The Collected Sermons of

William Sloane Coffin

The Riverside Years

VOLUME TWO

William Sloane Coffin

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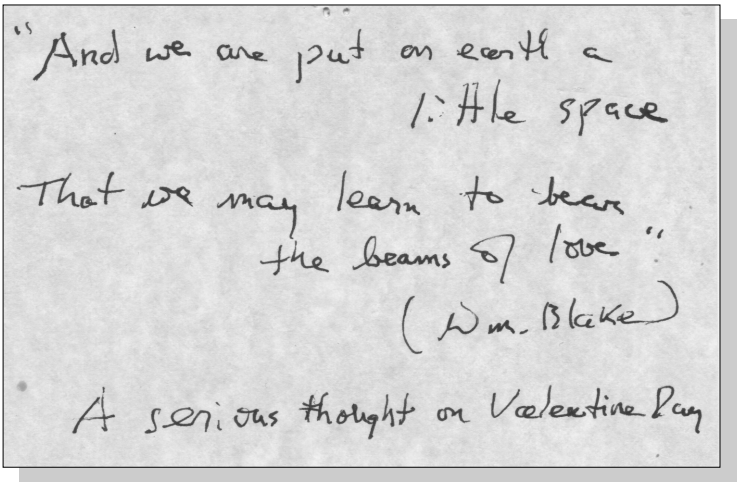
Dear Reader,

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 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

1983

Alex's Death

JANUARY 23, 1983
Readings: Psalm 34:1–9; Romans 8:38–39

As almost all of you know, a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm, my son Alexander—who to his friends was a real day-brightener, and to his family "fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky"—my twenty-four-year-old Alexander, who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave.

Among the healing flood of letters that followed his death was one carrying this wonderful quote from the end of Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*: "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places." My own broken heart is mending, and largely thanks to so many of you, my dear parishioners; for if in the last week I have relearned one lesson, it is that love not only begets love, it transmits strength.

Because so many of you have cared so deeply and because obviously I've been able to think of little else, I want this morning to talk of Alex's death, I hope in a way helpful to all.

When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died I was sitting in the living room of my sister's house outside of Boston, when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking middle-aged woman, carrying about eighteen quiches. When she saw me she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly over her shoulder, "I just don't understand the will of God." Instantly I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. "I'll say you don't, lady!" I said. (I knew the anger would do me good, and the instruction to her was long overdue.) I continued, "Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had had a couple of 'frosties' too many? Do you think it is God's will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road, and no guard rail separating the road and Boston Harbor?"

For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God

doesn't go around this world with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. And Christ spent an inordinate amount of time delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, and muteness. Which is not to say that there are no nature-caused deaths (I can think of many right here in this parish in the five years I've been here), deaths that are untimely and slow and pain-ridden, which for that reason raise unanswerable questions, and even the specter of a Cosmic Sadist—yes, even an Eternal Vivisector. But violent deaths, such as the one Alex died—to understand those is a piece of cake. As his younger brother put it simply, standing at the head of the casket at the Boston funeral, "You blew it, buddy. You blew it." The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, "It is the will of God." Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was *not* the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break.

I mentioned the healing flood of letters. Some of the very best, and easily the worst, came from fellow reverends, a few of whom proved they knew their Bibles better than the human condition. I know all the "right" Biblical passages, including "Blessed are those who mourn," and my faith is no house of cards; these passages are true, I know. But the point is this: While the words of the Bible are true, grief renders them unreal. The reality of grief is the absence of God—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The reality of grief is the solitude of pain, the feeling that your heart's in pieces, your mind's a blank, that "there's not a joy the world can give like that it takes away" (Lord Byron).

That's why immediately after such a tragedy people must come to your rescue, people who only want to hold your hand, not to quote anybody or even say anything, people who simply bring food and flowers—the basics of beauty and life—people who sign letters simply, "Your broken-hearted sister." In other words, in my intense grief I felt some of my fellow reverends—not many, and none of you, thank God—were using comforting words of Scripture for self-protection, to pretty up a situation whose bleakness they simply couldn't face. But like God Herself, Scripture is not around for anyone's protection, just for everyone's unending support.

And that's what hundreds of you understood so beautifully. You gave me what God gives all of us—minimum protection, maximum support. I swear to you, I wouldn't be standing here were I not upheld.

