The Collected Sermons of

William Sloane Coffin

The Riverside Years

VOLUME ONE

William Sloane Coffin

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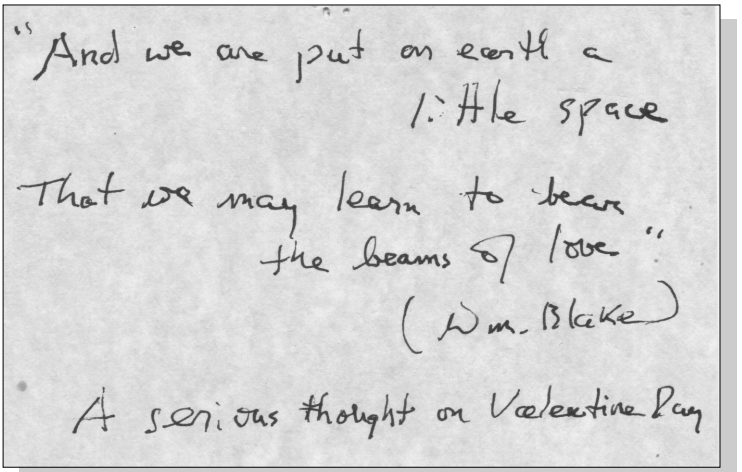
Dear Reader,

Before he was unable to do so any longer, Bill always made the morning coffee. He would bring it to me in bed and there we would have our best talks of the day; fresh, sharp, intimate, challenging, and of course, all the "to-dos" that come with living together. Often he would talk around the sermon he was working on, or bring a new quote, like a treasure, that he was going to use to brighten a moment in a sermon. One Valentine's Day morning four or five years ago, he brought me this note with my coffee, and I give it to you, who also try.



It is my hope that you will find courage and hope for your own work in these sermons, that you will see how Bill found his way, and that he may help you find yours.

With all my best wishes,
Randy Coffin

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Introduction

"Come off it!" Praise the Reverend William Sloane Coffin too extravagantly, as many did in his hearing, using hyperbole to describe his works and ways, and they would be dismissed with a smile, a shrug, and a posture which suggested: "Now that *that's* out of the way, let's get down to business."

Moved as I am by the Riverside sermons and tempted as I am to praise the preacher and author lavishly, I hear his virtual "Come off it." So I will, out of respect and in his honor. This means that hyperbole will have no place, though here and there I might express some awe. To get to the point, I will concentrate first on what this chapter is not:

It is not a song of praise. We've already settled that.

It is not a biography. There is a commendable one: *William Sloane Coffin Jr., A Holy Impatience* by Warren Goldstein (Yale, 2004).

It is not an exegesis of the sermons in this book, though it is an introduction to the world out of which they issued and a peephole into the world of the sermons themselves.

It is not a snippet of a personal memoir by the author of this introduction. While I frequently saw, heard, read, and conversed with Coffin, hundreds of people who knew him at Yale, Riverside Church, or elsewhere, have better credentials for reminiscing than I. So I'll get to the assigned business at hand, introducing a book of sermons which represent only one element—though an extremely important one—in his ministry.

It is not a history of Riverside Church, where these sermons were preached through a decade of Coffin's ministry there. For the detailed context its numerous authors provide, see *The History of the Riverside Church in the City of New York*, by Peter J. Paris and seven other authors—big churches demand big casts of characters—(New York University Press, 2004). Leonora Tubbs Tisdale wrote the chapter on the Coffin decade, 1977–1987.

It is remarkable, first off, that anyone cares about sermons preached from one pulpit, far away from all but New York readers, up to thirty years before their publication here, namely 1977 to 1987. There are so many sermons preached each week, and most preachers, however high they aim in faith, are realistic enough to know that most are ephemeral. If we count one homily or sermon per congregation each weekend, almost half a million messages get preached each Friday night, Saturday, or Sunday in the United States. Many of these forms of witness are quite effective, life-giving—some hearers would even say life-saving—alongside the many more that are less effective, vibrant, or memorable. Most of them achieve their goal if they help situate the hearers in the experienced presence of God, are instructive, and inspire the congregation to leave the pulpit and pew behind in order to put the message to work for the next seven days. Only a wildly egocentric preacher could envision seeing all of his or her messages in print, or at least in print that was intended for more than the local membership. Local hearers often can pick up the previous week's messages at the door as they leave the house of worship.

What becomes of these sermons? Are some of them folded and crafted into paper airplanes for children's play; are they piled up on bedroom reading tables; do they nourish passengers on commuter trains or transform the lives of some of those who could not be present for the preaching? If this sounds dismissive of preaching, an act commanded by the Jesus of the Gospels and an honored form of communication through twenty centuries of Christian meeting, it is not intended to be. Rather, it reflects something about the ephemeral character of human achievements, even those which reflect sacred intentions, and also shows awareness of the limits of human memory.

As for the substance of sermons, a British theologian asked an audience of regular worshipers: *Try to bring to mind five sermons you have heard in your lifetime.* Most of those who were challenged to do so were stumped. They might remember a funeral sermon, something said on a special occasion, or an occasional stunner. Most are forgotten. After they came up with a few, the theologian went on: *Now try to bring to mind five people through whom the hand of God was laid upon you.* Instantly, everyone came up with such.

Not a few of those described as God's agents were preachers remembered from childhood or through long years of the pastoral care they offered. From all evidences of his popularity and the demand for published versions after decades, Dr. Coffin would be one of those few whose sermons were remembered and cited by hearers and readers after many years. He would also be one that a generation

of Yale students, Riverside members, and guests remember. They could say, "The hand of God was laid upon us" by him. If they would choose to follow up on this metaphor, they would likely go on to say that that figurative hand of God in the case of Coffin's sermons was one that could lift people up when they were down, push them back when they were proud, and impel them into action. I envision a new generation of readers of these works from the Coffin years and ministry feeling that hand of God and hearing whispers of the divine call afresh. Those who might consider that sentence to be hyperbolic and its expectation too extravagant are asked to read a few of the sermons here and see whether my vision is realistic or not.

Regard these sermons first as what Christian sermons should all be: testimonies. One definition of preaching, tired-sounding but full of promise, is that of the great Boston preacher Phillips Brooks: "Truth through personality." The personality of preacher Coffin is evident on every page. That is why the many subscribers to his sermons years ago soon learned that from them they could probe more deeply into biblical texts; learn what Coffin did with a text and how he did it; and pick up a line full of insight here and there. But they soon discovered that they could not simply reproduce and then preach his sermons effectively. I am told that an Episcopal priest in California was caught simply lifting one of his homilies. Such plagiarism was easy to discern.

Truth through personality—the idea pushes us into the realm of a more complex concept: that to understand the act of preaching we have to become aware of the "hermeneutics of testimony." That is a phrase of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who pondered what happens when we reject "absolute knowledge of the absolute," or, in Pauline terms, we recognize that "our knowledge is piece-work" or partial (1 Cor. 13). Yet the preacher who wishes to address and impart the things of God cannot simply surrender all notions that "the absolute," or, in Johannine terms, "the Truth" is accessible and can be partly imparted.

Testimony, for Ricoeur, first involves the "claim to have experienced something." Second, as with testimony in court, we have to judge the truth of the witness. Whoever has been in court is likely to agree that the testimony cannot be grasped absolutely. It does deal strongly with "the probable." Ricoeur recognizes testimony could be false, and some preaching turns out to be such. We call it "inauthentic," if not deceiving. A commentator on Ricoeur puts all this well: "Witnesses must back their beliefs. Commitment does not guarantee the veracity of a belief, but lack of commitment undermines it." In

Ricoeur's terms, this means that "testimony is also the engagement of a pure heart and an engagement to the death." To the death?

Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, was a credible witness because those who testify on the basis of conscience and risk death become especially attractive and believable to those whose consciences are stirred. Members of audiences were aware that enemies of his message and cause might kill him at any moment, and his audiences and congregations knew it. That is why, even when on some occasions and in some modes he preached the gospel in terms that a comfortable suburban pastor might use, his message rang truer and was more compelling. It sealed the relation of the hearer with the speaker and behind them, "the Absolute" or in biblical terms, "the Truth." Lest the reference to the suburban pastor is taken as a slap against preachers who enjoy apparent security, let me say that it does not exclude the witness of those who are not at the edge of the zone where the violent would kill. "Testimony" is compelling when the middle-class, comfortable preacher is fighting a shattering disease, or is facing a psychological battering. Such can come when the preaching parent is frustrated in efforts to be reconciled to an alienated child, or when existential doubt is plaguing.

It is at this point that one can hear a haunting, chiding whisper: "Come off it." Bill Coffin would squirm or kick if he thought we thought that anything he did put him in a "quasi-martyrial" situation. The label "martyr" applies to St. Stephen, or Steve Biko in South Africa or Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany, or some murdered civil rights workers in the American South. True, Bill was hated, lividly, by those who could never forget the activities he undertook and instigated at Yale and elsewhere to protest the American adventures in the Vietnam War. It is also true that he was hated for his participation in civil rights and disarmament causes. Many a pastor-preacher will identify with Coffin, who engaged in ominous tangles with some influential membership blocs and even some obstructionist staff members at Riverside Church. Yet whatever the scale of threat and jeopardy a preacher feels, or however nagging the personal and up-close temptations might be, they serve to force the preacher to think through what truth he or she is to convey, and with what degree of self-reference he does so in the sermon.

