

HELP MY UNBELIEF

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
September 17, 2006**

This morning's gospel lessonⁱ presents an almost humorous example, as a commentary I use puts it,ⁱⁱ of Jesus' disciples trying to mimic him as healer and failing. A boy who's apparently been suffering from epilepsyⁱⁱⁱ since early childhood is brought to Jesus by his father, who notes that Jesus disciples have been unable to cure him. The father would like to believe in Jesus' power, but his followers' powerlessness has shaken the father's belief. Hence, as he puts it rather poetically, "I believe; help my unbelief!"^{iv} I'd like to discuss unbelief with you this morning. I'm very glad to be back in this pulpit and with this congregation again, after two months off for vacation and study time. Let's start off the academic year together in this challenging intellectual environment at Stanford by facing the question of religious skepticism and doubt head on.

I've certainly had my periods of unbelief. The longest and strongest was during my late high school and early college years. When I arrived at Yale as a rather headstrong and cynical freshman, the university chaplain was offering a non-credit course entitled "A Seminar for Friendly Disbelievers." This was at Yale in the mid-1960's, and the chaplain was the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin, who's preached here in this church a number of times – his last appearance having been in the spring of 2001. Bill Coffin has had an enormous influence on my life and my ministry, I feel very honored to have known him, and I lovingly dedicate this sermon to him today. But back to my freshman

year at Yale. I was fascinated by the title of that seminar, and since I was certainly a disbeliever, but still fascinated by the great existential questions – and in that sense a friendly disbeliever – I took the course. It changed my life and set me on a course of religious and spiritual engagement that brought me to university chaplaincy myself, and to more than 30 years of ongoing inquiry.

Bill Coffin always said that “religious faith despite doubts is far stronger than one without doubts.”^v He claimed that doubt is, in fact, the handmaiden of faith. He would often follow that comment with the observation that “No one so reveals an absence of faith as a dogmatist.”^{vi} “Doubts move you forward, not backward,” he would teach, adding “just as long as you doubt out of love of the truth, not out of some pathological need to doubt.”^{vii} There was another side, though, as Pascal taught: “The heart has its reasons, of which the mind knows nothing.” In searching for new truths, we must take care not to insist on absolute intellectual certainty. For example, there are truths in music and art and poetry and dance and novels and plays to be apprehended at a much deeper level than they are comprehended. Science and logic are critical tools, and they take us a very long way, but there’s much that’s critically important in the human spirit that they don’t touch and never will.^{viii}

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

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

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

So, I was getting a pretty bracing challenge to my unbelief, week after week, in the Coffin seminar. “So what does he believe in?” I came to ask. “What would I think is

truly worth believing in – in putting my faith in?” His answer, simple at first, but infinitely complicated as it was played out, was love. This man Coffin was a World War II veteran when he came to college, and the brutalities and juxtapositions he had witnessed made short shrift of any childlike innocence or sentimentality. He knew that Nazis could spend their days gassing Jews and their evenings listening to Beethoven quartets.^{xiii} He learned the Russian language and was a liaison officer to the Red Army, proud of its heroic advances against the Nazis, but deeply disturbed by many of its soldiers’ accompanying pillage and rape.^{xiv} He was drawn to the French existentialists as “crisis thinkers” – Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Andre Malraux, and especially Albert Camus. They were all professed atheists, and he was attracted to their tragic sense of life and the fact that they knew what hell was all about. Yet, ultimately it was theologians like Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich who captured his heart. Only with a heart full of love could one begin to truly understand, much less enter deeply into human relations.^{xv}

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

When Jesus says, “Our Father, who art in heaven” in the Lord’s Prayer – or translated in the more personal and familial term we use in our service, “Abba in heaven, hallowed be your Name” – Bill Coffin listens carefully, as he put it, because Jesus knows more about God and the world than he does, by far: “He could talk to me convincingly about a father in heaven because he took seriously the earth’s homeless orphans. He could talk to me convincingly about living at peace in the hands of love, because he knew that the world lived constantly at war in the grip of hatred. He could talk to me of light, and joy, and exultation, because I knew that he himself knew darkness, sorrow and death.”^{xviii} From Coffin’s perspective, Descartes had it wrong in saying “I think, therefore I am.” It should be, “I love, therefore I am.”^{xix} Coffin explained that it’s not because we human beings have value that we are loved, it’s because we are loved that we have value.^{xx} Jesus for Christians becomes a mirror to the best of our humanity and a window to divinity itself, revealing as much of God as our human eyes are capable of seeing. “When Christians see Christ empowering the weak, scorning the powerful, [and] healing the wounded...we are seeing transparently the power of God at work.”^{xxi}