After the death of his wife, C. S. Lewis wrote, "They say, 'the coward dies many times'; so does the beloved. Didn't the eagle find a fresh liver to tear in Prometheus every time it dined?"

When parents die, as did my mother last month, they take with them a large portion of the past. But when children die, they take away the future as well. That is what makes the valley of the shadow of death seem so incredibly dark and unending. In a prideful way it would be easier to walk the valley alone, nobly, head high, instead of—as we must—marching as the latest recruit in the world's army of the bereaved.

Still there is much by way of consolation. Because there are no rankling unanswered questions, and because Alex and I simply adored each other, the wound for me is deep, but clean. I know how lucky I am! I also know that this day-brightener of a son wouldn't wish to be held close by grief (nor, for that matter, would any but the meanest of our beloved departed), and that, interestingly enough, when I mourn Alex least I see him best.

Another consolation, of course, will be the learning—which better be good, given the price. But it's a fact: few of us are naturally profound; we have to be forced down. So while trite, it's true:

I walked a mile with Pleasure,
She chattered all the way;
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow
And ne'er a word said she;
But oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me.
Robert Browning Hamilton

Or, in Emily Dickinson's verse,

By a departing light
We see acuter, quite,
Than by a wick that stays.
There's something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the rays.

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: "Cast thy burden upon the Lord and He shall strengthen thee" (Ps. 55:22); "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps. 30:5); "Lord, by thy favor thou hast made my mountain to stand strong" (Ps. 30:7); "for thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling" (Ps. 116:8). "In this world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

And finally I know that when Alex beat me to the grave, the finish line was not Boston Harbor in the middle of the night. 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.

Loving Your Enemy

FEBRUARY 6, 1983
Reading: Matthew 5:43–48

Nuclear energy is an unforgiving technology; you make one mistake and you've had it. If the world is to survive, we need a new kind of technology, and no end of forgiving people. Americans are told almost daily that we have many enemies, and especially the Russians. Hence this sermon on loving your enemy, with these words of Jesus as a text: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies.'"

At first that sounds like a very straightforward commandment, albeit as easy to follow as for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. But even as an idea, loving your enemy seems to me difficult to grasp, for love represents both tenderness and judgment. Jesus, who enjoined us to love our enemies, himself passed the harshest possible judgment on all who were cruel, unjust, and indifferent. Is not the Soviet government precisely that to millions within and without its borders? So how are we to love the Russians and, at the same time, oppose cruelty, injustice, and indifference?

The first thing to be said about enemies is trite but true: they are our sisters and brothers. That's what monotheism is all about—one God, one human family. The trouble is, we don't *feel* the relationship.

The other day I heard of a Zen Buddhist monk who came upon a baby abandoned in the road. He picked up the baby, wept, and put it down again. He wept because the baby had been abandoned; he left it there because in his mind no one could replace the mother. It's a haunting and troubling story, and I tell it only to suggest that we might view all our relationships as indispensable and irreplaceable. A mother and a child are not one, but also not two. They are some mystical number in between. So also are lovers, and truly good friends. But spiritually speaking, that's the way we all ought to be together—not one, but also not two. And that includes our enemies.

For all his faults, Oliver Cromwell in the seventeenth century understood the reality of relationships. When it came time to draw up the rules of war for his newly formed revolutionary religious army, he had to confront the question of what to do with a man who was found with a wound in his back. The answer was, find his comrades and drill them out of the army and out of the Church. Why? Because cowardice is more a communal than an individual failing.

Enemies are like cowards: they represent communal failures, breakdowns in sacred relationships. For the initial breakdown itself only some may be guilty, but all are now responsible. And to repair these breakdowns is of such urgency that Christ could say in the Sermon on the Mount, "If when you are bringing your gift to the altar, you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave your gift where it is before the altar. First go and make your peace with your brother, and only then come back and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23–24). Does this mean that every Sunday, on our way to Riverside, we should swing by the Soviet consulate?