Coffin retains authenticity because his references to conflicts afar, conflicts near, conflicts within, are always brief, as readers will soon find. They are, if anything, understated and told in such a way that they display no traces of narcissism. I do not mean by that last comment to suggest that Coffin was a virtuoso at self-deprecation, modest to a fault, or someone who felt compelled to remind us how insignificant he is. Part of the "hermeneutics of testimony" in Christian preaching is

that the witness manifests enough sense of self-worth—thanks to the genes and Jesus—to show the guts to commend "the Absolute"="the Truth" of God in Jesus Christ and to ask others to join in the wager, the one that deals with the "probability" of the resurrection of Christ, the decisive point of witness for Paul, Paul Ricoeur, and Bill Coffin.

Paul Ricoeur, on a theme that perfectly matches the stand and outlook of Coffin, continued with analysis of the biblical or "sacred" meaning or context for testimony when it uses extraordinary expressions. "What separates this new meaning of testimony from all its uses in ordinary language is that the testimony does not belong to the witness. It proceeds from an absolute initiative as to its origin and its content." To bring testimony, says the philosopher, is different than cinching the deal through philosophy: "To attest is of a different order than to verify in the sense of logical empiricism." (On the hermeneutics of testimony and comment on it see Dan R. Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* [Westminster John Knox Press, 2002], 196–202).

Whoever wants to test the testimony of Bill Coffin as father need only read "Alex's Death," his most famous and revered sermon from the Riverside years or all his life. Note also the sermons that chronologically follow "Alex's Death." They are cries of the heart, revelations of bewilderment, exorcisms of temptations to turn against God but, significantly, they show that the signals of a more profound faith and impulse to exercise ministry comes from them. After suffering the loss of a child during those Riverside years, all the rest was put in perspective. He faced criticism and rejection even by many Riverside stalwarts. Some of them were reached by adversarial television and newspapers, for his stand against nuclear armament and, after showing some signs of timidity, support for homosexual rights and the enhancement of understandings on this troubling issue. Even further in the background are the nagging tensions over Riverside church administration, which was not his chosen or favorite field of action, or one in which he excelled.

Now for some lower level but perhaps relevant personal testimony of my own: I had not expected to read so much Coffinesque Christian orthodoxy as one finds on so many pages. Before I was personally acquainted with him or had read him, back in his Yale years, I only knew that he was described as the most prominent standard-brand or liberal Protestant. Those were the years when the concept of a Protestant mainline was being marketed. Often it was used invidiously against those who were not in the evangelical/evangelistic or Pentecostal ranks and certainly against those who were forming a religio-political New Christian Right. In polemical portraits of these, "liberal Protestants" were faithless Christ-deniers who got their signals

from Soviet communism or secular humanism, and then spoke and acted while applying only a biblical-sounding Christian veneer to their preaching and preachments. William Sloane Coffin was supposed to be "Exhibit A" to represent the faithless.

During the intervening years, when I began to read Coffin's books and occasional sermons, I was jolted into the need to make reappraisals or, should I say, first-time appraisals. Far from muffling the voice of the Gospels and serious Christian theologians through the ages, Coffin was a witness to the acts of God in Christ, one ready to profess faith in the Trinity, one at home with the relevant voices of Christian traditions. True, you will find here no discussions of modalistic monarchianism, patripassionism, or semi-Pelagianism. However, as their author employs fresh language, Coffin's sermons are clear and draw their power from the basics. When it came to politics, he may have seemed to be, to polarizers in the parish and the media, "on the left." My hunch is that his biblical testimony must have sounded as if it was coming not "from the right" but from the mainline of the mainline. I'd call it the "moderate" middle, but Coffin did not believe that Christian prophecy, judgment, or gospel, could ever be "moderate."

The immediate impression one receives from any page of these sermons is that preacher Coffin had internalized a dictum of top theologian Karl Barth, one which had almost been reduced to cliché by the 1970s, but which was still to the point: "Take your Bible and take your newspaper and read both. But interpret newspapers from the Bible." Today I suppose Barth would have to urge preachers to google internet signals in order to know what is going on in the minds of YouTube and MySpace addicts in the pew. Here, again, standard-brand Protestants of the sort who established Riverside Church and many from African-American church traditions that were cherished and assertive on Morningside Heights in the Coffin decade might have expected preacher Coffin in his sermons to become enslaved by a passion for the moment. He certainly did have an awareness of performance and attracting the media. But he did not become addicted to it, and he did not have to become obsessed with a passion for relevance.

Something needs to be said about the situation of Riverside Church. It was founded in the 1920s in a merger of a Baptist and a Congregational Church. With the backing of immensely wealthy John D. Rockefeller Jr., they built cathedral-size modern-Gothic appearing Riverside. It towered and towers over Morningside Heights near Columbia University, Union Theological Seminary, and any number of educational institutions. A succession of great preachers, most notably fighter-against-fundamentalists Harry Emerson Fosdick in

the 1920s, led it to become well known for liberal theology and its powerful agencies for making change in New York City. Massive though the walls were, the church with its programs and personalities had always been fragile. Fosdick and Rockefeller, who admired each other, regularly tangled, especially when Fosdick would preach about social policies offensive to the man of wealth.

Morningside Heights became a neighborhood of turmoil, and Riverside had to react to shocks as both rich and poor, black and white, liberal and moderate, and, by Coffin's day, gay and straight people were in tense relations with each other. The cumbersome polity of the church was Baptist-style writ large—it stressed the autonomy of the local congregation. It was heavily bureaucratic, difficult to administer. As years passed, funding itself became a major problem, and Coffin had to attend to financial affairs, not always adeptly. For all the tremors and traumas affecting the foundations of that church and the people who worshiped in it, Riverside became no doubt the most prominent pulpit in American Protestantism. The press and radio and television knew where to focus on issues of the day, and found them in the Coffin pulpit. Tourists and guests knew where to come for great preaching and the music for which the church was also famed. By the time Coffin came to the scene, relations between the large black caucus and some other elements in the membership of the staff were tense. Coffin had to address them.

In addition to the description of the location and the physical circumstances of the church, we need to pay some attention to the place of preaching in such a pulpit, circa 1977. In church and society, a kind of therapeutic revolution was continuing. One of the features of its "feeling movements" was the sowing of distrust of the spoken word. In these years the public was experiencing the high prime of Marshall McLuhan, priest of the media revolution, who called into question messages and even the concept of messages in a critique. The electronic revolution was focused on television and devoted to imagery. Often advocates of this medium dismissed oral communication. Seminaries attracted students who felt a call to ministry, but many of them wanted to avoid anything as drab and boring as preaching, then seen as an outmoded form. They were told that embrace, gesture, drama, and pictures were the ways to communicate the sense-revolution. Preaching, discourse by one to many, was declared to be dying out.

Yet at the same time, new movements were arising. And every one of them—whether they existed in support of civil rights or in causes such as dealing with the environment, war and peace, identity movements of ethnic or interest groups, the understanding of gender—was

led by people who used words well. The pioneers of the women's movements possessed no guns, no ships, and meager funds. But they had words, and their speeches rallied newcomers to the cause and fortified those already in it. In other words, they were secular preachers. In religion, there had been new stirrings for twenty years. Heads of the black movement for those two decades had been "Reverends." Among all these activists was Bill Coffin, preaching and gaining followings mainly through sermons. He believed in the spoken word. Without instruments of government, the military, big business, or advertising firms, he had virtually no source of power beyond his spoken words. He had used his feet during protests at Yale and was ready to use them now, but they were relatively unimportant when compared to this voice box and his words that issued from it.

A third event or trend that should have worked against Coffin at Riverside was the relative decline of churches that came to be called "mainline," ironically at the time this putative mainline was seen to be losing its place. Others were on the rise. Barriers which had once set quotas on Jews in the academy were down. Nonwhite Protestants, tending to the city, were producing headlines and celebrities unmatched in the then still prevalent Protestant style. Preaching was being rediscovered, most significantly among African Americans. Significantly, Coffin's successor at Riverside was to be James Forbes, who, like Coffin, was often pointed to as the most prominent preacher of the day.

In the midst of this colorful cast was Coffin, whose very name recalled the days when Anglo-Saxonhood meant so much. The Reverend Doctor William Sloane Coffin Jr., rooted in WASPdom, was now a prophet against some of its practices and an evangelist who would heal people within the old Protestant nexus. Others took confidence from his example.

One learns from the record of Coffin at Riverside how hard it is for even the most eloquent and wisely admired spiritual leaders to move complex institutions. In fact, as one reckons with the causes to which he gave support, it was clear that few were prospering. During those years the electorate took a turn to the right with the election of Ronald Reagan. More and more investment of funds and faith went to armament. Priorities in the nation favored the rich and led to neglect of the poor. In almost every sermon here there is a reference to some in-church or beyond-church matter that needed address, but for which there were no resources in pocketbook, mind, or heart to turn things around easily. So, since the nation and church were losing so much, was Coffin himself a loser? Hardly. Realistic as he was about

his own fallibility—his marital record, for instance, had disturbed some on the calling committee at Riverside—he was generous in his appraisal of faults of others. His critical voice was never whiny. He once chuckled during a University of Chicago visit which included a stop in my office where there was a sign "No Whining." I don't think he noticed my other wall decoration, Walt Kelly's Pogo saying: "We have faults we have hardly used yet." His sermons suggest that he would have acclaimed it.

