

## INCREASE OUR FAITH

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan

University Public Worship

Stanford Memorial Church

October 6, 2013

In today's gospel reading from Luke,<sup>i</sup> the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith. Jesus has just told them in the previous passage that part of being faithful is being able to forgive someone who sins against you. Even if that person sins against you seven times every day, you must forgive. The demands of discipleship are great indeed, and so Jesus's disciples ask him to increase their faith. But Jesus' response is a tough one. In effect, he says that they really didn't have any faith to begin with, not even the size of a mustard seed, which is very small. And then he tells them that in order to be faithful, they must be like slaves who work hard in the fields all day for their master, come home and prepare his dinner, serve him while he eats and drinks, and then get no thanks whatsoever, because they were simply doing what they were supposed to have done.

So here we are, starting off the academic year together in this challenging intellectual environment at Stanford, or engaged in whatever endeavors we're pursuing, and we may need to realize that we have virtually no faith to provide us with any strength and sustenance. I certainly know for myself that my lowest ebb of faith in my own life was during my late high school and early college years. I remember that when I arrived at Yale as a rather cynical freshman, the university chaplain was offering a non-credit course entitled "A Seminar for Friendly Disbelievers." This was at Yale in the mid-1960's, and the chaplain was the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin. I was fascinated by the title of that seminar, and since I was certainly a disbeliever, but still fascinated by the great existential questions – and in that sense a friendly disbeliever – I took the course. It changed my life and set me on a course of religious and spiritual engagement that brought me to university chaplaincy myself, and to more than 40 years now of ongoing inquiry. I dedicate this sermon to Bill Coffin.

One thing I learned pretty quickly from him is that faith can co-exist with doubt. In fact it needs doubt. Bill Coffin always said that "religious faith despite doubts is far stronger than one without doubts."<sup>ii</sup> He claimed that doubt is, indeed, the handmaiden of faith. He would often follow that comment with the observation that "No one so reveals an absence of faith as a dogmatist."<sup>iii</sup> "Doubts move you forward, not backward," he would teach, adding "just as long as you doubt out of love of the truth, not out of some pathological need to doubt."<sup>iv</sup>

There was another side, though, as Pascal taught: "The heart has its reasons, of which the mind knows nothing." In searching for new truths, we must take care not to insist on absolute intellectual certainty. For example, there are truths in music and art and poetry and dance and novels and plays to be apprehended at a much deeper level than they are comprehended in our minds. Science and logic are critical tools, and they take us a very long way, but there's much that's critically important in the human spirit that they don't touch and never will.<sup>v</sup>

One of the early lessons in the Seminar for Friendly Disbelievers was that it seems common in modern American universities to judge music and art and poetry and novels by their very best works, but then to judge religion by the very worst examples of it: the cruel and violent and bigoted and arrogant, if not the stupid and naïve and simplistic. Coffin used to ask virulently atheist professors: "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." He knew that 99 times out of 100 he wouldn't believe

in that kind of God either. Coffin had a deeply inquiring mind and an active curiosity about the nature of the universe and its meaning. Once he was together with a small faculty gathering of good friends whom he considered wonderful people. In the midst of a discussion, he asked enthusiastically “Isn’t the existence of God a lively question?” A political scientist responded: “Bill, it’s not even a question, let alone a lively one.” Bill’s retort was along these lines: “I can understand doubting the quality of the bread, but I can’t see kidding yourself that you’re not hungry – unless, of course, your soul has so shriveled up that you have no more appetite left for the great mysteries of life... And that’s what I think has happened to so many of you, and why,” he said smiling, “some of you are pretty boring.”<sup>vi</sup> As you can imagine, a very lively discussion ensued, which Bill relished. His point was that “while blind belief of any religious stripe is bad for us, the nation, and the world, the answer to blind belief is not blind unbelief.”<sup>vii</sup>

Coffin also used to explain that when people stop believing in God, the problem is often not that they come to believe in nothing, but that they risk believing in anything. That is, they can come to worship what biblically are called “idols:”<sup>viii</sup> wealth, power, prestige, social acclamation, a thin body or pretty face, celebrity friends, the security of a gated community, intellectual cleverness... and the list goes on and on. As the wealthy and comfortable author of Ecclesiastes came to understand, all these are ultimately emptiness and a chasing after wind.<sup>ix</sup> They don’t provide lasting fulfillment. They don’t provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life. And they certainly are of no help in facing death.