St. Paul said, "All have sinned and fallen short," and St. Augustine elaborated: "Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself." In other words, it takes a sinner to catch a sinner. If the Soviets have intervened monstrously in the internal affairs of others, so, Lord knows, have we. If they suppress civil liberties at home, we conspire to suppress these same liberties abroad, from Honduras through the Philippines to South Korea and Pakistan. If what the Russians do in Poland is heartbreaking, it is not to be compared with the continuing torture and death we are aiding and abetting in El Salvador, In short, if we are not yet bonded with the Russians in love, at least we are one with them in sin—which is no mean bond, for it precludes the possibility of separation through judgment. That's the meaning of the Scriptural injunction, "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matt. 7:1).

So we are not only brothers and sisters, we Americans and the Russians, we are fellow sinners. And there must be at least as many

Russians who know that as there are Americans, even though, for obvious reasons, their voices are muted. I believe the world is sustained by a kind of international solidarity of people who are ashamed of what their governments are doing. Shame is not only a deeply religious but an intensely patriotic emotion, reflecting the determination of citizens to carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a quarrel that is but a reflection of God's eternal lovers' quarrel with the world.

And let us not forget what hatred does to those who hate. To quote other words of Augustine: "Imagine the vanity of thinking that your enemy can do you more damage than your enmity."

What damage can our enmity, our hatred of others, do us? Among many insights of the Roman Catholic Church, I prize the one that makes the first of the so-called cardinal virtues *prudentia*, or *providential*, which can be translated "darn good thinking." Only if your heart's full of love can you think straight. Love has a limbering effect on the mind, while hatred paralyzes it. Lack of compassion distorts the intellect—maybe not when it comes to examining the stomach of a spider, but certainly when dealing with the hearts of human beings. Far from blind, love is visionary. Only love sees rightly that what is essential is invisible to the eye. It is love that sees that one and one don't make two, but something in between. It is love that sees enemy Russians as sisters and brothers and as fellow sinners. And love sees also as sisters and brothers the homeless and hungry of this city and the poor and persecuted the world around, those overlooked by hearts too busy with hatred or with themselves. Consider the 250 million of the world with no housing, the 300 million who are unemployed, the 550 million illiterate, the 700 million who are undernourished, the 950 million who live on less than thirty cents a day, and the 2 billion who have no access to pure water—which is crucial, because 80 percent of the world's illnesses are related to impure water—are they not victims of callous thinking ("stinking thinking," to borrow a phrase from Alcoholics Anonymous), victims of worldwide hatred and indifference, victims by denial of a world that presently spends $1 million a minute on arms? (We won't even mention other forms of frivolity.)

But the opposite of love is really not hatred, but fear. As it is written, "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). Fear is the enemy that always defeats us, both as individuals and as nations. Wrote Rabindranath Tagore: "The mind, seeking safety, rushes towards its death." Frankly, nothing scares me like scared people, unless it be a scared nation—scared of communists, scared even more of being "soft" on communists, and most of all, perhaps, scared of being humiliated by communists. Don't we always fear most those who

have the power to humiliate us? And wasn't Othello right: "Thou hast not half that power to do me harm as I have to be hurt"?

So the first and final enemy is always the enemy within—our own fears and hatreds, which means the first enemy to be loved is ourselves. Have you ever seen anyone who was for higher defense budgets who wasn't personally defensive? (An interesting question!) And would we be so defensive were there not so much that has yet to be forgiven?

Whatever is worthy of censure is, at another level, deserving of compassion. People who are full of hatred are only demonstrating their insecurity and their desperate efforts to secure themselves against their insecurity. But the only road to inner peace lies through the forgiveness that once walked the earth, in whose name we are gathered here today.

And the only road to outer peace lies through our forgiveness of our enemies. To forgive is not to condone. In fact, what we cannot possibly condone, we can only forgive. Forgiveness means to be hard on the issues and gentle with people (confrontation, yes, but also compassion); to have the capacity to lift human beings above their present level. Forgiveness spells reason, not hysteria. Forgiveness means positive Christianity, not negative anticommunism. Forgiveness means the lifting of a mental roadblock, the clear proclamation that the evil act is no barrier to a continuing relationship. Forgiveness to Christians means to outlive, out-love, out-pray, out-suffer, and out-die everyone else in this world, as did our beloved Lord and Savior.