But what about when an epileptic child is in need of healing, and a desperate father finds that the disciples of Jesus are unable to cure him – when the power of God is apparently not working through them? As the father says, he wants to believe, but his unbelief seems to have the upper hand. My aunt was a believing Christian until she lost her husband during World War II – a navy flier shot down over Guadalcanal. Not understanding how a loving God could allow this to happen, she became a lifelong atheist. Bill Coffin’s own faith was challenged when his oldest son, Alex, died in a car accident during his senior year in college at Boston University. Alex had a special bond

with Bill, partly because he seemed to be a younger version of his father. They were two “peas in a pod.” Then one January night Alex was driving in a bad storm around a dangerous curve at the edge of South Boston Harbor. He may have had one too many drinks earlier that evening as well. His car plunged into the water around midnight and Alex drowned. We might say that Jesus was not there to save him. Less than two weeks after Alex’s death and funeral, Bill preached a sermon titled simply “Alex’s Death” at the church he was serving in New York city.^{xxii}

As he explained in that sermon, “The reality of grief is the absence of God – ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’” Also, when one’s children die, as Bill put it, they take away the future. So how did he face this tragedy as a man of God? If ever there was a time for religious skepticism and doubt, this was it. And how possibly could his doubt be the handmaiden of faith? The night after Alex died, Bill Coffin was sitting in the living room of his sister’s house near Boston when a woman came in with some food for them and said sadly “I just don’t understand the will of God.” Coffin responded immediately, passionately and rudely: “I’ll say you don’t, lady! 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 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?”

Bill Coffin understood that just because “Christ spent an inordinate amount of time delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, and muteness,” that doesn’t mean that there aren’t deaths – unlike Alex’s explainable, humanly preventable death – that are untimely unanswerable questions or simply caused by the forces of nature. But

nothing infuriated Coffin as much “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.” Coffin’s understanding of God was of infinite love, and his image was that “when the waves closed over [Alex’s] sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all of our hearts to break.”^{xxiii} So Coffin faced this potential crisis of faith, of unbelief, with a messy combination of clear-headed realism, anger at the vacuousness of traditional piety, grief-filled feelings of being abandoned by God, and an abiding belief, that helped his unbelief, that love is the ultimate answer and that God is another name for love. He thanked his parishioners in the sermon for their healing flood of letters and explained that “If in the last week I have relearned one lesson, it is that love not only begets love, it transmits strength.”^{xxiv}

One of Bill’s final gifts to us before he himself died this year at the age of 81 is a little volume called *Letters to a Young Doubter*, published in 2005, but very much in the spirit of the Seminar for Friendly Disbelievers that I took with him almost 40 years ago. Much of this sermon comes from the book. It’s written as an exchange of letters over one academic year with a bright freshman who’s asking for help with his unbelief. In the end, Bill Coffin’s advice is simply to inquire – to love the great existential questions in themselves – being patient towards all that is unresolved. Then, gradually, Bill teaches, we will begin to live into the answers.^{xxv} As each of us here faces our own unbelief, may we confront the questions honestly and then have both the patience and the willingness to live into the answers.

BENEDICTION

In the words of William Sloane Coffin: "May we remember that 'God is love' means God is known devotionally, not dogmatically. 'God is love' does not clear up old mysteries; it discloses new mystery. 'God is love' is not a truth we can master; it is only one to which we can surrender. Faith is being grasped by the power of love." Amen.

(W.S. Coffin, *Credo*)

NOTES

ⁱ Mark 9: 14-29.

ⁱⁱ *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, p. 635.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 43; *Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 905.

^{iv} Mark 9:24.

^v William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. x.

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 2.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 20.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 12.

^{xii} See, for example, Ecclesiastes 1:14; 2:26.

^{xiii} Coffin, *Letters*, p. 35.

^{xiv} See Warren Goldstein, *William Sloane Coffin, Jr.: A Holy Impatience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), especially Chapter 3.

^{xv} Coffin, *Letters*, pp. 36-37.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 34.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 42.

^{xviii} William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 11.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, p. 5.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 6.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 12.

^{xxii} Goldstein, *William Sloane Coffin*, pp. 307-309.

^{xxiii} William Sloane Coffin, "Alex's Death," in *The Courage to Love* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), pp. 93-98.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, p. 93.

^{xxv} Coffin, *Letters*, pp. ix-x.