

Rev. Parker's last stand: Fifty years of preaching

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

Carl Parker died recently. The Reverend Carl Parker. That you have not heard of him is an indication that you have never praised God in a church that bears the name of Wampee, Little River or Indian Field. For over 50 years he preached the gospel at places like that.

During his last days, when I attempted to comfort him, saying, “Well, Mr. Parker, it seems as if the Lord is giving you a peaceful leave,” he roused himself, looked at me from his bed, and said, “With the churches I have served, the Lord owes it to me.”

His father before him was a Methodist preacher—barrel-chested, with a thunderous voice, swatting flies in a forlorn little Methodist church while preaching his way through both testaments in one sermon. His stepmother was also a Methodist preacher, first in the South Carolina Conference in the 1950s, picking up the gospel from the drooping hands of her ailing husband just before he died. Between them they served a half dozen churches at one time. The Reverend Bessie Parker went on to be a legend within the annals of the South Carolina Conference.

You could therefore say that preaching was in his blood. When I was courting Mr. Parker’s daughter, who eventually became my wife, he was serving as a district superintendent in the Marion District. While Patsy’s family had nothing but Methodist preachers in it, mine had none. So I was nervous. I wanted to make a good impression. I was considering entering seminary in the fall, and I coveted the approval of this preacher’s family.

A district superintendent is in charge of a score of preachers. The district superintendent does not serve one congregation, but supervises the preachers. That meant that Mr. Parker spent many Sundays in the pew rather than in the pulpit, a situation that he detested.

That particular Sunday, the preacher was a master of ambiguity and equivocation. Mr. Parker squirmed in his pew as the preacher carefully qualified just about every statement. Mr. Parker withdrew his large railroad watch from his pocket at five-minute intervals throughout the sermon—the watch that had been given to him by some thankful congregation of the past. He would gaze at his watch, shake his head, thrust it back into his pocket and groan slightly. The poor preacher continued to flail away, poking here and there at his biblical text, rather than delivering it.

“We need to be more committed to Christ . . . but not to the point of fanaticism, not to the point of neglect of our other important responsibilities. We must have a greater dedication to the work of the church. Now I don’t mean that the church is the only significant organization of which you are a member. Most of us have obligations to various community groups . . .” On and on and on.

Every five minutes, with some ceremony, Mr. Parker withdrew his gold railroad watch from his pocket, opened it, looked at it, remained surprised that so little time had elapsed, closed it, and slapped it back in his pocket with regret.

After the service, all of us in the district superintendent’s party brushed right past Mr. Milk Toast with barely a word of greeting. Mr. Parker led us down the sidewalk back to the district parsonage, like ducks in a row. He went right through the front door and charged up the stairs. Pausing mid-way up he whirled around, shaking a finger at me and thundering, “Young man, if God should be calling you into the pastoral ministry, and if ever you should be given a church by the bishop, and if ever God gives you a word to say, *for God’s sake would you say it!*”

This was the only instruction he ever gave me on homiletics. It was enough.

Throughout his ministry he was a thoroughly biblical preacher, cultivating a great affection for the demands of the text while nurturing an obliviousness to the praise and affection of the congregational context. When I got out of seminary and was appointed to my first church, I asked him if he had any advice for me. He said, “Get to know your people. Find out where they are, and work from there.”

This seemed like good advice to me.

“I never will forget my first appointment,” he continued. “I was still a student at Duke Divinity School, and the bishop sent me to a little church outside of Bennettsville. Backward! Those people were so far out in the country, even rain

hardly ever made it out to them. They were as ignorant about the faith as any crowd I have ever served.

“But I remembered what I had been taught in seminary—find out where the people are and work from there. So my first Sunday, as I stared out on those blank faces, I began by asking them, ‘How many of you are familiar with the Trinity?’

“Dumb stares greeted me back. ‘Well, how many of you know who Jesus is?’ I asked. One old farmer shrugged his shoulders; otherwise, no response.

“In desperation I asked, Well how many of you have ever heard of God?

“Again, blank looks. Finally, one old man rose and said, ‘Preacher, I may have heard of him. Is his last name Dammit?’”

There were people who didn’t know how to take Mr. Parker’s humor.

When it came time for him to retire, more than two decades ago, the church he was serving had a special day for him, complete with a big dinner with his favorite barbecue.

