

**“REMEMBERING WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN”**

**Amos 5:18-24; John 20:19-31; Acts 4:32-35**

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“It is ironic to think of the number of people in this country who pray for the poor and needy on Sunday and spend the rest of the week complaining that the government is doing something about them.” The words are classic Coffin—sparse, intelligent, ironically humorous, theologically unassailable, holding a mirror to the face of American Christians and urging us—sometimes gently, sometimes with a prophetic roar that makes us see before our eyes the great Old Testament prophet Amos—urging us to join him in what he continually referred to as his “lover’s quarrel” with his native land.

William Sloane Coffin, Jr., one of the great preachers and public ministers of the 20th century, is dead. He died April 12th, in the 82nd year of his life. This morning I would like to honor him, to give you all a sense of the man and his ministry.

So to begin, some biography. Bill Coffin was born to great privilege in New York City. His grandfather was a partner in the W and H Sloane company, a successful furniture manufacturer; his father president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. His uncle, Henry Sloane Coffin, was president of Union Theological Seminary, also in New York. He was a passionate student and lover of music, who trained in his youth in Paris to be a concert pianist and got his undergraduate degree from the Yale school of music. He served as a military intelligence officer during World War II, and after that worked for the CIA for three years. Disheartened by what he called the “naivete” of the American use of power during the Korean War, he left the CIA and attended first Union Theological Seminary in New York, then Yale Divinity School, graduating with his M. Div. in 1956. He served a year as chaplain at Phillips Andover prep school, another year as chaplain at Williams College. Then, tired of chaplaincy as an endeavor in “the bland leading the bland,” with what he called “unseemly haste,” he jumped at the offer to become chaplain of Yale in 1958. The Civil Rights movement was heating up, and the public career of William Sloane Coffin was launched when he became one of the first white preachers to join the Freedom Riders in the South in the cause of desegregation. From civil rights, his activism moved to the Viet Nam war. In 1967, he rose to national prominence when he was arrested at an anti-war demonstration in Boston with Dr. Benjamin Spock and two others for conspiracy to encourage draft evasion. In 1976, he left the Chaplain’s office at Yale and in 1978 became Senior Minister of Riverside Church in New York, arguably the most prominent liberal church pulpit in America. His attention there grew most closely focused on issues of nuclear disarmament. From Riverside, he went on to become the national director of SANE/FREEZE, whose emeritus director he remained for the rest of his life.

Though Bill retired after SANE/FREEZE, he never quit writing, preaching, speaking, up to a month before his death. Preaching at Riverside Church from his wheelchair in 2003, his voice slowed, I am told, and a little slurred but still powerful, he spoke of the war in Iraq, claiming, “This war against Iraq is as disastrous as it is unnecessary; perhaps in terms of its wisdom,

justice, purpose, and motives, the worst war in American history. Of course we feel for the Iraqis, so long and cruelly oppressed, and we support our military men and women; but we don't support their military mission. They were not called to defend America, but to attack Iraq. They were not called to die for, but rather to kill for their country, ...in an illegal and unjust war opposed by the UN security council and virtually the whole world. What more unpatriotic thing could we have asked from our sons and daughters?"

In the past week, I have read much of what has been published by and about Bill Coffin, trying to distill for myself and for all of you a sense of what made his public ministry so powerful, so compelling, beyond the fact that he was a brilliant orator. I remember once as a Yale undergraduate, the student next to me muttering, "That man [Coffin] could recite 'Mary has a little lamb' and hold his audience." But the gift of rhetoric alone only takes you so far. For me, the power in Coffin's public persona came from two sources: his understanding of the connection between faith and intellect, and his theological interpretation of incarnational love.