As we begin Black History Month, let us remember words of Dr. King: "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Eyeball to Eyeball with the Devil

FEBRUARY 20, 1983

Readings: Genesis 2:1–7; Luke 4:1–13

In the three gospels that carry it, the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness follows hard on the heels of the story of his baptism, a high moment when, as you recall, the heavens opened and a voice was heard: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

Does this sequence of events indicate that every great vision fades into the light of common day; that after every mountaintop experience comes a return to the valley floor? Perhaps so, and for the reason offered by T. S. Eliot: "'Go, go, go,' said the bird; 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality!'"

But that assessment is beside the point, for here Reality itself, the Holy Spirit, leads Jesus out of the Jordan and into the wilderness, proving that the Spirit is both comforter and *dis*comforter. Pain is an essential part of the religious life, for as the story shows, pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses our understanding.

Heart-searching time that it is, Lent *should* be painful *and* rewarding, a time to be led by the Spirit into our own wildernesses, to have it out, eyeball to eyeball, with the devil, on all the basic issues of our lives. For, like steel, we human beings are uncertain until tested.

Do not be dismayed that the Church personifies evil. The devil is imaginatively portrayed as a person because evil is experienced as an intensely personal power. Its seductions are personally persuasive. Moreover, while evil certainly arises within us, still it is experienced as something greater than us—hence its separate existence. And most importantly, the devil is a fallen angel. How many parents tell their children that evil arises in the so-called lower nature! But notice that the devil never asks Jesus how he feels, for example, about sex, any more than Jesus ever put that question to anybody else. Both know that evil arises in our "higher" nature, in that which is most Godlike—our freedom. Not that our higher nature can't abuse our lower nature, but the source of the evil is always in our freedom. And what does the devil ask us to do with our freedom? In countless subtle, seductive ways the devil whispers, "Sell it!"—which is to say, "Sell yourselves short."

The subtlety comes through in the first temptation: "Command this stone to become bread." After forty days Jesus was of course hungry, desperately so, but I think his own hunger was making him remember hungry people everywhere. After all, he had just been baptized, and he was now wrestling with the meaning of it all—what was his mission to be on this earth? Palestine was plagued by extremes of drought and flood. Bread, a basic necessity, had become a precious commodity, the more so because the Roman taxes, like American taxes today, hurt most those least able to protect themselves. Why then should not Christ become a Messiah of justice, fulfilling God's commands and the hopes, too long deferred, of those whose lives were hard, endless, dirty labor? It would have been a proper, hard-

headed, courageous role for him to have assumed, and one that would have met popular messianic expectations. That Christ turned it down simply reminds us how extraordinary—*extra*-ordinary—human lives are. "Give us this day our daily bread": bread is essential, and for that reason, we should never rest until everybody has enough. The rabbis say, "Without material sustenance there is no Torah," and in the *Threepenny Opera* Bertolt Brecht writes, "First feed the face, and then talk right or wronger ("Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral")." What we have to confront in this Lenten season in our wildernesses is the truth of this statement: "When bread has been assured, then God becomes a hard and inescapable reality, instead of an escape from harsh reality" (Berdyaev).

Haven't we set our sights too low—on a secure life that insures us against harsh reality, that assures us bread? In my younger, more obnoxious days, I used to ask tenured professors what they had said that year that they would not have dared to say had they not been given tenure. It was a mean but fair question. Originally designed to protect controversial ideas, tenure now protects uncontroversial professors. But they are not the only noncontroversial people. On that now-famous *60 Minutes* show, the National Council of Churches was criticized only for what it was aiding and abetting abroad. Isn't it doing anything controversial at home? And why should the Council be defensive? Shouldn't every decent church boast at least a few enemies—as did their Lord and master?

There are many things I have done that I repent. But they are as nothing compared to the good things I regret not having done. To me, it's not the lives we've lived, but our unlived lives that stand out, and that poison our existence.

Listen again to the story of our creation: "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). Obviously we don't all have to be controversial, but all of us have to recall that the breath of life has been breathed into our nostrils. We are nature *plus*. Our hands not only bring food to our mouths, they play the flute; they help us salute one another, and they help us address God. We are *extra*-ordinary. We do not live by bread alone. So in this Lenten season, in our separate wildernesses, we have to ask ourselves whether the devil has not seduced us to sell ourselves short, to live only by the light of the obvious, to grab so greedily at today that we lose all tomorrows. Have we not, like Esau, sold our birthright for a mess of pottage? Clearly we have much to think about, including

these words of Jesus: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34).