The reason he could be angry but not sullen, disappointed but not despairing, was because he believed in the Christian gospel, with its accent on the triumph that came with suffering, the power that issued from the weak, the victory that was the seal of the loving sacrifice unto death of Jesus on the cross. The theology was moving to those who heard it, and should be so to readers of these sermons. They were not covered by the media as much as were his demonstrations against racism and nuclear armament, or as had been his counseling of conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War draft in the years before he came to Riverside. Yet devotion to that gospel of weakness was the secret of his power, or the power of that in which he believed. To test that, one has to sample the sermons, or, in due course, to read them all with a highlighter or colored pen for underlining in hand.

Pastor William Sloane Coffin, in times of such unrest, tried to "interpret the newspapers" in the light of the Bible. He could preach some landmark sermons, one of which we will sample: The occasion was Martin Luther King Jr.'s fiftieth birthday. Coffin used the occasion to celebrate King's ability to shake things up in general.

> Even as Blacks are breaking up all-white patterns, so women are upsetting the patriarchal structures of America. And this bodes well for the Gay liberation movement, as historically only societies that subordinate women are harsh in their treatment of homosexuality—male homosexuality, that is. Interestingly enough, with the exception of one vague passage in St. Paul, there is not a single mention of lesbianism in all the Bible. (Someday we'll deal with the gross misinterpretations of Scripture on the part of those who, for their convenience, forget that the Nazis put over 200,000 homosexuals to death.)

That is the typical Coffin who loads up several causes within a few lines. A few lines later he pointed to those who put no friendly hand

on the shoulders of teenagers in Harlem and other ghetto sites. Still a moment later he could ask: "Isn't the arms race getting ahead of the arms control process?" Old military veteran Coffin almost lost it whenever he came to current military affairs and war:

> As Martin well knew, the church is called to be the Bride of Christ, not the whore of Babylon. She cannot bind herself to the Prince of Peace and go awhoring after the gods of war. She cannot proclaim the gospel of Christ while officiating at the altars of anti-communism. She cannot stand for peace while lying prostrate before the shrine of "national security."

Soon he was announcing Riverside Church's organizing of an anti-arms race initiative, crediting King's spirit.

What is more striking than those comments, which almost became boilerplate among Christian critics of racial injustice and the arms race, is the incidental way Coffin would reach beyond the moment:

> What the prophets teach us to believe and what the world regards as belief are not the same. . . . Prophets recognize that revelation always has to be worked out, that there is a progressive nature to moral judgment. So they criticize what is, in terms of what ought to be. They judge the darkness of the present by the light of the future. And they reject what is narrow and provincial, in the name of what is universal. Prophets know that just as all rivers finally meet in the sea, so all individuals, races and nations meet in God.

Coffin quoted Galatians 3:28 after those lines which summarize as well as any what being prophetic in his time meant, though he was embarrassed when people called him a prophet as he himself was addressing the agenda he had just outlined.

The reader will find many variations on this prophetic theme, which he handles with care. In a sermon preached soon after there was a poignant reference to the presence of the powerful in the case of Nelson Rockefeller, whose funeral at Riverside drew the wealthy and the mighty. Almost immediately in the sermon, Henry Kissinger was the focus. Here was another illustration of a preacher who had that newspaper in his one hand. On the global scene, Iran and Iraq

became regular topics in the year when Iranian leaders took some Americans hostage.

Sometimes pastors in large and endowed congregations are envied because their main task is preaching, so they have all week to prepare for the pulpit. It happens that prominent pulpits are usually the main means of outreach of a congregation and the chief means of nurturing the adults, and, one hopes, often the children. This connecting task inevitably forces administrative tasks on the leader of the pastoral staff, usually the preacher. Coffin saw to it that he did set aside plenty of hours for study and the writing-out of his sermons. But anyone who reads the history of Riverside covering his years knows that he was forced to face tensions and crises, sometime financial, sometimes in staff battles, and most of all when his participation off the premises in causes that not all members found congenial took great expenditures of time. He used the tensions as energizers for the act of speaking.

Sometimes his allusions are so dense that the reader, finding it difficult to follow, has to have empathy for the congregation. Still, the people stuck with him, looked forward to his sermons, quoted them, and sometimes testified that they tried to live by what they learned. Here is a sample of an overladen allusion-rich paragraph that is still worthy of unpacking:

> Descartes was wrong. *Cogito, ergo sum?* ("I think, therefore I am.") We are not detached brains, nor do we establish who we are by thinking alone. Self-knowledge through self-contemplation is self-defeating. In his *Memoirs*, the British philosopher A. J. Ayre writes, "The self seethes, and philosophy analyzes. An abacus is substituted for the sinew of human mystery, and wit for passion."

One hopes that the hearers "got it," for it encapsulates so much of what I found to be central to Coffin in Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of testimony." For the French philosopher and here for an English one thrown in, analysis is not testimony. One can stand back during analysis. My teacher of preaching sixty years ago planted an idea that has never left my classmates or me. He posed eighteen questions that dealt with the quest for effective preaching. Coffin would have breezed through such a test. But the eleventh question was elusive and plaguing. We were to read other people's sermons and ask, "Does this preacher *describe* God or *offer* God?" Offering God meant testifying that "the Absolute"—no, translate that to "the Truth" in Jesus

Christ—is an offering of God's presence which expects response. Philosophy, like the abacus, is then on the shelf, while the self seethes and the sinew of human mystery has to be reached.

Coffin moved on to disturb the peace of the antirationalist romantics who were coming to such prominence in the church and world in 1978. These were the romantics who dodged the reach of God by saying *sentio, ergo sum* ("I feel, therefore I am"). If Coffin could have appraised such "feeling" as a mere fad in middle-class therapy and the discourse of the time, he would have dropped the matter; but he found that something was at stake. He feared that people would end their quest for or response to God with nothing but feeling. Those who wanted to be closer to God, he urged, had to go deeper. For deeper than thinking, deeper than feeling, is caring. I care, therefore I think. I care, therefore I feel. I care, therefore I wish, therefore I will. I care, therefore I am. Coffin discerned an ontological and biblical grounding for this depth: "We have passed out of death into life, because we love the [sisters and brothers]" (1 John 3:14). If one was to care, he or she had to get rid of grievances, in the manner of Jesus the "plant from the stem of Jesse," who never allowed his soul to be cornered into despair; who needed no enemies to tell him who he was; who never counted what was unworthy of his suffering.

In a time when people were beginning to be "spiritual but not religious," or who found the church and ministry irrelevant, Coffin found a way to confront them by asking questions, even by quoting questions.

> I have a friend—very successful—who in the fifties toyed with the idea of becoming a minister. When he came to see me at Yale Divinity School I introduced him to my teacher, Richard Niebuhr. . . . Afterwards my friend told me of their conversation. He said to Dr. Niebuhr, "I believe in God all right, and Jesus and the Christian life, but somehow the church and its ministry seem a bit irrelevant, not part of the 'big show'" as he put it. He wanted himself to be part of the big show. Finally Dr. Niebuhr said, "Tell me, Mr. Jones, what is the big show?"

That exchange prompted a new inspection of Nicodemus, the successful ruler who came to Jesus at night. Soon he was speaking against the concept of machismo which did not allow the powerful to have to ask questions or be questioned.

I cannot conclude this beginning of a book without citing a typical Coffin sermon. Typical, you might think? It's the one he preached the Sunday after his son Alex's death in an auto accident in 1983. The agony was more deep, no doubt, than that the preacher felt over the deaths of children far away. His theological blast at people who were too sure they knew the will of God in the accident was more furious than it might have been when other well-meaning people misspoke theologically. But it all comes close to the heart of his preacherly theology:

> And of course I know, even when pain is deep, that God is good. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Yes, but at least, "My God, my God"; and the psalm only begins that way, it doesn't end that way. As the grief that once seemed unbearable begins to turn now to bearable sorrow, the truths in the "right" Biblical passages are beginning once again, to take hold. . . . "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Coffin regularly preached about victory over death and the triumph of resurrected life. So he could conclude of this accident, "If a week ago last Monday a lamp went out, it was because for him at least, the Dawn had come. So I shall—so let us all—seek consolation in that love which never dies, and find peace in the dazzling grace that always is."

Authors of introductions to books don't usually end with an "Amen," but sermons by William Sloane Coffin Jr. make up a different kind of book, so I end with: Amen.

Martin E. Marty
Emeritus, The University of Chicago

1977

The Spirit of Power and Love

NOVEMBER 6, 1977

"for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love . . ."

2 Timothy 1:7

At this point in the service I imagine a few personal words are in order. So to all members of Riverside Church let me say that I am totally disposed to cherish, nurture, and love each and every one of you in the sure hope that you will do the same for me—as so many of you have done already! Among the problems of the church, I see none that are insoluble. To bring relief to the far-flung misery of New York City is obviously more complicated. The human rights about which we speak so often do not exhaust the Gospel, but they are an essential part of it. Therefore, complex as these city problems may be, we cannot throw in the towel, until there is food for all, housing for all, work for all, education and decent medical help for all. And finally, in the pursuit of my new duties, I promise that I will try always to heed the advice of whoever it was who said, "Take yourself lightly, so that, like angels, you may fly."

