

Protagonist Corner

*The Witness of Carlyle Marney (1916-1978)*¹

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All flesh is grass, including preacher flesh, famous or not. Ask around the congregation and see who knows anything about your predecessor who filled the pulpit three or four decades ago.

In his time Carlyle Marney was one of the great ones, not only in the United States, but also in ecumenical circles around the world. He served congregations in Kingsport, Tennessee, near Louisville and in Paducah, Kentucky, in Austin, Texas, and in Charlotte, North Carolina. Fourteen volumes of his theology and sermons were published. He taught preaching and/or ethics at places such as Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Duke Divinity School, Virginia Military Institute, and Princeton Theological Seminary (mostly in the summer programs there, but he once was offered the chair in homiletics and declined). He preached at Harvard, Yale, Chicago, Vanderbilt, Riverside Church, and Union Theological Seminary in New York, in Korea and Japan and around Europe, and in countless pulpits of small renown but of possibly great significance.

Active in both the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches and a board member of *The Christian Century*, he also helped begin and lead numerous groups in the towns and cities where he was a minister. He received several honorary doctorate degrees and was especially proud of the ones from Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte (historically an African-American institution) and from the University of Glasgow in Scotland. When major health problems caused him to resign the pastorate at Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1967 he founded Interpreters' House, an ecumenical center for renewal and study at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. Interpreters' House became well known for its program of integrating psychology, philosophy, theology, Biblical study, and the arts, and for reaching out especially to ministers who were burned out or burned by the struggles related to civil rights and the Vietnam War and the general upheavals in the Church during the 1960's and 1970's. Colleagues at Interpreters' House included James Fowler, whose later work at Emory University on the stages of faith became a signal reference point for many. Marney's wide circle of friends included Lyndon B. Johnson, Sam Rayburn, Bill Moyers, William Sloane Coffin, George Buttrick, Karl Menninger, Clarence Jordan, Benjamin Mays, and countless children, laborers, teachers, professional people, artists, members of the military, and prisoners.²

John Carey points out that during the Paducah years, Marney came to formulate three vows regarding the ministry: "1) I would never become economically victimized by a job. 2) I would never want anything a denomination could give me to the point of paying too much to get it. 3) I would follow new light into anyplace as soon as I knew it to be new light."³ Later on he added a fourth vow which he often repeated at Interpreters' House: "I will never lie from the pulpit."

During the eleven Interpreters' House years Marney increasingly became ecumenical and more critical of institutional religion (especially of Southern Baptists,

but sparing no one), and he more intentionally explored psychiatric, sociological, philosophical, and interfaith approaches to the human condition. He expanded his preaching and teaching assignments as well as his writing. His schedule in May and June of 1978 included preaching and leading seminars in Arkansas, Alabama, Oregon, Colorado, and North Carolina, in addition to the Interpreters' House regimen. On July 3, 1978, he collapsed while leaving his office to lead the Pastors' School at Furman University and died immediately, less than a week shy of his sixty-second birthday.

Marney's preaching was utterly unique, closely related to his personality and charisma, and particularly to his deep voice, which someone compared to the voice God would surely have if He were from the South, only deeper! By nature inquisitive, Marney brought a passionate intellect to the preaching ministry. He believed that a preacher should be continually in process, becoming more and more familiar with the Christian tradition as well as with culture. (Here in his approach to preaching, he was more like Tillich than Barth.) During the 1970's he would chide younger ministers to "keep on doing your homework—you'll never make it as a guitar player or comedian." At the time of his death, books on his desk included Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, a prayer book, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Augustine's *Letters*, Robert Bailey's *The Minister and Grief*, and a Greek New Testament. He once listed the authors who had most influenced him—Augustine, Rudolf Otto, MacNeil Dixon, William Temple, Dostoevsky, Unamuno, Berdiaev, Brunner, Kierkegaard, and John Baillie.⁴ He believed that an uneducated and unprepared minister was no more to be excused than a careless surgeon, an attorney who failed to write a timely brief, a mechanic who left out parts of an engine, a sanitation worker who spilled trash all over the yard, or a thief in the business world. Often he said that he listened for thirty hours a week and studied for twenty more, for the privilege of speaking for twenty minutes on Sunday.