If the first temptation was to satisfy the economic needs of Jesus' people, the second temptation seems to have been to satisfy their patriotic passion. Rome was then the oppressor, with a garrison of soldiers in every sizeable town, not only to levy taxes but also to put down revolts. Surely the spiritual descendants of "the boys of '76" can understand Christ's temptation to become the George Washington of Israel, to rally the six million Jews scattered throughout the ancient world; and, perhaps in alliance with the Parthians, to bring defeat to Rome, peace to his people, and glory to God.

Alfred the Great is reported to have said, "Power is never good unless he who has it is good." The devil could have whispered convincingly, "If anybody is good it is surely the Son of God. Wouldn't power in your hands represent love implementing freedom and justice? Why not prove, once and for all, that love and power are not polar opposites?"

That Christ withstood this temptation too should lead us to more painful heart-searching, to question our own American reliance on power—particularly the power to kill—as the best way to protect freedom and peace in the world.

Suppose you picked up the paper this morning and read that Police Commissioner McGuire, tired of conventional means of fighting crime, has come up with a new policy of deterrence. From now on, the police of New York City are going to kill every last member of the family and every last acquaintance of anybody who from now on commits murder within the city limits. You'd be horrified, wouldn't you? To threaten to kill so many innocent people represents power run amok.

Yet that is an analogy for our present policy of nuclear deterrence—except that the hostage system is massive. We—and the Russians—have promised to kill in retaliation every last man, woman, and child in each other's countries, almost none of whom will have anything to say with the decision to press the button. It's madness, obscenity. So go into your wildernesses and search your hearts and see if you can square that policy with the worship of the Lord your God.

And finally we read that the devil "took him up to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God'" (always that attack at the identity point, where we're always weakest), "'throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

"He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you.'" . . . And Jesus answered him. 'It is said, "You shall not tempt the Lord."'"

The first thing to note—and well—is that the devil quotes Scripture! But what is the temptation? Is this "unfaith clamoring to be coined to faith by proof"? Can't you picture the crowds gathered below: "Look, he's going to jump. He *has* jumped. He's safe. He *must* be the Messiah!" And did Jesus reject the temptation knowing that freedom and proof, religiously speaking, are indeed polar opposites? Or did he think then what he said later in the parable: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:31)?

Or, more subtly, is this the kind of temptation that comes to a person who has finally renounced the struggle for worldly security and the struggle for worldly power and has committed himself or herself to God, but with the secret expectation that God will now do all the work? So much so-called spirituality is superficiality, pure laziness reminiscent of the story of the priest who went golfing with the rabbi. Before putting the priest crossed himself. By the ninth hole he was nine strokes ahead. Said the rabbi, "Father, do you suppose it would be all right if before I putted I too crossed myself?"

Answered the priest, "Of course, rabbi. But it won't do you any good till you learn how to putt."

There are so many lazy people in the churches, people who want to cop out on all the responsibilities that go with freedom, who want selfishly to ask God to take care of them when they are supposed to be out taking care of the world. They come to church, but they don't leave. They do church work, but not the work of the church.

So, dear Christians, we have our work cut out for us. Let us not be afraid in this Lenten season to go out into our own wildernesses and go eyeball to eyeball with the devil on the basic issues of our lives. Let us not be afraid of the pain that is the breaking of the shell which encloses our understanding. Let us remind ourselves that because God has breathed into our nostrils the breath of life, we cannot sell our freedom, we must not sell ourselves short. Besides, who really wants to sell his or her freedom for material well-being? Do we as a nation really want to trade in our power to love for loveless power? And as individuals, do we want God to take care of us when we should be caring for others?

And one more thing: At the end of Matthew's account of this story we read: "Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him" (4:11). There are still angels around ready to do no less for us.

Not Self-Control but Self-Surrender

FEBRUARY 27, 1983
Readings: Isaiah 40:27–31; John 16:31–17:1

I am most grateful to my colleague Russell Davis for giving me John Claypool's *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, a book that inspired and gave much substance to this sermon. Preachers are incurable magpies!