Preached Coffin to his university audience, "There is nothing anti-intellectual in the leap of faith, for faith is not believing without proof but trusting without reservation. Faith is no substitute for thinking. On the contrary, it is what makes good thinking possible. It has what we might call a limbering effect on the mind; by taking us beyond familiar ground, faith ends up giving us that much more to think about. Certainly Peter and Andrew and James and John, in deciding to follow Jesus, received much more to think about than had they stayed at home. And so it is with all of us: if we give our lives to Christ, if we leave familiar territory and take the leap of faith, what we receive in return fills our minds altogether as much as it fills our hearts." Or one other brief Coffinism I can't resist. He repeated it often. "Christ came to take away our sins, not our minds."

Bill was broadly and deeply read. His sermons were as theologically rigorous as they were politically and socially incisive. I remember once, at a public lecture, someone asked him what first step one should take to become a social activist. He answered, "Read a book! To confess that you don't know how best to respond to the Islamic world is to own your humility. To confess you know nothing about it is to expose your laziness. There is no virtue, and in fact there is considerable danger, in ill-informed opinion."

Even those who disagreed with him had to respect Coffin's intelligence, his erudition, his endless appetite to learn and grow and change. In the early days of the women's movement, Coffin first chafed at feminism as a "distraction" from the more pressing social problems of our age. A year later, he preached, "When will we men get over the notion—largely unconscious—that our lives are somehow more important than those of women, even of women we love?" What changed his mind?, he was asked. "I learned something new," he responded. Throughout his life, he never gave up learning new contexts in which to interpret his fundamental theological understanding that "We all belong one to another. That's the way God made us. Christ died to keep us that way. Our sin is only and always that we put asunder what God has joined together."

Which brings me to my second understanding of what made Coffin so formidable a prophetic presence: his rock solid belief in what God has done in Jesus Christ, and what that implies for

Christian life in faith. “What is faith?,” Coffin asks. “Faith is being grasped by the power of love. Faith is recognizing that what makes God is infinite mercy, not infinite control; not power, but love unending. Faith is recognizing that if at Christmas Jesus became like us, it was so that we might become more like him. We know what that means: watching Jesus heal the sick, empower the poor, and scorn the powerful, we see transparently the power of God at work. Watching Zaccheus climb the tree a crook and come down a saint, watching Paul set out a hatchet man for the Pharisees and return a fool for Christ, we know that our lives too can become channels for divine mercy to flow out to save the lost and the suffering.” “All saving ideas are born small. God comes to earth as a child so that we can finally grow up, which means that we can stop blaming God for being absent when we ourselves are not present, stop blaming God for the ills of the world as if we had been laboring to cure them, and stop making God responsible for all the thinking and doing we should be undertaking on our own. I’ve said it before, and I will probably say it many times again: God provides minimum protection, maximum support—support to help us grow up, to stretch our minds and hearts until they are as wide as God’s universe. God doesn’t want us narrow-minded, priggish, and subservient, but joyful and loving, as free for one another as God’s love was freely poured out for us at Christmas in that babe in the manger.”

Over and over in his writings, Coffin returns to the Christmas story with a deep appreciation of God’s word made flesh: the story of God’s rigorous, unending love for us, and our obligation at the most basic sense, our joy as we become spiritually mature, our joyful response to love God’s world in return—all of God’s world. For Coffin, there is nothing more central; it is the foundation out of which all faithful action grows. Sharp, critical, confrontational—William Sloane Coffin was all of these things, but he was never hateful, never cynical. His argument with his country, with those in power, with those who sought and seek to hold to themselves that which is not theirs, always his argument framed as lover’s quarrel, and the love outstripped the quarrel in its tenacity and power.

“I am a lover, not a fighter,” he often said, and for the almost 50 years of his public ministry, his love for God and God’s people burned passionate, insightful, and true, bringing many, myself included, to a deeper sense of God’s call and claim on them. I would end this morning with these words of Bill’s. “I believe God dwells with all those who make love their aim. And there is no sentimentality in this love; it is not endlessly pliable, or always yielding. Prophets from Amos and Isaiah to Gandhi and King have shown how frequently compassion demands confrontation. Love without criticism is a kind of betrayal. Lying is done with silence as well as with words. And always the love that is of God lies on the far side of justice, never the near side.”

In appreciation and thanksgiving, I would answer Amen.