Race

From his family of origin, who had been mostly Union supporters during the Civil War, Marney understood that Christ died and lives for all and not just for comfortable or Caucasian people. The image of God was in people from Creation, and, in the words of Irenaeus, in Christ God became like us so that we might become like Him. And so in Austin he sought paths toward reconciliation and desegregation. It is easy in 2011 to forget how apartheid was the entrenched norm in the 1950's and 1960's. Long before the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court verdict rendered "separate but equal" schools unconstitutional, Marney had preached about civil rights as a Christian imperative. In Austin he met often with black ministers and friends in an obscure Mexican restaurant. With a few others he lobbied the Texas legislature when racist bills were being considered. John Carey relates,

On one particularly tense occasion, with thirteen blatantly discriminatory bills pending on the floor of the legislature, Marney invited Congressman Brooks Hayes of Arkansas to come to Austin to speak against such legislation; he also prevailed upon Price Daniel, then governor of Texas and a close personal friend, to introduce Hayes. Hayes spoke at a rally held at the First Baptist Church, and all thirteen bills were killed in the legislature.⁵

However, Marney was enough of a Niebuhrian regarding human self-interest and sin to never place ultimate hope in political reform, so he continued to labor for reform while always preaching the Cross and believing that the kingdom of God was always beyond human creativity.

In Charlotte, Marney came to see the idolatrous economic power of the privileged culture in which he worked as the ideology which sometimes subtly and most often overtly supported racism. He sought out friendships with persons in the black community, particularly with faculty members at Johnson C. Smith University and with activists such as T. J. Reddy (who was bailed out of jail by Marney when Reddy and others had been arrested for allegedly burning a stable). Marney not only took public stands on such issues as desegregation of public accommodations, but also worked behind the scenes as a member of the Executive Committee of the Chamber of Commerce and as a member of the Council on Human Relations. Through members of Myers Park Baptist and others, he moved items such as redlining and the lack of affordable housing on to the public agenda. It took until 1964 for the restaurants and hotels of Charlotte to be desegregated, and this transition was largely peaceful because of the leadership of the Chamber of Commerce, who saw the economic risks of doing the wrong thing. In a sermon in 1965 Marney said, "Unless we make the plight of the Negro American the central concern of all Americans, there will be no social peace in this generation to come. A candid history of the South and its people would be unendurable for a Southerner to read. We could not face it. Shorn of its myths and legends we would repudiate it as not our own."⁶

During this period Marney organized a regional, integrated conference on civil rights at Myers Park Baptist and on another occasion had also invited Clarence Jordan, founder of the inter-racial Koinonia Partners in Americus, Georgia, to Charlotte and was told by several prominent members of the congregation never to bring Clarence back. Not only was Jordan considered too radical on race, but his economic ideas about Christian socialism were construed as communism by the bankers who heard him.

Whatever influence and victories Marney experienced on the racial front came in great measure from his ability to relate pastorally to his parishioners who disagreed vehemently with him. In the voluminous correspondence of the Marney papers, there are many examples of dialogue on sensitive matters which were never reconciled, but nevertheless a relationship endured, often by sheer willpower and commitment to the Church as Christ's body and not simply a gathering of the like-minded. Civility in discourse was more prevalent than it is today. In 1960 Marney received a long letter from a well-known Charlotte physician who was struggling with integration of Memorial Hospital where he practiced. (The physician viewed himself as more humane and progressive than most in that he practiced at Memorial and not at the private Presbyterian Hospital.) He enumerated the following:

- 1 The ideal solution would be an entire wing of Memorial Hospital for negroes (with a separate entrance).... This means segregation, but it also means equal facilities and professional care....
- 2 If the above plan (wing) cannot be carried out, the next best solution is segregated wards....
- 3 If complete integration has to be started, I believe that it will require

many years before the white public will accept it on a large scale basis. In other words, the effect would be to make Memorial a "city hospital" with the "Myers Park people" choosing other hospitals. . . , and this will certainly run private patients away! . . . If I had my way, I would see to it that all negro doctors, nurses, etc. receive proper training and that proper facilities are provided for them and then I would be perfectly satisfied for the negro to be taken care of by their own race. Naturally, this is impossible at the present time, thus the rest of us are going to have to do our share.

This is a long, rambling letter, but I did want you to know a little more in detail my feeling in the matter. I want you to know that I greatly appreciate your letter of March 10th. I also want you to know how much you mean to my family and me. We are very happy that you are our pastor.

