



AMID GRANDEUR, GREAT PREACHING

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Caption: 1. COVER OF THE BOOK: Sermons from Duke Chapel; 2. Lincoln 3. Willimon 4. Heyward

Duke Chapel can be a tough place to preach. Because the cavernous neo-Gothic structure is so dark inside, the preacher can't see very far, which makes gauging audience reaction problematic. Then there are the acoustics.

William Willimon, former dean of the chapel, notes that an "unnatural reverberation" causes speakers to hear their words a few seconds after uttering them. The limestone walls amplify a baby's squeal unnaturally; a dropped hymnal becomes, according to Willimon, "a thunderous peal."

But these problems have not kept some of the world's best English-speaking preachers from coming to Duke University, to the Chapel, to preach. A new book called "Sermons From Duke Chapel," published by Duke University Press and edited by Willimon, collects texts of nearly 60 sermons delivered there since the structure's dedication in 1935.

"It's a marvelous record of preaching, going back these 70 years," said Willimon, now bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church.

The \$34.95 hardback includes sermons by Paul Tillich, the great 20th-century theologian; William Sloane Coffin Jr., the liberal former chaplain of Yale University; Will Campbell, the renegade Baptist preacher and author; and evangelist Billy Graham. African American preachers in the book include C. Eric Lincoln, Howard Thurman, James Forbes (a North Carolinian) and Peter J. Gomes, from Harvard University's Memorial Church.

Women are well-represented, including Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge, who on March 16, 2003, in the early days of the Iraq War, preached a sermon

titled "The Enemy Lines Are Hard to Find."

"That's one of the strongest anti-war sermons I can remember," Willimon said. "She's a very cultured, sort of serene, statuesque woman preacher with a Tidewater Virginia accent, but that day we were really hit in the face. I remember a professor came out and said, ``I'm so ashamed of the university for not speaking out against the war, and I am so proud of Duke Chapel for having a sermon like that.' Not everybody liked it."

One of Willimon's favorite sermons also is strongly political. On April 29, 1956, in the midst of massive white Southern resistance to the Supreme Court's Brown vs. Board of Education decision mandating integration, H. Shelton Smith of the Duke faculty preached on race relations.

"When we consider the Supreme Court's decision from this Christian perspective, we are bound to admit that it is morally right," Smith said. "If therefore this ruling is being bitterly assailed in the South, it is due in no small measure to the moral infirmity of our Christianity."

Georgia Harkness, in 1939, was the first woman to preach at Duke Chapel. At least a dozen Catholics and four rabbis have preached there. Charlotteans who have preached at the chapel, and have sermons in the book, include Louis Patrick and the late Carlyle Marney.

The chapel is home to an independent Christian congregation of about 500 members, Willimon said. When school is in session, the congregation consists of about one-third students, one-third tourists and other visitors, and one-third congregation members.

In recent years, a special endowment has paid visiting preachers between \$600 and \$1,000, Willimon said. They are drawn not by the pay but by affection and respect for Duke, particularly its divinity school, and by Duke Chapel itself, despite the visual and acoustical challenges.

One preacher came in spite of the building's beauty, Willimon noted. That was Will Campbell, famously suspicious of Christians' spending on church buildings.

Willimon recalled walking with Campbell toward the chapel and remarking on the magnificence of its tower. He asked in jest if Campbell was thinking the same thing.

"He said, `No. I was thinking (Jesus) has come a hell of a long way from Bethlehem.'

"Charlotte Connections in "Sermons from Duke Chapel":

Billy Graham, who grew up in Charlotte, is represented by the sermon "Finding Answers," preached on Sept. 23, 1973.

Carlyle Marney, late pastor at Myers Park Baptist Church, is included with a sermon titled "Not to Condemn Us," preached on April 17, 1977.

The outspoken feminist and lesbian Carter Heyward, who grew up in Charlotte and became one of the first female Episcopal priests, made the book with the sermon "The Enigmatic God," preached on Nov. 20, 1977.

Louis Patrick, pastor for many years at Trinity Presbyterian Church, is represented by the sermon "The `Ah' of Wonder," preached on Sept. 30, 1984.

George Linney III of Charlotte, and a member of Myers Park Baptist, helped transcribe recorded sermons for the book while a Duke Divinity School student.