to be here. She shows us the stones from the mill that are still standing, witnesses to an era gone by. The sun is fading into the hillside, and on the deck we tell stories well into the Georgia darkness. "I recall one time," Fred begins, "when I was lecturing at a seminary and during a time of fellowship with the faculty, one of them blurted out, 'Fred, tell us a story!'"

Not a certain story. Not a story appropriate to the moment. Not a story brought to mind. Just tell us a story!" Fred pauses, then says, "That fellow didn't understand a thing about stories or storytelling." We listen for hours to Fred's stories, and we realize that we have entered not only personal ground but holy ground really, one preacher's encounters with God.

The bugs chase us inside eventually, and the Craddocks chase us out even later. Back at the motel in Blue Ridge, we marvel at the life and ministry of Fred B. Craddock that have brought us all together this weekend. It is a long way from Kansas City and Denver, where we teach, to Cherry Log, Georgia. In some respects, it is an even longer journey from Humboldt, Tennessee, where Fred was born in 1928.

Brenning Craddock, as he was called then, spent his early years on a farm where his dad raised fruits and vegetables. His mother stuck Buster Brown stickers in the heels of shoes at the Brown Shoe Company. It was his mother who had given him to God when he was an infant. He had such a bad case of the whooping cough that she gave him up for dead at one point and went out to the barn so she would not have to listen to him gasping for air. In the barn that day she offered him to God. He recovered, but would not find out about this until years later.

The Craddock family lost the farm and eventually moved into town when Brenning was about eight or nine years old. He still recalls how devastating this was to his parents. Times were so hard that they actually had to borrow coal ash from neighbors to start a fire of their own. He and his siblings helped make ends meet by selling papers and mowing the lawn of the nearby cemetery. As might be expected, good country people also gave them things. These are the kinds of deeds that would come to inform the rural stories of Fred's preaching.

It was after the Craddocks had moved into town that some ladies from the Central Avenue Christian Church reached out to the family. They brought some shoes that fit little Brenning and a picture book with stories from the Bible. As a result of both gifts, he started going to Sunday school in the Christian church. His mother had grown up going to church, with what he fondly calls "an *In His Steps* kind of Christianity." Fred's mother encouraged him in spiritual matters, while his father, a gifted storyteller, instilled in him a love for stories. As a young man, Fred watched as many of his friends in church made commitments to vocational ministry, but not Fred. For one thing, he did not want to take such a matter lightly. For another thing, the size of pulpits and the voices of those who filled them were overwhelming to him. Even when he did entertain the idea of becoming a minister, his school counselor and his pastor advised against it.

During Fred's senior year of high school something pivotal happened. At church camp there was a night of consecration down by the lake. Afterward, the counselor encouraged the youth to return to their bunks in silence and write a letter to themselves about what they were experiencing. The letters were to be mailed out the next January. Fred remembers receiving the letter and saying yes to ministry. His mother was pleased, and that is when she told him about her dedicating him to the Lord when he was sick as a child.

After high school, Fred went to Johnson Bible College, a conservative school that required intensive study in the biblical languages, both of which he still reads well, though he admits his Greek is better than his Hebrew. At Johnson, he was required to memorize the content of each chapter of the New Testament and to memorize large portions of the New Testament in Greek. While attending Johnson, he served as pastor in two small churches that he reached by Greyhound bus every weekend, Glen Alice Christian Church and Post Oak Christian Church.

In college, however, he was not given much encouragement toward a ministry of preaching. After his first speech in class, the teacher blurted out, "Do it again. I didn't hear a word you said." Fred was so determined to strengthen his voice that he would go out to a nearby pasture regularly and preach to the cows. He thought if he could get Holsteins to raise their heads, he would be heard in the churches.

He met and fell in love with Nettie Dungan. They were married in June after graduating from Johnson. Fifty years later they are still in love, with her name mentioned in many a "Craddock story." They spent the summer of 1950 preaching at various churches, always traveling by bus because they did not have a car. When it came time to go to seminary, they visited Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis and Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, but the Graduate Seminary of Phillips University seemed like home, being located in rural Enid, Oklahoma. Fred started there in the fall of 1950, finishing in 1953.