Now let us return to our text—"for God did not give us a spirit of timidity,"—or "craven spirit" as some of the translations read—"but a spirit of power and love." And let us also turn to the none too gentle words of our Lord and Saviour—"to every one who has, will more be given; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

It is hard to believe that this parable (Matt. 25:14–29) is as cruel as it sounds. It is hard to believe that Jesus is actually saying what the world seems so intent on proving, that the big-time always wins and that small-fry always lose. Is Jesus really joining the already all too numerous citizens of almost every nation who are intent on attacking the vulnerable instead of the powerful? Or is he simply trying, once again to break through our defenses in order to unearth something that most of us would much prefer to keep buried?

My own conclusion is that this parable is harsh, but also strangely hopeful. New Yorkers live in an enormous city, and we are gathered

here in a building that is, shall we say, intimidating in its size. But all people everywhere are feeling a bit overwhelmed by bigness, and thoughtful people concerned with how human beings arrange their lives are beginning to see that the very scale of organization is an independent and primary problem. Bigness has a special relationship to pollution. Bigness has a special relationship to genocide, to suicide too, to terrorism—and to fatalism—to name but a few ailments highly contemporary. So in such a time it is surely comforting to hear what I take to be the deep-down message of this parable: *small is beautiful. God loves one-talent people*. That's why he made so many of us! And that's why His son comes down so hard on this particular one-talent person—because he refuses to believe it. What can you do with someone who refuses to believe that he or she is loved?

We Americans are today rightly suspicious of those in high office, for the events of recent years have shown us more than we have wanted to know about the arrogance of power. But we tend to forget the degree to which the inertia of the powerless makes possible the powerful. We tend to forget that in God's eyes self-obliteration is just as wicked as self-exaltation. And as this parable makes clear, both stem from the same fateful error of confusing a person's talents with a person's value.

To one he gave five, to a second two, and to a third he gave one. To each he gave not according to his value, but according to his ability. You remember that the two-talent man entered into the same joy of his master as the five-talent man. (That's a lovely phrase, isn't it—"enter into the joy of your master.") What the parable is saying is that though our talents differ, our value is the same. And the reason for this equality of value, proclaimed on almost every page of the Old and New Testament, is a cornerstone of the Christian faith: God's love does not seek value; it creates it. Our value is a gift, not an achievement. It is not because we have value that we are loved, it is because we are loved that we have value.

I've always loved the story of the beggar in the sixteenth century in Paris, desperately ill, who was brought to an operating table of a group of doctors who said in a Latin they were sure he would not understand, "*Faciamus experimentum in anima vile*." ("Let us experiment on this vile fellow.") Whereupon the beggar, actually an impoverished student, later to become a world-renowned scholar, Marc Antoine Muret, asked from the slab on which they had laid him out, "*Animan vilem appelas pro qua Christus non dedignatus mori est?*" ("Will you call 'vile' one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?")

What Muret understood so movingly was that on the cross, God's son laid bare his father's heart for all to see. "This is my body broken for you," "this is my blood shed for you"—"for each and every one of you because whether you believe it or not, my love for you is greater than any telling of it."

Now why is that so hard to believe? Is it because it is too good to believe—we being strangers to such goodness? But before asking that, let's go on with the parable. After disbursing the talents the master goes off on a long journey. This too sounds cruel, as if he were some kind of absentee landlord. But here again I think we are dealing with another cornerstone article of the Christian faith: God is a good father—which is to say, he is not paternalistic. (*Pater noster non est paternalistic!*) As all of us who strive to be good parents know, love is self-restricting when it comes to power. We cannot exercise our power in such fashion as to restrict the freedom of our children, the freedom to become the independent, mature people God meant them to be. So it is right that the master should have left his servants freedom of choice.

And now I think we have arrived at the heart of the parable, the harsh heart, the part that unmasks what we would rather conceal. Most Americans think that the greatness of our democracy is that it offers us freedom of choice. I believe that too. But what that statement overlooks is the present tragedy of American democracy. The present tragedy of American democracy is that although we are offered freedom of choice, most of us, to a startling degree, have lost the ability to choose. I have in mind those who sit in the seats of Congress as well as those who walk the desolate streets of the South Bronx. And I think this is true of our private as well as our public life. The tragedy of our country today is that most of us do not believe that we are loved by God—not really. If we do think so, we don't think so emotionally. Consequently our much vaunted individualism is selfish instead of selfless.

Rather than accepting our value as a gift, we think we have to prove it. We think it derives from the jobs we hold, from the places where we live, from our status and reputation. So unlike the five-, unlike the two-talent person, and unlike the blessed saints, whom on this All Saints' Sunday we call to remembrance, we take no chances—not for God's sake. Like the one-talent man, we play it safe, adopting what might be called the protective strategy of deliberate failure. If you don't place any bets, you won't lose any money. If you sleep on the floor, you will never fall out of the bed.

Actually, for all his having only one talent, this fellow is shrewd. Deciding that the best defense is offense, he says, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you do not sow and gathering where you do not winnow." In effect, what he's saying is, "You see, Master, you shouldn't be like that. Look where it gets you. Now of course if you had slipped me five, or even two talents, things might now be different."

Psychiatrists among you might well call this person a passive-aggressive, a passive-aggressive with a punishing instinct. Overcome by fear, he digs, shall we say, his own hole, then tries to punish the master for putting him in it and for not rescuing him from it. When you stop to think of it, it's really surprising that he didn't present the master with a bill for the shovel!

"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love." What I love about that line is the beautiful implied understanding of our all too human inclination to feel overwhelmed; an understanding that there are always plenty of outer reasons for our inner defeats. At the same time, the text ruthlessly insists that what is understandable is also inexcusable. We need not be defeated and we won't be defeated if instead of colluding with our fears, we have the courage of our conviction that God has more love for us than we will ever have hearts ready to receive. That's the choice—everyday, almost every hour, and in almost every decision. Will we collude with the fears that tell us, "No, I can't," or with our conviction, hard as it may be to believe, that we are loved with an absolutely overwhelming love? It's a little like this building: either we can feel overwhelmed by its size, or we can allow it to lift up our spirits until we feel with the psalmist, "we are a little lower than the angels."

Finally, it is perfectly true to say, "to everyone who has will more be given." For what are we being given? It's not money, it's love. Love begets love; it's power, more power. The greatest reward of love is the opportunity to love more.

So dear friends—old and new—the next time you feel overwhelmed by a sense of your own insignificance, don't reach for the shovel. Remember that God's love doesn't seek value, but creates it. Remember that small is beautiful, that God loves one-talent people. In fact, if our poor wretched earth is ever going to be saved from its present misery, and from the flames that threaten to engulf us, it is going to be rescued by one-talent people like the twelve disciples and all the saints. They became saints very simply because they acted on the belief that there is a divine unquenchable spark in each and every one of us. So, instead of digging, let's start singing: "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine—Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine."

It's Easier to Be Guilty

NOVEMBER 13, 1977
Reading: Mark 6:25–34

When St. Teresa, that great Spanish saint, finished St. Augustine's *Confessions,* she is reported to have sighed and said, "I see myself there reflected." And who wouldn't see herself or himself reflected in one who prays, "Oh God, make me a Christian, but not quite yet."

To reveal us to ourselves is, of course, a characteristic of all great literature, so it is hardly surprising that on almost every page of the Bible we see ourselves reflected. For example, we see ourselves in Adam's excuses, "the woman you gave me," in Jacob, donning his Gordon Liddy-like disguise in order to deceive his father as a first step up the rung of financial success; or in Saul, the moment he hears the chant go up from the crowd—"Saul has killed his thousands but David his ten thousands." And doesn't Saul's jealousy mirror our own perversity? When you stop to think of it, jealousy is the only one of the so-called seven deadly sins, which unlike lust, gluttony and all the rest has no immediate satisfaction whatsoever. Yet there is not one among us who can totally resist this totally pleasureless vice.

In the New Testament we can see ourselves reflected in promise-making, promise-breaking Peter, or in the pathetic figure of the paralytic, quite literally scared stiff, or if you will, scared to death, his life one long suicide. But can we see ourselves reflected in the New Testament lesson, the story in Mark which comes shortly after the story of the paralytic, the story of the woman who for twelve years was bleeding internally? For twelve years she sought unsuccessfully a cure, which makes it hard for us today not to believe that her illness wasn't in part emotional, particularly as in those days to hemorrhage in this fashion was thought to be unclean. So we can say for twelve years, invisible to the public eye, she suffered her weakness, her secret guilt.

I think it would be fairly easy to say "of course we see ourselves reflected there." All of us have secret guilts, and they don't all stem from infantile fantasies either; rather they are a product of an adult understanding of reality. For it is perfectly true that we have fallen short as parents. As American citizens we have strewn the world with our blunders. Lord knows we fail often enough in our vocations, and if we are women these days we may think that we are a failure because we do not have a vocation. And because to an extraordinary degree we are our memories, that is, our memories shape us more than our

genes, the memory of what we have done and what we have neglected to do, like the woman's hemorrhaging, has enormous secret power over us, draining our lives of vitality and joy.

As I say, I think it would be fairly easy to say something like that. But to leave it at that would be to miss the point of the story. For the story is not about the woman's sickness, the story is about her cure. She hears what people are saying about Jesus, she says to herself, "If I touch even His clothes I shall be cured." She makes her way through the crowd pressing around him, touches his clothes and instantly is well again.