With every good wish and kindest personal regards.⁷

Marney's reply acknowledged the distance between their positions, but closed as follows:

I do love you for the candor and forthrightness that marks everything you say and do. Because this is true I have little concern as to whether we agree or not. . . . The grandest thing that comes out of these relationships is the personal element of relation which exists even where disagreement is the order of the day. Thank you for what you mean to me and mine.⁸

The Environment/Creation

Especially during the last five years of his life, Marney began to speak more directly to environmental issues. This is not surprising in that from childhood he had spent a great deal of time enjoying the natural world, and his forty-five acre farm near Lake Junalusaka had brought respite and delight and wonder for him and many others for twenty years. But in many ways Marney was again ahead of the times and prophetic. His stance was biblical, theological, and plaintive during a time when Americans were only beginning to experience gasoline shortages and to raise questions about nuclear wastes and air and water pollution and over-consumption of food. The first Earth Day celebration had been held only in April of 1970. (This essay was being written in 2010 when nightly reports of the Gulf Oil Spill disaster filled the news and in 2011 following the meltdown of the Japanese nuclear power reactors, and Marney's positions seem as yet both needed and unheeded.)

First, Marney observed that there is a difference between having a responsibility for creation and of worshipping nature. In *The Recovery of the Person* (Abingdon, 1963) he insisted:

Nature knows no anthems, no hymns, no religious nature songs which see God in birds and bees and sunsets and trees: when did nature change? There have been fifteen hundred floods on the Yellow River in the crowded canyons of China in three thousand years. The Yangtze has destroyed millions in regular floods. . . . Two hundred fifty thousand died last year of volcanoes, storms, freak winds, and nature's so-called acts of God. In what year did nature turn benevolent and begin to preserve for us the lie of

a God of love?... Reverence for life? Bah! What reverence can nature have for me—and even Schweitzer must destroy life to save for a while another form of life. Nature is a world of ant warfare, bee executions, wolf raids and omnivorous plants. If God is love, it seldom shows in nature.⁹

God, revealed in Jesus Christ is Personal, is Love, is Jesus Christ Incarnate, and is not a plant, flower, mountain, river, sea, or star. In his last of many Bible conferences at Massanetta Springs in Virginia, and in one of his last sermons at Duke Chapel, Marney called humanity to responsible stewardship of Creation:

Our energy crisis means no more or less than this: there is a wall around our garden. Creation has edges. Those predecessors of Columbus were right: one can literally sail off the edge of the Earth. A laboratory culture really can over-run the garden. Us bees really are killer-bees and we brown rats really do become cannibals, if crowded. The poor we do have always with us and we create the poor.... Any life-style that is Christian takes its rise not in our salvation but in Creation, for if, as the blessed Psalter puts it, "God belongs in the heavens," it continues, "the Earth He has given to us"! But not, surely, to make it a swampy sewer, choked with the bones of the prematurely dead, strangled on the noisome, gaseous fumes of our iron horses breaking wind in their mad climb to the top of Athos, or Sinai, or to the Moon.

I have posited swiftly, and now shall expand upon three propositions: "The Limits on Creation require an Ethic of Parsimony. The Nature of Covenant implies an Ethic of Responsibility. Incarnation is the mode for an Ethic of Identity."¹⁰

Within this sermon is the prayer which was included at Marney's funeral by Marney's dear friend and associate pastor at Myers Park Baptist, Bob McLernon, and which has been published in several places. (On the internet, for the complete prayer, search for "Confession and Defense by Carlyle Marney" in www.christianethicstoday.com.) The conclusion bears repeating here, perhaps for a new generation of hearers:

Hear now my intention with Grace as if it were fact. I do and have intended to be Responsible in Creation by Covenant and where I have defaulted do Thou forgive. Forgive Thou my vicarious responsibility for all the defection from The purpose of all Thy responsible creatures, and accept Thou this my admission of utter dependence upon Thy mercy. "Naked came I into the world" and how I am dressed at the conclusion makes no difference. A pair of jeans or a Glasgow robe, it makes no difference. Meantime, well, I mow, I cut wood for winter, I clean drainage ditches, I preach about what is happening and look to see what God will do for the earth. I watch out always for babies and little rabbits in front of my mower, and old folks nearby and black snakes worth preserving, and little puppies on the road, and the young-old who stutter and laugh and can't hear, too. The cry of us all, "Come Lord Jesus, come."

Death

Marney throughout his ministry experienced and pointed unflinchingly to the tragic elements of human life, consummated in the death of all things. For him the Cross was usually more evident than Resurrection (which is a Hope, not a certainty), and God's absence and silence were more prevalent than God's presence and speaking. In this way he was a Christian existentialist, influenced by Kierkegaard, Unamuno, Camus, and indeed the imprisoned Bonhoeffer. Marney's Holy Week sermons have stood the test of time and are well worth visiting. The unpublished works of his last five years point to an increasing awareness of the fragile brevity of human life. He once said in a sermon on the Transfiguration, "Our universal grief is that we run out of time."