In his seminary preaching classes, he was schooled in the traditional approach of John Broadus' monumental work *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*. All those sermons, regardless of the text and occasion, sounded the same. It was the kind of preaching Fred heard growing up. G. Edwin Osborn was his professor, a man who had once been a dispatcher for trains, a job in which everything was highly structured. That was how Fred was taught to preach—Roman numerals, capital A and B, little ones and twos.

It was at Phillips that faculty members encouraged him to think of becoming a teacher some day. Over time the idea grew on him, so after

graduating and serving a church in Custer City, Oklahoma, Fred went back to Johnson Bible College, where he taught from 1953 to 1957, seeing one class all the way through.

While serving as pastor in Columbia, Tennessee, he began his doctoral studies at Vanderbilt and began to experiment with storytelling as a way of preaching. The members of the church commented more than once on how his informal talks at church socials were so natural and interesting. “For instance,” he recalls, “in the fellowship hall after a meal, I found myself using scripture and people’s experiences, telling anecdotes from my life, and bringing it home to the point of the occasion. But then in the sanctuary on Sunday morning, I’d manufacture something else that I thought a sermon must be.”

Fred was hesitant to try storytelling approaches to preaching for several reasons, one being his weak voice. His effort to be heard meant there was no room for modulation, the kind of thing required in storytelling. In addition, his mother frequently used the word *story* as a synonym for lying. She even made it into a verb. “Don’t story me,” she used to say. She did not consider stories to be appropriate in sermons. Yet Fred’s father had instilled in him a love for literature, especially Shakespeare. Slowly, he began to experiment with storytelling in the less-formal Sunday evening services in Columbia.

After finishing his doctoral course work in 1961, he went on to teach at Phillips at the undergraduate level while he completed his dissertation. Five years later, he began to teach in the seminary at Phillips. It was there that he was asked to teach a course titled “From Text to Sermon.” The intent was to show the practicalities of exegesis. He still recalls being fascinated with what he describes as “the sermon being the future of the text.” One of his great contributions to preaching theory has been a sharing of his own instinctive genius, bringing to the conscious level what he did naturally on his own when preparing a sermon. It was not easy to do at first, he notes, “It was like watching your feet while you walked.”

His publishing *As One Without Authority* was not intended to revolutionize preaching theory, a discipline not held in high esteem at the time. He simply wanted to help his students preach with integrity. The title itself was originally intended as a humble reflection that this was not his field. He later found the phrase in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, who would become a key figure in Fred’s work.

During the academic year of 1968–69, he was on sabbatical leave in Germany. A couple of the chapters for his book were already written, but he felt that German scholarship might be able to help him think through some issues yet unclear in his mind. In particular, he had gone to study

with Hermann Diem who, as it turns out, had been forced into early retirement because of alcoholism. On a narrow street in Tübingen, between the university and the Neckar River, Diem told Fred that he was wasting his time, to go back home. Then, in passing, he blurted out the name of Kierkegaard. “Study Kierkegaard,” Diem told him. It was a providential moment. The writings of Kierkegaard helped Craddock to finish *As One Without Authority* and became the major force behind his 1978 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale, which were published under the title *Overhearing the Gospel*.

From 1979 to 1993, Craddock served as Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, in Atlanta, Georgia. While there, his reputation grew through lectureships and numerous publications in New Testament studies and homiletics, including his introductory textbook in homiletics, *Preaching*.

Upon retiring from Candler, Fred had planned to conduct workshops in preaching for uneducated ministers in the rural Appalachians. He had not planned on becoming the preaching minister at Cherry Log Christian Church. That happened while doing some supply preaching at a church in Blue Ridge, near where he and his wife had retired. It was the people in the community who encouraged him to help them start a church.

Although Fred preaches at Cherry Log almost every week, a search committee has been formed to call a pastor. When a pastor is finally called, Fred will help in whatever way he can, but hopes to give himself more fully to workshops for rural pastors. In the meantime, he is the Cherry Log congregation’s pastor. In his study, he can close his eyes and see the folks who worship there on Sundays.