Now I do not doubt that like the woman, all of us, shall we say, are bleeding. Nor do I doubt that most of us know it, although I think that you will agree with me that some of our wounds are so deep we neither know how nor want to examine them. But what I suspect is that we can see ourselves reflected more in the crowd than in the woman. We are pressing around Jesus all right, in fact so much so that some people out there, like the disciples in the story, think we are actually touching Jesus. But he knows differently. No power has gone out of him. He knows we are keeping our hands to ourselves. In short, unlike the woman who, after all, despite many setbacks, for twelve long years continued to seek a cure, we, after perhaps a comparable number of years, have come to terms with our bleeding. Our wounds are now familiar. In fact, we are rather comfortable with them. Some of us have even learned how to coerce others with them. Having reached a truce with our guilt, we now don't want to touch Christ. We fear the cure more than the illness.

Have you ever heard yourself or anyone else say sentences something like the following?

"No, I think I'll just keep my mouth shut and endure my marital problems."

"Oh, some day I suppose I'll sit down and have a good long talk with the kids."

"I know my job is boring and certainly isn't useful to anyone, but I guess these days you are lucky to have any job at all."

"Too bad the rest of the world doesn't have America's wealth, but I guess we just have to hope for the best."

These sentences are symptoms of an advanced state of a disease recently called by Ashley Montague "psychosclerosis," a hardening, not of the arteries as in arteriosclerosis, but of the spirit. As a result, the mind cannot see and embrace new ideas, the heart cannot stay vulnerable. Sufferers of psychosclerosis deaden themselves against life in order to go on living. They sell their freedom as the price of their self-perpetuation. It is a very common disease, and people who contract it

are far from dumb. In fact, they are very smart. It is smart to fear the cure more than the illness. Didn't the woman herself almost die of fright when she grasped what had happened? Isn't forgiveness terrifying? It may be Hell to be guilty but isn't it worse to be responsible, response-able, able to respond to the love of God?

God's love casts out fear. The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is fear. So faith means courage. Forgiveness means freedom. To be healed means to have the courage and freedom not to endure marital problems, that is easy; but to face and resolve them; to talk to the kids right now; perhaps to change jobs; and certainly to seek to redistribute the nation's wealth and power at home and abroad.

So why be healed when love is so costly? One reason is because it is so boring to be sick. Fearful people are boring people. Their fear of failure makes them miss out on some of the best things in life. So they are boring to themselves, boring to others. And the same is true of guilt-ridden people. They are too driven, too self-preoccupied to be fun. In fact, not to feel too badly about themselves they make sure they don't feel too good about anything. For them, life has no heights, no depths. It is all flattened out.

The trick in life is to die young as late as possible. But sufferers of psychosclerosis, spiritually speaking, seek to die old as soon as possible. But life is too short to be boring. Furthermore for Christians at least, it is dishonest to go on living in fear and guilt as if within our very reach the cure wasn't there.

Some Christians love to berate atheistic communism. But the heresy of rejecting Christ is small potatoes compared to the heresy of remaking Christ into something he never was, still isn't, and never will be. We cannot say we are Christians and pretend that Christ isn't a healer. He came precisely so that, like this woman, we might touch Him, that power might go out of Him and into us. And what a moving picture that is—power coming out of Christ in order to staunch her bleeding, a prefigurement of the Cross.

This is such a rich story that one could go on talking about it far too long. So let's only note two points more. While it is true that without Christ the woman could not have been healed, what the woman did she did entirely on her own. She didn't tell him what she was going to do, she didn't ask his permission, and she wasn't planning to tell him afterwards what she had done. In other words, she made herself totally responsible for her own cure, which is why she was cured. That is to say, we are healed by God, but only when we choose to be healed. Christ didn't say, "My power has healed you." He said, "Your faith has cured you." His power was there, but she had to

want it, she had to take it, and as to take it took such courage, it is small wonder that he wheeled around to see who had touched Him.

The second point is this: In St. Luke's version, after Christ has turned around, when the woman explains why she touched him and how she had been instantly cured, in that sentence the Greek word for "crowd" changes to the word for "people" or community. By her willingness to become deeply human, this woman humanized all around her, changing a faceless multitude into a community of warm human beings. To touch Christ is to be put in touch with one another. His power is there, but we have to want it, we have to take it. God grant that there may be among us men and women of sufficient courage to do so and in so doing transform us all into a loving, caring community.

Sophocles said of Athens that it was people not stones. May the same be said of Riverside.

A World Fit for Children

NOVEMBER 20, 1977

For the last two Sundays, I have been saying things like "faith means courage," emphasizing courage because the virtue of courage is that it makes all other virtues possible. Anwar Sadat's visit is a dramatic example of that today. And I have been saying, "forgiveness means freedom," "God loves one-talented people," "we should not fall victims to psychosclerosis," the hardening of the spirit. In other words, for the last two Sundays we have been talking of ourselves as individuals, which is perfectly all right as long as we remember that as Christians we do not believe in the cult of the individual ego. That cult is as bloody as the Aztecs'; it feeds on victims.

As Christians we do not believe in the Gospel of private salvation—"Not my father, not my mother, not my deacon, not my city, not my nation, not my world, just me and Thee, O Lord." No. Salvation is for everyone—including me. That is the Christian understanding of salvation. It's a package deal. It cannot be untied or negotiated. It includes everyone and everything, politics and economics, the past, the present, and particularly the future. The God we worship is a God ahead of us, as much as above us or within us. And what are our dear children, if not living signposts pointing to the future? "*Los niños son la esperanza del futuro del mundo*," said the great José Martí—"Children

are the hope of the future of the world," and in so saying, he implied that they could use a little help from their friends. Let us recall too the words of A. J. Muste, "We need a foreign policy fit for children."

So on this golden morning let us think big thoughts. Let's make our hearts as wide as God's universe, and to get us started, let us call to mind the story in the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of the Book of Numbers. After a long and tear-stained trek, the children of Israel finally reach the borders of the Promised Land. Spies are sent out, and when they come back there is a majority report and there is a minority report. The minority report, submitted by Joshua and Caleb, is prophetic, saying in effect, "We can go ahead, we can do God's will, if only we don't lose hope," which we can translate as a passion for the possible. The majority report, as one might expect, is pragmatic. The prudence it counsels only thinly veils the cowardice of those submitting it. It speaks of "giants in the land"—the sons of Anak, literally the long-necked one. "And we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers and so we seemed to them" (Num. 13:33).

Predictably, the children of Israel accept the majority report, and we read that "all the congregation raised a loud cry and the people wept that night; and all the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt.' . . . And they said to one another, 'Let us choose a captain and go back to Egypt.'" And then when Aaron and Moses remonstrate, and Caleb gets up once again, and Joshua, and say, "The Lord is with us," the congregation said to stone them (Num. 14:1–10).

I recall this story because that line "We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers" seems to reflect the constant problem, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." The story shows us that while love seeks the truth, fear seeks safety. And fear distorts the truth, not by exaggerating the ills of the world, which would be difficult, but by underestimating our ability to deal with them. "We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers." As in the story of the one-talent man, we see again the protective strategy of deliberate failure, only with two added wrinkles: if you think other people make you into a failure—"giants in the land"—then you don't have to feel badly about being one. And if you think that those trying to wean you from your sense of failure—the Joshuas and the Calebs of the world—are only trying to push you around, then you can stone them with a good conscience.

Now I do not think there is a Promised Land for anybody any more, but I recall this story because I believe there is a Promised Time for everybody. After a far longer and even more arduous trek, the three hundred odd billion of us who inhabit this planet are in fact on the very

borders of that time promised in Scripture—"and it shall come to pass in the latter days"—a time when quite literally, if we do not lose our passion for the possible, we might indeed create a world without borders, a world without famine, a world at one, a world at peace.

But instead of pressing forward, God's children once again are holding back. Instead of "seizing the time," we are losing our grip; and some of us seem eager to elect captains to lead us back to the fleshpots and spiritual slavery of Egypt.

It is understandable. We have been through tough disillusioning times. Who was it who said, "I used to be an incurable optimist, but now I'm cured." And understand why we are fearful. Ahead *are* giants. But what are giant obstacles if not brilliant opportunities brilliantly disguised as giant obstacles? And aren't we Christians to say with Camus, "Even in deep darkness of winter I know in my heart an invincible summer"?

The best definition of patriotism that I know is the one offered by the ancient Roman Tacitus. "Patriotism," he said, "is entering into praiseworthy competition with our forefathers." So let me suggest that we enter into praiseworthy competition with the children of Israel and with our nation's Revolutionary forefathers. They declared their independence, one from Egypt, the other from England. Let us declare our interdependence with all people. Let us dare to see pragmatically that the survival unit in our anguished time is no longer an individual nation or an individual anything. The survival unit in our time is the whole human race plus its environment.

It used to be that we worried about this part of the globe not being able to protect itself against that part. Now it is the whole that cannot protect itself against the parts. Therefore, we can no longer say that an individual nation-state is the principal focus for thought and action. Responsible national citizenship has to give way to international citizenship. And that pragmatic view is, of course, only the ancient prophetic view. According to this view, all of us belong one to another, all three billion odd inhabitants of this planet. That's the way God made us. Christ died to keep us that way. So our sin is that we are always trying to put asunder what God himself has joined together. I am not my brother's keeper, I am my brother's brother. That is something again that Sadat seemed to understand as he talked to the Israelis this morning. In other words, to Christians, territorial discrimination is as evil as racial. "God cares for all, as if all were but one."