But the bishop had some little churches without pastors, and he asked Mr. Parker if he would be willing to serve them, so he went back into the trenches for another four or five years. He finally said that he now really must retire. They had a dinner for him on the grounds, and tearfully relinquished him to retirement.

Then a new bishop had a church or two that no one wanted to serve, and he implored him, so in his mid-70s he was out of retirement again.

I told my wife, “I’ve gone to two retirement dinners for him in succession, and I will not go to a third.” But I did.

On a pleasant June day, after he had announced that this time he was really, completely, absolutely retiring, the little church had a special day for his last day of preaching. The church was packed—about 100 people gathered. Mr. Parker preached on a favorite text, in which Paul sings of the height and depth, the breadth and width of the love of God.

It was Father’s Day, and Mr. Parker mused a bit in the beginning of the sermon about our love of and gratitude for our fathers. “And yet, the love of God is deeper,

richer and more persistent even than the love of the most wonderfully dedicated human father," he declared.

And then he recited from memory one of his favorite stories by Jesus—the story of the shepherd seeking the lost sheep. This was followed by a somewhat surprising digression in which Mr. Parker reminded the congregation of the upcoming execution of a convicted criminal who was on death row in Columbia. We then heard a narration of this man's terrible crime spree through South Carolina—killing, raping and maiming five or six people before he was apprehended.

"And yet, according to today's text, and the beautiful story which Jesus told, God Almighty would go to Columbia, to death row, and seek this man, would stand beside him, and plead with him, until (the story says *until*) he brought him home. And furthermore, when God finally reaches this lost one" (Mr. Parker was reaching the climax now, pounding on the open Bible before him), "Jesus says that there is more joy in heaven over this one lost sheep coming home than over 99 righteous people—like us!"

Now turning to an usher, he said, "Joe, how many people would you say we have here today? I'd say about 99 of us, all hunkered down safe in the fold. More joy in heaven over Jesus' embrace of that murderer for the kingdom than over all of us good ones here today! What a great God we've got!"

I noted that, after that sermon, the people in that little church seemed much more willing for preacher Parker to go ahead and retire.

He recounted for me, when I was a young preacher, his first days in the Annual Conference. At his first conference his preacher-father asked him, "Son, where would you like to see the bishop appoint you?"

He dutifully replied, "Well, Daddy, I took a vow to go wherever the bishop sends me. I don't really have anywhere in mind. But I do know where I hope *not* to go. I would just as soon take a ticket straight to hell as be appointed down to Ridgeland." The elder Parker had served Ridgeland when the younger Parker was a boy. It had not been pleasant.

The next day, the young preacher saw his father in the hallway of the church where the Annual Conference was meeting, "Son, I just had a conversation with the bishop. You just got your ticket."

That first summer in Ridgeland, it was so hot that the flowers on the altar withered before a service was over; acolytes fainted; even the candles drooped and melted. Though air conditioning was available, the legendarily tight-fisted congregation had refused to lay out the money.

He first preached on a Sunday in August: "I was to preach on a well-known parable of our Lord this morning. But the parable ends with the wicked being thrown into the eternal fires of hell. Not wanting so early in my ministry to offend any of you by criticizing a potential place of residence, I have moved toward another text. But just let me say" (his voice now rising to a shout) "that you people are going to fool around and kill me up here in this pulpit! Hell ought to have no terror for any of you who are accustomed to sitting through services in this church!"

The next week, a campaign was launched to buy air conditioning for the church.

In one of his novels dealing with World War II, James Jones tells the story of a group of soldiers who took and held an obscure crossroads in France, shortly after the Normandy invasion. Most of them lost their lives in the effort, but the unit held its post until reinforcements arrived. Jones says that victory finally came in the great war not so much because of the major battles that were fought and won, but rather because of heroic skirmishes by a few people in a thousand obscure and out-of-the-way crossroads.

If the kingdom of God ever dawns in its fullness and glory, at least in Low Country South Carolina, it will be because of the many preachers like Carl Parker who stood their ground and had their say, in a thousand out-of-the-way crossroads. Their lives, and the sacrifices they made, are a great testimonial to the truth of another preacher who did most of his preaching in obscure, out-of-the-way crossroads.