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### A Sermon that Sings

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# A Sermon that Sings

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Office of University Communications

June 18, 2011

*Dr. J. Alfred Smith was born to be a preacher. But for Smith, who is Pastor Emeritus of Allan Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, Calif., and who served this spring as Gardner-Webb University's first Scholar in Residence, a life in the pulpit was not his earliest aspiration.*

"I play the saxophone," Smith says, "and I wanted to be a jazz musician." In fact, one cannot understand Smith's faith, his style, and his message apart from music. Born to what he calls "an humble domestic household" in Kansas City, Mo., some of Smith's earliest memories are of being awoken to the sound of his grandmother praying aloud and "singing some of those old church songs," or teaching him to read by the cadences and rhythms of the King James Bible. When his grandmother finally allowed Smith to be baptized at the age of 12—"she was a biblical literalist," he says, "who said that Jesus didn't go up to the Temple until he was 12"—it is the music of the moment he remembers most profoundly.

"I was baptized on Easter Sunday morning, and I often re-live those moments in that outdoor pool, while people were gathered around singing a cappella, and all the baptismal candidates were in white robes," Smith remembers. "Later in my higher education, when people were throwing skepticism at me, the tender moments of my baptism would assure me of the presence of the living God, and would enable me to understand that I can love God not only with my mind, but from the very bottom of my heart."

For Smith, the synesthetic memory of his baptism captures the beautiful harmony between the intellect and the spirit, the mind and the heart, that underlies his faith and his theology. It is this message of harmony—of unity in diversity—that Smith was born to preach.

"I grew up before the days of integration, so I did not get to study with people who were not African-American until I became an adult," Smith says. It was his experience of racial injustice that led Smith to build his life's ministry around what he calls the "Justice Itinerary of Jesus," the title of one of his courses at Gardner-Webb's School of Divinity this spring.

"There is a fear that we can't talk about certain things because they're not correct," Smith insists. "They're not correct politically, or not correct theologically. But we shouldn't think about that. We should think about being just to one another." Smith's message from the pulpit is that Jesus reconciled sinful humanity to the sinless God, repairing our relationship with the Father and making the way possible to repair our relationships with one another. In so doing, Jesus managed to balance the demands of justice with the reality of grace. Smith insists that we should similarly live with attitudes of grace toward one another, while working diligently to ensure that injustice is eradicated.

In fact, when Dr. Larry George, a professor of New Testament studies in Gardner-Webb's school of divinity, made possible the connection between Smith and Gardner-Webb, it was the potential for a diverse educational experience at Gardner-Webb that initially attracted Smith. "If you come to Gardner-Webb," he insists, "you're not going to get a parochial or ghettoized education. Gardner-Webb is the best kept secret of a university in the South, because it has women on the faculty, it has people of color on the faculty. There are professors like Dr. Terry Casino, who brings a global understanding of the church, or Dr. Sherri Adams, who brings a firsthand knowledge of the church in the two-thirds world."

Still, at Gardner-Webb and other divinity schools across the country, Smith would like to see more cultural exchange. He explains, "There is a misconception at universities that black studies and Latino studies and Asian studies and woman studies are for blacks, Latinos, Asians, and women. But if the church is growing by leaps and bounds in the two-thirds world countries, we better wake up and start reading their literature. Our fieldwork assignments should be cross-cultural. We must not live on cultural islands."

Almost as powerful as Smith's message, though, is the sonorous voice in which he delivers it. One of the great pleasures of Smith's life with his wife and ministry partner, the Rev. Bernestine Smith, is their mutual love for great music. "We love to listen to good jazz," Smith says, "and I am amazed that four soloists can play a melody and then embellish it four different ways. They improvise, they transcend the way the melody is written, and when that happens they truly find their voice."

It's no surprise that, when asked about his own voice, his answer comes back to jazz. As his listeners can attest, by the sheer power of his voice Smith manages to awaken the sensuous richness of spiritual experience and intellectual conviction. "A sermon should be a musical score," he laughs. "At first, the sermon should have a tear. That's where we do our weeping and our lamenting. But we can't stay there. The sermon should sing at the end, because we're thanking God for his unconditional grace. We have fallen short, but Christ has given us another opportunity."

As he and Bernestine return to their home in Oakland, Calif., Smith, who is professor of church ministries and preaching at American Baptist Seminary of the West, insists that he has been profoundly impacted by his time at Gardner-Webb. "I'm going to buy a Gardner-Webb bag, and a Gardner-Webb hat, and get on a plane and take the Gardner-Webb message wherever I go."

But it is the message he leaves behind that is perhaps more important. Like the transcendent power of a jazz riff, Smith hopes his own unique expression of the Gospel awakens in his students a passion for justice, love and truth. "I hope I helped them know," says Smith, "that they were not just learning for learning's sake, but that their knowledge is to be used so that

God's love would be in their human hearts, and God's touch would be felt in their human hands, and God's compassion would glisten in their human eyes, and God's truth would pour forth from their human lips. That's what I want them to remember me by." And we will.