But God also "cares for each as if he had naught else to care for." Do you remember how Jesus says, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?" He is referring to the practice of sacrifice, and to the poor

who couldn't afford bullocks. They would buy two sparrows for a penny, and if they bought two pennies' worth—four sparrows—a fifth was thrown in. God cares for that fifth sparrow! And he goes on to say, "Are you not of more value than many sparrows" (Luke 12:6–7).

It is not enough then to talk of interdependence. Many people have been doing that for some time: Henry Kissinger, for one. And presidents of multinational corporations are quick to say that national boundaries are no more interesting to them than the equator. But the powerful of the world tend naturally to see themselves as the village elders of the global village. They tend to see a unity based on the present order rather than on greater justice for the poor and the powerless. Their greater concern for disorder over injustice inevitably produces more of both. And while we are saying harsh things, let us recognize the degree of truth in that accusation frequently launched against us Christians that we have a vested interest in unjust social structures because they produce victims to whom we can then pour out our charity.

I am a great believer in charity. I think it is such a wonderful thing that even the poor should have a chance to engage in it. I think it is a wonderful thing that all this food was brought this morning to the altar. But every outpouring of charity is also a signpost to a deficiency in justice. So while in myriad programs here at Riverside we try as we must try to pour out our hearts in charity to the victims of society, we must never cease asking, "Why must we have these victims?"

We need then to talk not only of a global but of a just and global future, the only one worthy of the children we honor today.

In closing let me just say one word to the rich and powerful among you, and to all of us who are citizens of a rich and powerful nation. The message of the prophets is that judgment of the rich spells mercy for the poor, judgment of the powerful spells mercy for the powerless. The message is summed up in the words of the Magnificat:

> He has put down the mighty from their thrones
> and exalted those of low degree;
> He has filled the hungry with good things,
> And the rich he has sent empty away.
> Luke 1:52–53

But it is often forgotten that judgment of the rich spells mercy for the rich as well. Judgment of the powerful spells mercy for the powerful as well. The rich should not be left to the mercy of their riches any more than the poor should be left to the mercy of their poverty. There are two ways to be rich. One is to have lots of money,

the other is to have few needs. In the United States, the second option is rarely weighed. But the Bible promotes it all the time, suggesting moreover that dwindling economic resources may allow spiritual resources to grow.

Consider this: The United States, with only 5.8 percent of the world's population, currently consumes about 35 percent of the world's resources. Were we Americans profoundly happy, I suppose it could be argued (though certainly not by me) that such is the price the rest of the world must pay for American happiness. But we are not a profoundly happy people. Our affluence has not bought morale. In fact, it has brought a great deal of loneliness and emptiness as our acquisitiveness has disrupted our sense of community. So if the wealth of rich Americans must be redistributed at home in order to eliminate our monstrous inequalities, if the wealth and power of America must be redistributed abroad, if to some degree austerity is called for, God be praised. All is well. We need not view austerity as a necessary evil, only as a necessary ingredient for that sense of community of which we see all too little among our own people, and among the nations.

So, dear friends, let us continue with good heart our exodus from the old time to the new. The road is hard but the future is bright. The Promised Time is there ahead. Already we can dimly view its contours. The spies are back, the prophetic ones among them announcing that the Promised Time will be much better than the good old days! So, enough of this "back to Egypt" talk. Enough of this talk about seeming to ourselves like grasshoppers. We, too, can become giants, Anaks—by sticking out our necks! We have created a world for some of us. Let's make one for all of us.

Born to Set Thy People Free

DECEMBER 4, 1977

The text for the morning's sermon on this second Sunday in Advent is the well-known verse from the Gospel of John as recorded in the New English Bible,

> So the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

I can't recall the exact spot, but somewhere in the writings of Kazantzakis, he describes a dream that disturbs the sleep of the old monk, Father Joachim. In the dream a troubled Mary brings her 12-year-old Jesus to him for help.

"What's the matter?" asks Father Joachim.

"I don't know," says the boy. "I seem to roam the streets, wrestling."

"With whom are you wrestling?"

"With God, of course. With whom else would you wrestle?"

Then Father Joachim takes the boy to his house, teaches him carpentry, takes him for long walks during which he talks to him of God as if God was some kind of neighbor who might stop by for a chat on a long summer's evening when he was sitting out on the steps. After about a month, the boy is cured; he goes home. Many years later Father Joachim hears he is doing fine, in fact, he is the best carpenter in Nazareth. Instead of saving the world he becomes the best carpenter in Nazareth!

If that dream doesn't make you squirm a bit it should, for by every blessed saint in heaven, almost all of us give up wrestling with God to become splendid splinters. Full of self-confidence, perhaps, in what we are doing, we are also full of self-contempt for doing more. And it is not really a question of doing more; it is a question of being more, thinking more, thinking about things that really matter. We know so little about things that really matter.

I once asked a group of Yale faculty if they thought the existence of God a lively question. Said a political scientist, "It's not even a question, Bill, let alone a lively one." That he didn't believe in God didn't bother me that much. After all, that was his problem and fortunately for His continued existence, God doesn't depend on our proving it. Moreover, the important question is not who believes in God but "in whom does God believe?" As betwixt Christians and atheists I imagine it is about even steven. There are as many sheep without the fold as there are wolves within!

But what did trouble me was this: I can see doubting the quality of the bread, but I can't see kidding yourself that you are not hungry—unless of course your soul has so shrivelled that you have no appetite left for all that elicits astonishment, awe, and wonder. It's this shrivelling up that is so disturbing. What's so boring at universities is not that scientists specialize, it's that specialists generalize, insisting that not only in their particular area, but in all areas of life the only truths that matter are the truths that can be proved, mysteries that can be explained. They see only those truths they can dominate. They have no truck with those to which one can only surrender. Their minds are

both powerful and frighteningly narrow. No wonder there is a widespread withdrawal from wisdom in universities today.

Not that we churchgoers have great cause for smugness. We believe religion is a good thing like social security and regular exercise, but we don't want to overdo it. It might affect the heart!

But enough of such angry comments. They probably make me feel better but serve no other cause. The point I wish to make is the obvious one: Answers demand questions, and the bigger the answers the bigger the questions. The main reason why people don't believe in God is that they don't wrestle with such questions, sometimes even denying their validity. And when you stop to think of it, there is nothing as irrelevant as an answer to an unasked question.

But the text begs us today to ask big questions, for it speaks of "The Word," not many little words. *The* Word, *The* answer to *The* question! "What's it all about?" All the tears and laughter of our lives—what do they amount to? How are we to conduct our lives?

Now I hesitate to turn to the answer which you remember St. Paul calls folly. I suppose that if it is hard to wrestle with a big question, it may be harder to accept the form the big answer takes: "The Word became flesh." It certainly is unusual, to say the least, that the greatest truth should become as ordinary as we, that the "King of Kings" should be born to Joseph and Mary, that "the bread of life" for human beings should be laid in the feedbox of animals.

Let me tell you another Christmas story, courtesy of the rich imagination of Søren Kierkegaard. Once upon a time, there was a king who fell in love with a maid. Whereupon he summoned his wisemen together to advise him on how he was to declare his love. "What could be simpler," they answered in one voice. "Your majesty has but to appear in all his glory before her humble abode and instantly she will fall on her knees and be yours."

But that was precisely what was troubling the King. He didn't want his glorification, he wanted hers. His love, freely offered, wanted hers, freely returned. So, night after night he walked the corridors of his palace alone, pondering his dilemma, and what a dilemma it was, when not to declare his love was the death of love, and to declare it was the death of his beloved. Finally, the King saw love's truth, that freedom for the beloved demands equality with the beloved. So, late one night when all his courtiers and wisemen had retired, he stole out the side door of his palace and appeared before the abode of the maid dressed as a servant.

It is a lovely story, isn't it, the kind that makes the heart melt, the eye fill? Or is it? I think if I had been the maid I would have wanted

to know more about this stranger. What about his future, and mine? Were we two going to be stuck together in this miserable hovel all the rest of our lives? In fact, this solution so satisfactory to Kierkegaard and to the King, I wouldn't have found satisfactory at all. I would rather he had been more honest. I don't mind marrying a King!

The fact of the matter is, "The Word became flesh" is not only astonishing, it's offensive. We want God to be God. Why does he want to be human? We want God to be strong, so we can be weak; but he wants to be weak, so that we can be strong. We want God to prove himself. But He answers, "What do you want—proof or freedom? I know what you are looking for—evidence to make an intelligently selfish decision. You'll never find it."

What Kierkegaard is so correctly insisting, is that God is known devotionally, not dogmatically. If as Scripture says "God is love," then the revelation is the relationship. Christianity is not clearing up old mysteries; it's the disclosure of new mystery. It is not a truth that you can master; it's only one to which you can surrender. Faith is being grasped by the power of love.

"Divine folly is wiser than the wisdom of man, and divine weakness stronger than man's strength" (1 Cor. 1:25). So at Christmas the Word became silent, a song without words, knowledge without articulation. The Christ Child in the manger is like the grown man before Pilate—wordless truth. At Christmas as on Good Friday, God does not give us an answer. He gives us Himself.