Earlier we heard Isaiah claim, "They who wait for the LORD"—or "wait upon" or "hope in" the Lord, as different translations have it—"will renew their strength." Then the prophet suggests three ways in which their strength will be renewed in three quite marvelous metaphors, the first of which is—shall we say—soaring: "They shall mount up with wings like eagles."

Long before it became a patriotic symbol, the eagle was a religious symbol, representing in its body and wings the strength which Isaiah saw that God could renew in each of us, in any time, and in any situation. That is why in so many churches, our own included, this great bird holds on its outstretched wings that book which is at once the most soul-searing and uplifting of all books, the Bible. You'd never know it to look at so many long-faced Christians, but the Christian faith is supposed to make us ten times as exciting and as excited as pagans: exuberant, exhilarated, even ecstatic. The reason so many Christians do not soar like eagles is that they have, alas, missed the secret. They think the secret to the Christian faith is self-control; in fact, it's self-surrender. Self-surrender is really the life, for how can you be "captivated," "enthralled" by anything or anyone—Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Leontyne Price, or Jesus—until first you surrender? You don't step into love, you fall.

So alike are "waiting for the Lord" and being in love that I want to read you a love poem, which I suspect many of you have not heard—even though I'm sure all of you are still following my prescription to read a poem a day. (I don't know why you laugh; it simply shows how futile these sermons are! How are you going to mount up with wings like eagles without reading poetry?) This poem is by Alfred Kreymborg, and it's called "Image."

> Showing her immortal—
> it's mine to do
> but I can't.
> Shaping her as she is,

a thing to
turn a glance
to an eternity—
it's there,
I can see it
but I can't say it.

If one could transcribe
some infinitesimal phase
of the trillion-starred endowment
which comes tumbling
out of simply trying to look at her,
or out of catching a glance,
slyly pointed,
trying to look at me,
stirring a trillion-starred emotion
vibrating like a bell
across endless tides of endless seas—

I'd do it.
but I can't.

I love her so much
I can't do anything else.

You see the point? You love Jesus so much, you can't do anything else.

Self-surrender is the proper attitude to life in general, simply because life finally can't be earned or grasped with fists clenched, it can only be received with palms open. Such a gift is life itself that each morning we should wake up and say, "My God, another day has been added unto me to see and hear and smell and read and walk and talk and love and glory. Praise the Lord!"

To soar like an eagle you have to remember that the secret is to abandon self-control for self-surrender; you have then to fall in love with God, with Jesus, and with life; you really have to be a little crazy, a "fool for Christ's sake," as St. Paul puts it—after all, "It's the cracked ones who let the light through."

But now suppose you, like Susan Lamb and Simone Wilkinson, are in Britain waging war against war; or you're in America trying to persuade administrations in Washington and New York that justice, not charity, is the answer to the homeless; or you're in the UN trying to persuade the world that poverty, not scarcity, is the cause of starvation.

Suppose the walls of Washington appear trumpet-proof, and the world seems like a place where time between tragedies is spent only waiting for the next. If you're that kind of person, with those kinds of perceptions, and you should be, then obviously you can't possibly stay in a constant state of exaltation, not without being an insensitive escapist. But according to Isaiah, where you can't "mount up with wings like eagles," you can "run and not grow weary."

Many Christians can't run without getting weary because they think life constantly rebuffs them, whereas in fact their problems arise not so much from their experience of life as from their expectations of life. Professors like to believe the world is rational, and all of us want to think it fair. But whoever said the world was either rational or fair? Think of all the undeserved good in the lives of all of us!

Those who are fighting for peace or for human rights like to think battles won should stay won, points proved should stay proved. They like to think that progress is an arrow, not a pendulum. In short, they are easily disillusioned and quickly discouraged. But let me ask you this: if you are disillusioned, whose fault is it for having illusions in the first place? Who ever gave you the right to stay innocent? None of us can any more blame the world for our disillusionment than we can complain about the way the ball bounces when we're the ones who dropped it. The main reason we can't run and not grow weary is self-pity—of all emotions, surely the most exhausting. I'm impressed by how weak and ineffectual we human beings are against the immensities of death and sickness and evil. "In the world you have tribulation"—I believe those words of Christ. So I keep my own expectations very low, which is why I have a lot of gravy in my life.