So, I was getting a pretty bracing challenge to my lack of faith, at least in God, week after week, in the Coffin seminar. “So what does faith in God really mean to him?” I came to ask. “What’s actually worth putting one’s faith in, besides all the idols like power and prestige that he’d enumerated.” His answer, simple at first, but infinitely complex as it was played out, was love. This man Coffin was a World War II veteran when he came to college, and the brutalities and destruction he had witnessed made short shrift of any childlike innocence or sentimentality. He knew that Nazis could spend their days gassing Jews and their evenings listening to Beethoven quartets.<sup>x</sup> He learned the Russian language and was a liaison officer to the Red Army, proud of its heroic advances against the Nazis, but deeply disturbed by many of its soldiers’ accompanying pillage and rape.<sup>xi</sup> He was drawn to the French existentialists as “crisis thinkers” – Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Andre Malraux, and especially Albert Camus. They were all professed atheists, and he was attracted to their tragic sense of life and the fact that they knew what hell was all about. Yet, ultimately it was theologians like Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich who captured his heart. Only with a heart full of love could one begin to truly understand, much less enter deeply into human relations.<sup>xii</sup>

Although Bill Coffin explained that for him the instinct to love is equally at the center of other religions like Islam and Judaism, and he could have easily become a Muslim or a Jew,<sup>xiii</sup> he became caught up in the person of Jesus. The stories about him were so powerful and captivating and transformative. Jesus scorned the powerful, empowered the weak, healed the hurting, and always returned good for evil.<sup>xiv</sup> What was behind this? What gave Jesus his strength and perseverance, even unto death? Jesus related his own actions to an infinite love, a capital “L” love in the universe, which he knew as God.

When Jesus says, “Our Father, who art in heaven” in the Lord’s Prayer – or translated in the more personal and familial term we use in our service, “Abba in heaven, hallowed be your Name” – Bill Coffin would listen carefully, as he put it, because Jesus knows more about God and the world than he did, by far: Coffin explained, “He [Jesus] could talk to me convincingly about a father in heaven because he took seriously the earth’s homeless orphans. He could talk to me convincingly

about living at peace in the hands of love, because he knew that the world lived constantly at war in the grip of hatred. He could talk to me of light, and joy, and exultation, because I knew that he himself knew darkness, sorrow and death.”<sup>xv</sup> From Coffin’s perspective, Descartes had it wrong in saying “I think, therefore I am.” It should be, “I love, therefore I am.”<sup>xvi</sup> Coffin explained that it’s not because we human beings have value that we are loved, it’s because we are loved that we have value.<sup>xvii</sup> Jesus for Christians becomes a mirror to the best of our humanity and a window to divinity itself, revealing as much of God as our human eyes are capable of seeing. “When Christians see Christ empowering the weak, scorning the powerful, [and] healing the wounded...we are seeing transparently the power of God at work.”<sup>xviii</sup>

So when we ask, “Increase our faith,” as the apostles requested of Jesus, we’re really asking to be able to love and to be loved. That’s about forgiving someone who sins against us seven times every day. That’s about standing with the despised and the afflicted. That’s about acting as a servant, not as a master. And ultimately I think it’s about challenging the Psalmist whom we heard today,<sup>xix</sup> lamenting the bloody exile from Israel at the hands the Babylonians. No, let us not say, as the Psalmist did, “Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” No, when we ask to increase our faith, may we heed Jesus’ words instead: “You have heard that it was said [of old], ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven<sup>xx</sup>... Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs...<sup>xxi</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”<sup>xxii</sup>

Increase our faith. Amen.

## BENEDICTION

In the words of the Rev. William Sloane Coffin:

"May we remember that 'God is love' means God is known devotionally,  
not dogmatically.

'God is love' does not clear up old mysteries; it discloses new mystery.

'God is love' is not a truth we can master; it is only one to which we can surrender.

Faith is being grasped by the power of love." Amen.

(W.S. Coffin, *Credo*)

## NOTES

---

<sup>i</sup> Luke 17: 5-10.

<sup>ii</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. x.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

- 
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- <sup>ix</sup> See, for example, Ecclesiastes 1:14; 2:26.
- <sup>x</sup> Coffin, *Letters*, p. 35.
- <sup>xi</sup> See Warren Goldstein, *William Sloane Coffin, Jr.: A Holy Impatience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), especially Chapter 3.
- <sup>xii</sup> Coffin, *Letters*, pp. 36-37.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- <sup>xv</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 11.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- <sup>xix</sup> Psalm 137.
- <sup>xx</sup> Matthew 5: 38-39, 44-45.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Matthew 19:14.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Matthew 5:9.