I said there are truths we can master and truths to which we can only surrender. (And Lord knows we must constantly strive to know the difference.) We now have to grasp the paradoxical truth that in surrendering lies freedom. I don't think it is that hard. When you say that you were "captivated" by a great book or a great painting, aren't you saying that you somehow felt free? "Enthralled" by the singing of the choir and the playing of the organ, aren't all of us liberated, including the choir members and the organist himself? We need make no bones about it, we need to be liberated, released, delivered, saved from our egocentric preoccupations, our endless niggling worries, our fears of failure and of dying. We need to be freed *from* fear *for* love, *from* self *for* God. For God is not seeking to convert us from this world to some other but from something less than life to the possibility of full life itself. We come to church not to prepare ourselves for the worst but to prepare ourselves for the best, not to become splendid splinters but to save the world by becoming as those who know that love is the expression of our aliveness, that to live and to love are to do the same thing.

So, come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free. Come, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

A Sign That Is Spoken Against

DECEMBER 18, 1977

". . . that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed"
Luke 2:35

About this time of year there is generally a mild hubbub about the dangers of a commercialized Christmas. In my own opinion, a commercialized Christmas may be in wretched taste but, at least, it doesn't pretend to be anything else. What is really dangerous is a sentimentalized Christmas, sentimentality being an emotion that does not arise out of the truth but which is poured on top, diluting, distorting.

Let me give you an example. The smallest street in Paris leads off from the left bank of the River Seine not far from the Cathedral of Notre Dame. It goes by the quaint name of "The street of the cat that fishes" (*La rue du chat qui pêche*). It is so narrow two bicycles could barely pass, and it extends no further than a quarter of a normal city block. Year after year hundreds of tourists strolling down the quay stop for a moment to peer down it, to look at the street sign, and to exclaim "Oh, how picturesque." Few, however, venture down the street, let alone into the dank, dark rooms that pass for habitation. If they did they might conjecture that for over five hundred years that street probably contributed more to the tuberculosis rate in Paris than any other street in the city. The unsentimental truth about the street of the cat that fishes is that it is better suited for cats than for humans. It is picturesque all right; it is also horrible.

The same is true of the manger scene. Bending low over the Christ child, the ox and ass add a tender touch. But they are not guests. This is their home. "There was no room for him in the inn" only because the innkeeper, knowing his guests, knew that like him none would be inclined to move over for a pregnant woman. The unsentimental truth about Christmas is that he who is to be bread of life for humans is laid in the feedbox of animals.

The Gospel of John, being very unsentimental about these things, suggests that our inhumanity to one another may only be exceeded by our inhumanity to God. "He was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not" (John 1:10–11). At Christmas as on Good Friday, human beings come off badly.

But why insist on this? To be a killjoy? On the contrary, to bring the real joy of Christmas to life, the real joy, not the frills and froth, the real joy that sadly enough won't be available to the eager readers of those best sellers promoting the notion that the good life is the painless life. Their writers want to do away with the sensation of pain rather than examine and change the situations that cause it. Deep down, they are shallow!

But not old man Simeon. He saw the true joy of Christmas: "Mine eyes have beheld thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples" (Luke 2:30–31). But he also foresaw how prohibitive this salvation would be to those who want their happiness cheap. Mind you, I am not saying that God doesn't want to make us happy. I am only saying that while God would like to please us He would much rather save us!

Listen again to Simeon. "Behold this child is set for the fall and rising of many . . . a sign that is spoken against . . . that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34–35). That makes Christmas sound pretty terrifying, doesn't it?

Before looking at these words more closely, let us look for a moment at the old man himself. We read that Simeon is "just," "upright," "righteous," and "devout"—to use all the words in all the translations—which makes him sound admirable but not necessarily sympathetic. For highly principled people can be remarkably insensitive to frailty and suffering. But then we read, "He looked forward to Israel's comforting." That's lovely! First of all, as an old man should, he looked forward. Simeon is the New Testament's first example of the fact that the senior years are the formative years, years when one sees the fundamentals of life with fresh clarity and urgency, when the imminence of death makes the preciousness of life so clear. (I heard a scientist the other day say that science has pretty well determined that there is no more life in our galaxy, and certainly has established the fact that before us and after us there is no one like us. What a statement about the preciousness of every human life!)

But back to Simeon. Looking forward, he was old and fresh. You are only old and stale when dreams are replaced by regrets. Or perhaps

we should say you are old and stale when you look forward only to be able to say, "I told you so, but you wouldn't listen to me."

Simeon, however, has no need to prove himself. He is ready, even eager to die. He is aging "toward the light." But he wants to hang around long enough to see the promised consolation of those he will leave behind. He must have been a dear man.

Now to his words—"that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed." I am impressed that the Bible locates thoughts not in the mind but in the heart. So does the prayer book: "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit." It's as if there is a difference between what we think with our minds and what we feel in our hearts. And I'm impressed by the strong suggestion in Simeon's words that if, so to speak, the Christ child is to be born in the chambers of our hearts, and not forced out into some manger, we are going to have to dislodge some of the thoughts presently residing there.

"That thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed." It's rough going to be confessional—no sentimentality allowed—but let's try in order to be properly prepared for next week. While in our minds we know everyone else is as important as we are, in our hearts we don't feel it that way, do we? In our minds we know that all human beings are created equal, but our hearts don't always feel the monstrosity of inequality. Our minds tell us to rejoice in the fact that this congregation is genuinely interracial, but there is a fear in the hearts of some of us that it is becoming too black.

I think we should not feel anxious if such prejudicial thoughts are revealed, only if they are repressed. I assume that I can't be born white in the United States without being antiblack at some level of my being. And I assume that every black person I meet at some level of his or her being must feel "Whitey can't be trusted." How could it be otherwise in a country—let's not be sentimental—which is at one and the same time a great nation and the only nation born in the blood of ten million Indians and developed in the sweat of forty million slaves?

But if we reveal and do not suppress these prejudiced thoughts deeply lodged in our hearts, if we genuinely want to be liberated from their power, God be praised we have Jesus Christ and one another. We can refuse to become the enemies that our prejudices want to make us. We can grow into the conviction that in Christ Jesus we all are one. And brothers and sisters in Christ, is it not the case that no salvation, no consolation, no joy is comparable to that of people determined no longer to be enemies who then embrace one another? Isn't that the joy we are seeing day after day in our newspapers reflected upon the faces of countless Egyptians cheering the

Israeli delegation in the midst of Cairo? As one Egyptian reporter said, "I'm seeing it, but I can't believe it!"

If Christ is born anew in our hearts this Christmas, I'm confident that by next Christmas this church will have found many ways to confront and to confound our prejudices, so that we can proudly claim on the bottom of our order of worship that not only are we interdenominational, interracial, and international, but deeply interpersonal.

Now what about that "international"? Frankly, I think class may be a tougher nut to crack than race; and the toughest of them all may be national prejudice. But surely we do have to confront it if there is to be room in our hearts for the Prince of Peace.

At the present rate of weapons procurement, it takes the nations of the world only two days to spend the equivalent of the annual budget of the UN and all its specialized agencies. This tragedy is compounded by the irony that the arms race is rapidly destroying the one thing arms are supposed to provide—national security. Then there is a further irony. World security is probably threatened less by relations between nations than by the relation of all of us to our environment. I have in mind the dwindling reserves of oil, the pollution of the air and of the sea.

So while in our minds we think it's national security we are after, in our hearts we worship military power. In our minds we may believe that all nations are created equal, but in our hearts most Americans feel about the United States the way Muhammad Ali talks about himself: "I'm the greatest." And the greatest not in terms of decency, but in terms of power.

"You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of splendor" (Ezek. 28:17). The Bible takes a jaundiced view of national power. But we love it. We cheer it as we cheer the power of Muhammad Ali, or the power of the bat of Reggie Jackson, and we never cheer louder than when a president warns that the United States "must not become a pitiful and helpless giant"—at the very moment it is becoming a mindless and heartless one. (In our congregation this morning sits the man who had the decency in Geneva to apologize for what the United States had done in Chile. But believe me, the State Department for once in its life acted with alacrity in informing him that powerful nations do not apologize for what they have done to small nations. We occasionally apologize to other big nations, for bullies are always weak on the tough and tough on the weak.)

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder" (Isa. 9:6). If that kind of a child is to be born in our hearts we shall first have to remove our irrational love

of loveless power. We shall have to see that arms control is not enough; it doesn't work, and it validates the arms that remain. Disarmament is the only answer. This spring the United Nations General Assembly will convene a special session on disarmament. So my second hope for next Christmas is that we will then be able to look back and say of ourselves and of the religious community generally, that not only did we pray, we worked for peace, we struggled for peace, we suffered for peace.

"And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." When you stop to think of it, all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the air forces that ever took to the air, in terms of influence can't hold a candle to this one man born in a manger whose sole possession at death was a robe. So let us not say we are powerless in the face of loveless power. Let us prepare ourselves so that with Simeon we may say that our eyes have seen, not some cheap easy selfish happiness, but "thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples." Let us cleanse the thoughts of our hearts with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit so that we may mean it when we sing "O come to my heart Lord Jesus; there is room in my heart for Thee." Amen.

Power Comes to Its Full Strength in Weakness

DECEMBER 25, 1977
Reading: John 1:1–14

May I wish you all a Merry Christmas, particularly you children in the congregation, and you old folks among our radio listeners. Some of your lives are not as full as once they were with people you loved dearly. So to you our special wish that Christ be with you today.