But I also never forget what we've just sung, "Through many dangers, toils, and snares [we] have already come." If God's grace has been with us in the past, surely God's grace will be with us in the future. There is absolutely no way we can absolutize our answers in favor of cynicism or naive innocence. We can say neither that the darkness swallows up the light nor the light the darkness. In this world, we can only say with St. Paul, "we see in part"; "we see through the glass darkly."

But it is not results, in any case, that secure our capacity to run and not grow weary. Ultimately, we have to do what's right, and penultimately to worry about what's effective. Imagine Socrates, when they handed him the hemlock, asking, "Is Plato going to write me up?" Or imagine Nathan Hale, as the noose settled around his neck, saying, "Wait a minute, fellows, are these thirteen colonies going to win this little revolution and then is every school kid in the new country going

to memorize the famous last lines I am now about to utter?" The most effective people in the world are those who don't worry about being effective. And Christians, especially, don't have to "win." It's been said that Christians are the only folk who can afford to lose.

For us, it is enough to know that sense of undeserved integrity that comes from being in the right fight. For us it's enough to hear, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

With no illusions, with no final dependency on results, and with confidence that grace will see us home, we can indeed run and not grow weary.

But finally, suppose you are today among the hungry, the homeless, the bereaved of Assam or New York, or you're over eighty with a broken hip in St. Luke's, or under forty with terminal cancer in St. Vincent's. In such a situation no one can "mount up with wings like eagles," or even "run and not grow weary." But one can still "walk and not faint."

In many religions the gods seem content to dwell on the other side of the sky, where our affairs are no more theirs than theirs are ours. But not so in the Christian understanding of the ways of heaven and earth. Once, during World War II, a family received that always-feared telegram announcing that their son, their only child, had been killed. Quickly the word spread around the neighborhood, and when their minister heard it he hastened to the home. When he came through the door, the father, in anguish, half out of his mind, rushed toward him screaming, "Tell me, I want to know: where was God when my boy was being killed?" After a long pause the minister answered quietly, "I guess he was where he was when his own boy was being killed."

In every kind of tragedy, those we understand and those we don't, God is a grieving companion. She's there to help us endure when only endurance is possible, to help us be patient when impatience is futile, to help us walk and not faint.

Never think that such suffering is totally pointless, because we never know. Preachers love to compare the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. The fresh waters of the Sea of Galilee sparkle and are full of fish, while in the salty Dead Sea no fish can live. The reason for the difference is that the river Jordan runs *through* the Sea of Galilee but only *into* the Dead Sea, which has no outlet. The obvious point, and a good one, is that life comes through giving as well as receiving. But an exceptionally imaginative preacher, George Buttrick, once went on to identify another truth: The Dead Sea *does* have an outlet, an upward one. Over the centuries, as the sea has surrendered itself to the sun, a residue of potash has built up around its shores. Potash is a main ingredient of fertilizer, and engineers estimate that if the potash

around the Dead Sea could be properly mixed and distributed, there would be enough to fertilize the whole surface of the earth for at least five years.

Does life ever come to a complete dead end? When the only outlet open is the sky, let us remember Jesus—"Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me." And if we give ourselves to God, God will see to it that new life comes from the old.

Who Tells You Who You Are?

MARCH 6, 1983
Reading: Matthew 16:24–26

Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." That these words are found, with variants, in all four Gospels, a total of six times, underscores their place at the heart and center of the Christian faith. These words also describe a general truth of life that certain things are lost by being kept and saved by being used. A talent, for example—be it singing, painting, viola or basketball playing—will develop if used, and if not will atrophy and be lost. If life is, par excellence, a talent to be exercised, to be matured by use, then we have to say that Socrates was wrong: it is the uncommitted, not the unexamined life that is finally not worth living. Descartes too erred: "*Cogito, ergo sum*"—I think, therefore I am? Nonsense. *Amo, ergo sum*—I love, therefore I am.

That being said, we must be careful not to deride the importance of self-examination. Not for nothing has the inscription above the temple at Delphi, "Know Thyself," become famous throughout all history. Losing your life should never be seized upon as an excuse for not finding out who you are. God save us from cocksure Christians, people who never dare to wrestle with doubt, who don't realize that sincerity stammers, who think they have committed their lives to Jesus, that they have put their hand in his and he is leading them on, when it is patently obvious they have Jesus' hand in theirs and are trying desperately to drag him off in some selfish direction of their own. "(People) never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction," observed Pascal.

