

The Collected Sermons of William Sloan Coffin: The Riverside Years, Volume 1, 1977-1982

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In Review



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William Sloane Coffin

Westminster John Knox

John Ames, 76-year-old Congregationalist minister and narrator of Marilynne Robinson's stunning novel *Gilead*, keeps his old sermons in boxes in the attic. "Pretty nearly my whole life's work is in those boxes," he says. "I'm a little afraid of them."

I suppose it's natural to think about those old boxes of sermons upstairs. They are a record of my life, after all, a sort of foretaste of the Last Judgment, really, so how can I not be curious? Here I was a pastor of souls, hundreds and hundreds of them over all those years, and I hope I was speaking to them, not only to myself, as it seems to me sometimes when I look back. I still wake up at night thinking, That's what I should have said.

Old sermons a foretaste of the Last Judgment? What thoughtful preacher would disagree, would not feel a tinge of fear over the possibility of pawing through past homilies, would not dread the remorse of discovering in their yellowing pages that, to paraphrase the old prayer, we had "said those things we ought not to have said and left unsaid those things we ought to have said"?

To be sure, in much of Christian thought, sermons are viewed as bearers of the eternal Word, but they are also ephemeral literary objects composed on the fly, products of the passing circumstance and the fleeting moment. To pull an aging sermon out of the files is precarious, something like opening up a long-forgotten photo album. One could be moved and inspired, but one could also be found wearing a homiletical poodle skirt or bell bottoms. (In my own files is a fading manuscript in which I callowly exegete lyrics from *Jesus Christ Superstar* with all the awestruck reverence due the servant songs in Isaiah. I will leave that one to molder in the box.)

Westminster John Knox has figuratively gone into the attic of the late William Sloane Coffin and published a massive anthology of sermons he preached at Riverside Church in New York in the 1970s and '80s (over 150 sermons in this first volume, with a second, equally hefty volume already on the shelves). Flush from the success of *Credo*, a beautifully edited collection of some of Coffin's provocative quotations and memorable sermon quips, issued shortly before Coffin's death in 2006, the publisher has returned with this riskier project. It's one thing to present someone's bons mots to the world, but the ups and downs of weekly parish preaching? How well can a full diet of any preacher's craft stand up to scrutiny?

When it comes to Coffin, quite well. To read these sermons, some of them over 30 years old, is to be impressed all over again by what a singular, remarkable and consistently scintillating preacher Coffin was. As a public figure, Coffin tended to be seen in one light, as the swashbuckling, fast-talking, left-leaning social conscience of a nation. But here, through the steadily advancing frames of weekly sermons, a more complex, multifaceted picture of Coffin's preaching gifts emerges. Here, to be sure, is Coffin the prophet, boldly taking on presidents, powers and principalities and bluntly announcing, "It's a sin to build a nuclear weapon." But here also is Coffin the pastor, comforting the congregation with the promise, "God will take care of us. She hears our prayers." Here also is Coffin the dedicated parish minister, taking up the mundane but necessary task of urging the folks at Riverside to increase their stewardship pledges. And here is Coffin the heartfelt evangelist pleading with his hearers to look in repentance to Jesus, "who humbled himself that we might be exalted, who became poor that we might become enriched, who came to us that we might return to God."

It helps when reading these sermons to have heard Coffin in person, to imagine the words coming alive in his unmistakable New York accent. Norman Mailer was once quoted in the *New Yorker* saying that Coffin's voice was "equal parts union organizer and Ivy League crew chief," and one can hear both inflections reverberating in these pages. Coffin was also a muscular, physical preacher. A classically trained pianist, he had large, expressive hands that he used to punch the air like a prizefighter as he preached. Coffin often made fun of the sweaty, high-energy, pulpit-pounding preachers who have a "glandular energy which is so frequently mistaken for the Holy Spirit," but Coffin had his own share of such vigor. The printed sermons are no match, of course, for actually hearing Coffin preach, yet it is easy to imagine how their many short, angular phrases and hard-hitting expressions could well have served as choreography for Coffin's pulpit ballet.

As befits Coffin's Presbyterian heritage, the vast majority of these sermons are biblical, drawn directly from the language and themes of particular texts. They are, however, not so much the intricate scrimshaw of a careful exegete as the broad thematic landscapes of an artist who sees scripture as a grand panorama of divine action. For Coffin, the Bible was less a collection of details and more a sweeping narrative of a fiercely loving God determined to bring a wounded creation to shalom and justice, and for Coffin preaching was the voice of a human gathered up into this redemptive intention.

If there is a surprise in this volume, it is how profoundly christological and theologically orthodox the sermons are. Generating Coffin's sometimes radical politics and undergirding his always edgy commitments to disarmament, racial harmony, sexual openness and economic justice was a neo-orthodox spirit and a rock-ribbed conviction that because God is in Christ reconciling the world, following Jesus is the whitewater adventure of a lifetime. One often hears in these sermons the voices of Barth and the Niebuhrs whispering in the background, and even occasional echoes of the frontier revivalist assuring his hearers, as Coffin does in one sermon, "You can take what seems like a defeat at the hand of Satan and turn it into the occasion for the victory God always had in mind for you."

These sermons were preached during the halcyon days of folksy, narrative preaching in the American pulpit, but Coffin seems to have fashioned his style from older timbers. The occasional well-turned anecdote appears, of course, but the rhetorical energy of these sermons flows mainly from two other springs. First, almost every sermon forms itself around at least one well-chosen literary citation. Typical, and a Coffin favorite, is G. K. Chesterton: "The world does not lack for wonders, only for a sense of wonder." Second, there is Coffin's own knack for coining the pithy phrase. According to journalist Ben McGrath, Coffin once teased Joseph Lieberman, "Joe, you're an orthodox Jew and a conservative Democrat. It would be better if it were the other way around." About the world of business he said: "Even if you win a rat race, you're still a rat!" About sex: "I hope American Christians . . . will become less Victorian and more Edwardian, less repressed, more irrepressible."

Naturally, not every sermon in this collection soars. As a preacher I found it reassuring to encounter a few that simply meander around and to run across some hasty three-point productions that confirm the homiletical truth that it's easier to make a list than to craft a sermon. However, the rare flat sermon in this collection serves only to highlight the multitude of sparkling gems.

As for the volume as a whole, the only additional feature I would recommend is historical notation for the sermons. It would be helpful, for example, to follow the development of Coffin's stance toward nuclear arms as it evolved in his preaching; fascinating to be reminded of the context for the occasional references to Jeb Magruder (who, in testimony before a Senate committee, pointed to Coffin's antiwar activity as partial justification for his own Water gate illegalities); and intriguing to know that the 1981 sermon "Homo sexuality," in which Coffin denounced homo phobia, was preached not out of the blue but as counterpoint to a sermon declaring

homosexuality to be a sin, preached by an associate pastor at Riverside the week before, a Sunday when Coffin was away.

If, as John Ames avows, old sermons are “a record of my life, after all,” then this volume of Coffin’s sermons testifies to a life well-lived, a life of creativity, rhetorical brilliance, fidelity to the gospel, wide-ranging influence and courage.