To the reading of John's Christmas story, let us add these words of St. Paul: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding men's misdeeds against them" (2 Cor. 5:19); and these words also, "Three times I begged the Lord to rid me of it,"—a sharp pain in his side—"but his answer was: 'My grace is all you need. Power comes to its full strength in weakness.' I shall therefore prefer to find my joy and pride in the very things that are my weakness. And

then the power of Christ will come and rest upon me. Hence I am well content, for Christ's sake, with weakness, contempt, persecution, hardship and frustration; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

I once was told of a man who arrived at the Canadian border north of Detroit on his bicycle. Behind him on the rack, he had a box full of sand.

"What have you got in there?" asked the customs official.

"Nothing."

"Well, let's just check it out."

The customs official raked his fingers through the box of sand. Finding nothing he waved him on.

A few days later the man was back again, with the same box of sand behind his seat, on the bicycle.

"Well, what have you got this time?"

"Same thing, nothing."

This time the official took the bicycle and turned it upside down, shook it out, took the box apart, but still he found nothing. For weeks the scene was re-enacted, each time the customs official certain he was going to find whatever it was this man was smuggling through. But he never did.

Several years later, the customs official, now retired, was having himself a few beers in a bar in Detroit. Suddenly he spied the erstwhile cyclist coming through the door. Hailing him, he bought him a drink and said, "Look, it doesn't mean anything to me now that I am retired, but I am curious; what was it you were smuggling all that time?"

"Bicycles."

I suppose that is something of a Christmas story. Certainly it never occurred to Herod to search a stable for the threat to his world that God was smuggling into it on that first Christmas. And ever since, the Herods and wisemen, the foes and friends alike of Christ have never ceased marvelling at the form God's revelation takes at Christmas.

Here are some lines from an unknown fifteenth-century writer:

> Thou shalt know him when he comes
> Not by any din of drums,
> Nor by the vantage of his airs,
> Nor by anything he wears,
> Neither by his gown
> Nor his crown.
> For his presence known shall be
> By the Holy Harmony
> That his coming makes in thee.

I like that verse because my passions need harmonizing. I like it too because it reminds me that God's revelation is like a stained-glass window: from the outside one sees nothing; only insiders see the radiance. And I like it because it is another reminder that never are we going to be helped by God's power, at least not as the world judges power. We are only going to be helped by God's weakness. At Christmas we can say that God undertakes a Sadat-like initiative* to change the premises of human relations—which the experts, of course always see as immutable! But compared to God's, Sadat's initiative is as the lightning bug to the lightning, for God undertakes to bring peace to the whole hostile world. He wants worldwide disarmament, politically and spiritually. And to break through our defenses, he arrives utterly defenseless. Nothing but unguarded goodness in that manger!

I suppose some would call it perverse to make too much of a tragedy out of something so inevitable, but the lengths to which we humans go to protect our tender egos never ceases to appal me, although I can't help being fascinated by the variety and subtlety our defenses take. For instance, the other day I met a man who came across as one of the friendliest fellows I have met since coming to this proud provincial town. Listening to him I had the impression that he had lowered the drawbridge of his castle, so to speak, and was inviting me over. But even as he pumped my hand and told me how happy he was to see me, I realized that he himself had rushed over the bridge to make sure I never set foot on it.

Need I say it? He was a fellow minister. We ministers have the most invulnerable way of making ourselves vulnerable!

But at least we try. You doctors, particularly you lawyers, you professors . . . but what's the point of singling out any of us? No sooner are we out of diapers than almost all of us are into suits of armor. Then, isolated by the fear we feel and the fear we inspire, we get lonely and become even more anxious and uncertain. So we erect even stronger defenses against the threat of even larger defeats. Then we attach ourselves to powerful institutions whose prestige we hope will protect us. Then to powerful nations whose arms we hope will defend us. I have never yet met a man who believed in a high military budget who wasn't himself incredibly defensive.

Some of you may protest: "The problem is that the only thing the other side understands is force." But the problem with that position is

*Coffin is referring here to the 1977 diplomatic initiative of Anwar Sadat, president of Egypt. Sadat openly expressed his willingness to negotiate peace with Israel. His action led to the 1978 Camp David Accords. Sadat won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work, which he shared with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

that you then have to act as if the only thing *you* understand is force. There is nothing Sadat-like in that position; nothing Christ-like either. God enters the world utterly defenseless. Nothing but unguarded goodness in that manger.

One of the reasons we love to hold babies, or puppies or kittens for that matter, is that they don't threaten us. They respond to that yearning in all of us to be disarmed, which may be why to the most heathen among us Christmas is so appealing. Our isolation is killing us. We are tired of this clanking armor, of bumping masks with one another. Living on the outside of everyone and everything, we long for substantial relations.

Suppose you were given the Christ child to hold. I'm serious. Close your eyes and pretend for a moment that Mary has taken Jesus from her breast, has turned to you and said, "Here, hold the child for a moment, will you?" Wouldn't that undo you, to hold in your arms all God's love for you? I can't think of anything that would undo me more. And that, I suspect, is precisely God's Christmas plan for each of us: to undo us.

"Three times I begged the Lord to rid me of this weakness, but his answer was, 'My grace is all you need. Power comes to its full strength in weakness.'"

It's all right to be weak. It's only wrong to pretend we are not weak. It's all right to be full of doubts. All feelings are valid. Not all behavior, but all feelings are valid. Now I know how terrifying it is to lay down our arms, to step out of our armor. "What will they say when they see me as I really am?" But it is the only way to live—as defenseless as the baby Jesus. "Power comes to its full strength in weakness."

We all know that the greatest expenditure in our personal defense budgets are caused by guilt. The same may be true, I suspect, of our national defense budget, but let's leave consideration of that little subject for another time. Let's stay, for a moment, with this harassing question of guilt, for what in our imaginations we were holding in our arms just now is God's forgiveness in person on earth. So, how guilty are we? How badly do we need God's forgiveness?

For many of the crimes we think we have committed we don't need forgiveness at all; we need exoneration. I am sorry to report this but we never committed most of the crimes we like to think we committed. I'm thinking particularly of wrongs we think we have done our parents. Children take note: Nine out of ten times, if anyone's to blame, it's the parents.

But it is convenient to think that we committed these wrongs, for they detract us from our real sin. From our real sin we generally take

refuge in a jungle of scruples, inhibitions, and totally inconsequential sins. (A priest friend of mine once described hearing the confessions of nuns. "It's like being stoned to death with popcorn.")

For instance, our real sin here at Riverside may be that although we belong to a big church, we don't think big thoughts. Our membership is incredibly talented, but New York hasn't been saved. We haven't even saved the Hudson—let alone the world!

In other words, guilt is important to quicken our imagination, to enlarge and sensitize our hearts, to show us how much we need the grace of God. But after that its usefulness is over. Christians are not sinners; they are forgiven sinners. The rejection of forgiveness is as wicked as the denial of sin.

Particularly on this Christmas Day do not say the confession and refuse the assurance of pardon. To do that would be to come to this church to make your last stand against God. Guilt is the last stronghold of pride. For guilt is your opinion of yourself. Forgiveness is God's opinion. Are you too proud to give up your opinion? to allow God to do for you what you can't do for yourself?

"God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself not holding our misdeeds against us." By entering the world utterly defenseless he disarms us. By forgiving us he relieves us, not of the consequences of our sins but of the consequences of being sinners. With no fear of condemnation we can now make ourselves vulnerable, which is what we are yearning to be—honest, sensitive, compassionate, courageous. No longer isolated by the fear we feel and the fear we inspire, we are ready now for substantial relations with one another and with God.

But one thing more. "God was in Christ reconciling the world." We don't start with ourselves and then "work out." We start with the world, which includes us. We start with the understanding that all human beings are created equal. If you follow that word all the way down to its Greek root you will find the word for oneness. All human beings are created one. Human unity is not something we are called on to create; it is something we are called to recognize. And Christ at Christmas enters this world to reconcile its warring factions, to say to us, "will you stop putting asunder what God himself has joined together."

Allowing our guilt to quicken our imaginations, we might be able to turn the sin to good use. If all the nations are not one in love, at least they are one in sin, and this is no mean bond, for it precludes the possibility of separation through judgment. "Judge not that ye be not judged," that's the meaning of that phrase. Suppose at their first meeting, Sadat were to start out, "My dear brother Begin, you have no idea

how we Egyptians have sinned against you . . ." And Begin would answer "You think that's bad, Anwar? Listen . . ."

We laugh, but isn't that how you make peace, whether between individuals, or between nations? "My grace is all you need; power comes to its full strength in weakness." What appears to be psychological defeat is spiritual victory, for again we are talking of honesty, sensitivity, compassion, courage. We are talking of a strength greater than the strength of the strong, as the world judges strength. Were the nations to vie in "weakness" then we would see the power of God at work. For God's strength is victory over the self. It is the sense of conquest without the humiliation of the conquered.

So, our work once again is cut out for us. God's Sadat-like initiative, His coming utterly defenseless into our hostile world has changed the premises of human relations. We have only to recognize it. And we can, because we are not experts, we're Christians. So let's let go our defenses, which only make for war, and let God create in their stead that Holy Harmony of which the fifteenth-century writer spoke so simply.

Last night the choir sang another verse, a prayer to the Christ child, which might well stand as our Christmas prayer today:

Love in that stable was born
Into our hearts to flow;
Innocent dreaming babe,
Make me thy love to know.
Amen.