And "know thyself" applies equally to nations, who are all too prone to do evil cheerfully in the name of national security. After

reading on Friday of President Reagan's latest rationalization for torturing still further the poverty-tortured people of El Salvador, I couldn't help thinking of that place in *Macbeth* toward the end of the fourth act, where Macduff asks, "Stands Scotland where it did?" to which Ross answers: "Alas, poor country! Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot be call'd our mother, but our grave."

But how do we get to know ourselves? It is no easy task, for who among us can boast no blind sides? I'm convinced we don't get to know ourselves by trying to find all the answers first and then starting to live. I could easily be persuaded that the great mistake of Adam and Eve—repeated frequently by intellectuals—was that before they lived they wanted to know all the answers, whereas God had ordained that knowledge was to come through and after experience. It is in the light of experience that we try to understand ourselves. We don't know in order to live; we live in order to know. And one of the things we must find out in living is the answer to the question, Who—or what—tells us who we are? Trying to answer that question is a fruitful way of trying to reach self-knowledge. Particularly in the Lenten season, we should continually ask ourselves, "Who—or what—tells me who I am?"

Let me illustrate. In my previous incarnation as a university chaplain, I was frequently asked to write letters of recommendation for seniors going on to graduate school (seniors who had yet to realize that education kills by degrees!). To deans of admission of such illustrious schools as Columbia Law or Harvard Medical I would frequently write: "This student will undoubtedly be in the bottom quarter of the class. But surely you will agree with me that the bottom quarter should be as carefully selected as the top quarter, and for what would you be looking in the bottom quarter if not all the sterling extra-curricular qualities so eminently embodied in this candidate?" Then I would say how sensitive, caring, and conscientious this student was. You won't believe this, but when I showed the student what I had written, invariably the student's feelings were hurt.

"How do you know I'm going to be in the bottom of the class?"

"The evidence is all in, isn't it?"

"Well, you didn't have to tell them!"

You see what I'm driving at: Never mind that the student was already in the ninety-nine-point-something percentile of all students in the nation; never mind that I said that she or he was a super human being. If he or she was not going to be in the top quarter, or half, or three-fourths of the class, he or she was a nothing. Such is the power of institutions of higher education to tell human beings who they are.

In this season in which we are mindful of the IRS, we are also reminded that some people need money to tell them who they are. Long ago, before the days of tax resistance, I used to be impressed by the fact that those most reluctant to pay their taxes were those most able to do so. Oh, they would give to charity, because charity reinforced the notion, "Money talks." But taxes are like Delilah's shears: they cut at the root of the strength, revealing the underlying weakness!

Closely related to money is power, and some people need lots of that to tell them who they are. Still others need enemies—whites need Blacks, and vice versa; Gentiles need Jews and Jews the "Goyim." Communists need imperialists, and anticommunists sure need communists to tell them who they are. Fifteen years ago this very month, in the middle of the Vietnam War, President Johnson announced his decision not to stand for reelection. Instantly half a million people in the peace movement lost their identity. ("Who are we without our enemy?") Fortunately, Richard Nixon came along and rapidly restored it. Some people need their sins to tell them who they are. Why, the way some of us treasure our mistakes, you'd think they were the holiest things in our lives!

And some few—very few, really—allow God to tell them who they are. These are people who believe that God's love doesn't seek value, it creates it. Rather than try to achieve their worth, they receive it as a gift. Rather than try to prove themselves, they seek only to express themselves. You can recognize these few real Christians because at home or in church, at work or in their lives as citizens, they are both vulnerable and fearless. They know that God provides no protection but no end of support. So "captivated" are they by Jesus that they are free to follow him if necessary from Galilee into Jerusalem. Having lost their lives to Jesus, paradoxically, they have found them.

And think of this: these are among the very few Christians who are never bored or boring. No matter how much or how little education they have, no matter how old or how young they are, whether they are rich or poor, in good health or bad, they are alive and well, fascinating folk, fun to be with.

So—what do you say?—let's risk joining them. Let's allow God—not money, not power, not our sins, nor "anything else in all creation"—to tell us who we are. Let's not seek to prove but only to express ourselves by becoming both vulnerable and fearless. It sounds scary, but also rewarding. "For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."