On this particular Sunday morning in July, we drive down the highway to Cherry Log knowing that today’s Sunday school lesson is on the parables of Jesus. How appropriate, since in many ways, Fred’s stories are parables, what C. H. Dodd described as the kinds of stories that leave listeners in doubt about precise meanings and that tease folks into wrestling with what they mean. Not surprisingly, that is what Fred does in Bible study this morning.

In the worship service, the congregation celebrates the music ministry of the church, dedicating new choir robes and recognizing the gifts of those who lead in worship. There is no sermon per se, not today. Instead, Fred shares a communion meditation as we gather at the Lord’s table.

After Sunday school and morning worship, we gather at another table. We go to The Pink Pig for lunch, where the smells are scrumptious and the surroundings are unimpressive, except for the picture of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter hanging on the wall. Fred introduces us to the owner,

who is busy cooking. Over lunch we tell more stories and talk “preaching.” We wonder if Fred realizes that his favorite expression for starting a story is “I recall.” We wonder if he realizes what powerful effects his stories have had on people over the years. We wonder if he realizes how many preachers on any given Sunday tell a “Craddock story.”

Later that evening we gather again at Fred and Nettie’s home. We talk about this collection of stories taking shape. It was our idea all along, not Fred’s. He honestly wonders why anyone would want to read his stories. Still, if it’s going to happen, there are some things concerning the book about which he feels strongly. He insists, for instance, that there be no index—not a topical one (“They’re parables,” he says), not even an index of key words (“Preaching is hard work. Let them hunt for it!”). He insists that the stories be told in his own words, not ours or anybody else’s. He hopes that readers will treat the stories with respect. Fred also wonders how the stories will be arranged. “How do you fellows plan to organize the collection?” he asks.

That is a good question, one that demands a really good answer, or at least a story, a parable of sorts. During the worship service earlier that morning, Fred did not preach. Not exactly. Instead, he shared a meditation at the time of communion. He began by asking, “How far back can you remember?” He noted that he’s heard of people who claim to remember way back into their childhood, as early as when they were two or three years old. He said that on a clear day he can sometimes remember clear back to creation, God’s creating the world with a word. On a clear day he can sometimes remember back to the cross on which Jesus died and that glorious day in which he was raised from the dead. “How far back can you remember?” he asked the congregation.

Later, in the motel room, we marvel. Oh sure, we had hoped to hear a sermon, but we marvel at Fred’s simple yet powerful meditation. We wonder if most folks remember the first Craddock story they ever heard. We wonder aloud if we remember the first time we heard Fred tell a story. We ask about each other’s favorite Craddock stories. Then we recall how the idea for this collection came about in the first place.

In November 1992, the two of us were in Kansas City for a workshop on biblical storytelling. At lunch that day some of the ministers who were gathered around one of the tables spontaneously began to share their favorite Craddock stories. Well, almost; they would begin with the phrase, “My favorite is the one about...,” but that was nearly the end of each telling. No one actually told a complete story. We simply referred to one, and everyone nodded. “My favorite is the one about jury duty.” “That’s a good one, but what about the barbecue restaurant?” “Oh yeah, that’s good,

but what about...?” We knew then and there that some day these stories, these Craddock stories, would have to be collected.

We decided on only one rule. All the stories in this book come straight from Fred Craddock’s mouth. We found them on audiotape, on videotape, or in print, or we heard them directly from Fred. We’ve tried to preserve his own wording. Although there are many other stories that we—and many other people—remember hearing Fred tell, these are the ones where we knew Fred’s own words to tell the story. If you know more, feel free to send them to us—or at least tell them to one another.

Back in the motel, we wrestle with Fred’s question about arranging all these stories. Maybe alphabetical based on the first line, like so many collections of poetry. No, that won’t work. People know Fred’s stories by the punch line, not the first line. Maybe they could be arranged purely at random, no rhyme or reason whatsoever. Definitely not! We wonder how Fred would arrange them. We wonder if he has his own favorites, and if so, what those might be. Later that day we ask, “Fred, do you have a favorite or two?” He smiles. “Of course!” he says. “Of course!”

Mike Graves
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