In December of 1976 Marney visited Davidson College (where I then served as campus minister) for several days. His lectures were on the relationship of faith and doubt. For him (as for Luther and Tillich) these were not opposites, but inextricable aspects of being fully human and of being Christian. During his final sermon, he alluded to the notion of "*deus absconditus*," a rather unorthodox theology developed by Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) and others. But Marney did not translate *absconditus* as "hidden," which is the most common rendering (see Psalms 10, 13, 30, 44, 88, 104). Rather, he queried, "What if God has already revealed enough, and now has absconded, *fled*?" This question is profound and seemed to be posed to elicit a response which takes full account of human responsibility and the always mysterious, transcendent "wholly other" qualities of the divine. In Advent, here was clearly the fear and trembling of waiting.

At the conclusion of the sermon, Marney departed from his prepared text and delivered an unforgettable, extemporaneous digression on Death as the crux of the faith/doubt relationship. Looking around the large and pensive congregation which was gathered in the well-lit chancel area and in the first rows of the darker sanctuary, he spoke slowly, "I have been quite near to dying several times, and I can say from those moments that Death itself may not be as bad as we usually fear. So, when the time comes for me, I hope to die well." He paused. Then, came a final question, "And, if I don't?" He shrugged his shoulders, a quizzical and even mischievous expression of nonchalance on his face, and sat down.

During 1977 I took a sabbatical from ministry at Davidson and studied independently at Duke Divinity School with three exceptional professors, Stuart Henry in American Christianity, Tom Langford in Theology, and Marney in "Christian Anthropology." Marney had directed me in particular to Nicholas of Cusa and to Ernest Becker, the cultural anthropologist who had been teaching at Simon Fraser University in Canada at the time of his death in 1974 at age fifty. It was to consider all of that, and to culminate three weeks at Interpreters' House, that I went to Marney's home on Wolf Pen Mountain one November evening in 1977.

The creek which ran over Marney's driveway and had to be forded was flowing rapidly; a mist was settling in, and I recalled Nicholas: we discover God as the one who cannot be understood. Our mind catches a glimpse of God in shadow or in fog, in darkness.

In the shadows by the central fireplace in the former apple barn book-lined study, Marney sat with his Irish setter, Robin. Academic matters did not seem to hold his interest for long. After about an hour, he referred to a passage from Nicholas of Cusa

—“I behold Thee... and I know not what I see, for I see nothing visible” (*The Vision of God*)—and applied it to his own vocation and life: “Sometimes I look at it all and it’s nothing, nothing. Sometimes I wonder if any of it has been worth a tinker’s damn!” I was stunned into speechlessness by this melancholy, and for a long while, neither of us spoke. Night fell.

To break the silence, I attempted to engage Marney in a discussion of Ernest Becker’s book, *The Denial of Death*, which had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction in 1977, posthumously for Becker. Marney’s appraisal of Becker was unabashedly respectful, if not reverential. “I wish I had done it myself,” he began. He was uncharacteristically reluctant to say anything critical—“I take my hat off to him.” Perhaps the winter chill, the darkness, his inner life and demons, my own and other griefs which he well knew and shared, all combined to form this unforgettable response to *The Denial of Death*. Although more exuberant times followed even that same night, I shall recall Marney as he stirred the fire and in a torrent of words not unlike a Psalm, lamented and confessed, “There is never enough time. If I live to be a hundred, there will never be enough time to finish who I am, never enough time to love all those I love—Elizabeth, our children, grandchildren, and friends. Becker... the Hell of it is, he’s dead.”

When I learned of Marney’s death, his words echoed poignantly, and were I to have chiseled an epitaph for him in July of 1978, it would have been, “There’s never enough time . . . the Hell of it is, he’s dead.” But by now I venture that would not have been enough, for it omitted the Alpha and Omega in whom Marney lived and moved and was, even in his depressions. Strangely, there is another passage from Nicholas of Cusa: “I give Thee thanks, my God . . . because Thou hast shown me that thou canst not be seen elsewhere than where impossibility meets and faces me. Thou hast inspired me . . . to do violence to myself because impossibility coincides with necessity, and I have learnt . . . the place where Thou art found unveiled.” One place where “unveiling” occurred is described in Marney’s own words in a personal note: “With a good fire, coffee, and a jug, it could be *real Church*.”