

**Sermon at the Installation of Dean Scotty McLennan  
Stanford Memorial Church  
March 21, 2001  
Rev. William Sloane Coffin**

Prefatory remark: A month ago, when I had a stroke, I consoled myself with Mark Twain's observations about Richard Wagner's music: "It's better than it sounds." But I have no illusions about my voice and so I beg your indulgence.

I will not presume to describe Stanford's graduates, but I can assure you that many Yalies constitute primary constraints on a better society. Not so, however, Scotty McLennan. I am betting on his deanery. He has a great inter religious reverence. He knows that frantic orthodoxy is rooted not in faith, but in doubt. When we aren't sure, we are doubly sure. On the other hand, he is no admirer of a spirituality that is a mile wide and one inch deep. And he knows that the higher our education is, the higher our responsibilities are for a better society. So I'm very glad to be here with you, President and Scotty, and I should say I'm very glad that Stanford would go to the NCAA.

We heard a short while ago that the prophet Isaiah said, "I have called you by name. You are mine, saith the Lord." But let's start with a quote from Lev Tolstoy, who said, "Certain questions are put to us not so much that we would answer them, but that we should spend a lifetime wrestling with them." My question on this auspicious occasion is – who tells you who are? And let me illustrate.

For 18 years I was chaplain at Yale when Reverend Scotty was an undergraduate, and it was natural that many Yale seniors applying for graduate school (not realizing that education kills by degrees) would come to the chaplain for letters of recommendation. If I may say so, I wrote brilliant letters of recommendation, and often to deans of such highfalutin' institutions of higher education as Harvard Medical School or Columbia Law School. I would say "Dear Mister" (as it was in those days) "Dean, this candidate will undoubtedly be in the bottom quarter of your class. But surely you'll agree with me that the bottom quarter should be as carefully selected as the top. And for what would you be looking in the bottom quarter if not superb extracurricular qualities like conscientiousness, will serve the common good rather than personal gain..."

Then I would show a copy of the letter to the student,. Now you're not going to believe this, but invariably, their feelings were hurt. "How do you know I'm going to be in the bottom quarter of the class?"

"Well, all the evidence is in, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but you didn't have to tell them."

Now you see what's going on? Just to get into a place like Yale, very much like Stanford, you have to be in the 99.5 percentile – in the 99.6 percentile to graduate. To get into

Harvard Medical School or Columbia Law School, you have to be in the 99.7, and to graduate, in the 99.8. And just because I didn't say they're going to be in the 99.9 percentile, never mind that I said they were conscientious, would not seek personal gain, but seek to serve the common good, they felt as nothing. Such is the power of institutions of higher education to tell you who you are!

Some people need money to tell them who they are. Now, of course, there are two ways to be rich. One is to have a lot of money, the other is to have few needs. The second option is not often observed in the United States these days, but I would remind you, students especially, of the words of John Ruskin: "The highest reward for human toil is not what you get for it but what you become by it." Human development is a matter of being more, not having more.

Well, some people need power to tell them who they are. Lots of politicians seek, gain, and hang on to power for all they're worth. Abraham Lincoln, once he was in Congress, declared the Mexican War to be unnecessary and unconstitutional. It cost him his seat in congress. In Vermont last summer, legislators, many of them, voted their consciences in passing legislation to allow civil unions between gays and lesbians. Some of them lost their seats last fall, but certainly it made my heart rejoice to see people whose ethical instincts were still higher than their political instincts. Ethical is as ethical does.

Some people need enemies to tell them who they are. It used to be that whites needed blacks and blacks needed whites, and plenty of homophobic people have gays and lesbians to tell them who they are. In 1989, as many of you will recall, the Berlin Wall came down, and all sorts of American anti-communists lost their identity. And it works on both sides. In March of '68, in the middle of the Vietnam War, President Johnson announced he would not stand for reelection. Half a million people in the American anti-Vietnam War movement lost their identities. "Who are we without LBJ?" Fortunately, Nixon came along and restored it.

Obviously, conformity claims many people. If they're not lemmings, they're close to it. They get along by going along. They are deeply fearful of any but the most familiar ideas.

And finally—take it from a pastor—some people need their sins to tell them who they are. The way many people treasure their sins, you would think they were the holiest things in their lives.

So it's a good question, isn't it? Who tells you who you are?

Now suppose you hear—and you believe—the prophet Isaiah: "I have called you by name. You are mine, saith the Lord." What does that mean? Among other things, it means you never have to prove yourself. You never have to prove yourself. God's love is poured out universally, equally on everybody on the planet, from the Pope to the loneliest wino on the earth. And furthermore, God's love doesn't seek value, it creates it. It's not because we have values that we are loved, but because we love that we have

values. Our value is a gift, not an achievement. So you don't have to prove yourself, ever. That's taken care of.

What you do have to do is express yourself. And what a world of difference it is between proving yourself and expressing yourself. That means we return God's love with a devotion of our own, large as it is, to our fellow human beings. We are called to be ministers of human welfare. You don't have to be successful; you do have to be valuable. You don't have to make money, you do have to make a difference. And particularly in the lives of those society puts last and counts least. Let me tell you a story.

In 16<sup>th</sup> century Paris, a beggar, taken desperately ill, was brought to a hospital, where the doctors laid him out, and said in the Latin they were sure he would not understand, "Faciamus experimentum in anima vile"—"Let us experiment on this vile fellow."

Well, the beggar was actually an impoverished student later to become a world-renowned scholar, Marc-Antoine Muret, and from the slab on which he was laid out he asked the doctors, "Animam vilem appellas pro qua Christus non dedignatus mori est?"—"Will you call vile, one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?"

From a Christian point of view, if Christ didn't disdain to die for anyone, who are we not to live for everybody? In religious faith, it's not doctrine but love that is non-negotiable. And love is not easy; if it were we'd all practice it. Among other things, love demands the utmost in clear-sightedness. Faith is not a substitute for thought; it's what makes good thinking possible. If you are full of fear, you will not seek truth; you will seek security. If a heart is full of love, it will have a limbering effect on the mind. To quote Tolstoy again: "Indifference to evil is violence." Clearly, love demands courage. The world is full of gentle cowards who think their gentleness offsets their cowardice. It doesn't. Compassion frequently demands confrontation. Think of the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, the gay and lesbian movement.

I said at the start, "the higher our education is, the higher our responsibilities are for a humane world." I stress that because indifference to evil characterizes many of today's college and university graduates. The greatest harm to our democracy, and to the whole planet, is not done by the poor; it's done by those who have BA's, BS's, MBA's, LLB's, and PhD's.

I once, as I said, was a chaplain. Now, in my old age, I have become a professor. And it gives me great encouragement to say today "Cogito, ergo sum"—"I think, therefore I am"—that's a bit of surpassing nonsense. "Amo, ergo sum"—"I love, therefore I am"—is so much truer, because, as the apostle Paul said, "Although I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, but have not love, it profits me nothing."

I believe that. I believe it is better not to live than not to love.

So, don't let money tell you who you are. Don't let power tell you who you are. Don't let enemies, and, for God's sake, don't let your sins tell you who you are when there's

more mercy in God than sin in us. Don't prove yourself—that's taken care of. All we have to do is to express ourselves. It's difficult, but we're a lot more alive in pain than in complacency.

So, I would hope that in his office, in this place, in our rooms, anyplace—we would try to listen carefully and hear the prophet Isaiah say: "I have called you by name. You are mind, saith the Lord."

Amen.