

William Sloane Coffin. *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years*. 2 vols. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Vol. 1, 597 pages, Vol. 2, 593 pages, \$50.37.

I like to read sermon collections and have many lining my shelves that extend down through history, but this one transcends the category. This is simply a must-read for those who teach and are students of preaching, as well as for those wanting substantive devotional material.

Students of preaching will appreciate finely-crafted sermons by a master of language as well as a theologian who simultaneously addressed the depths of the human soul with pastoral insights and the breadth of contemporary politics with the prophetic probing. He regularly delivered a word from the Lord. The sermons are structured with the simplicity oral language requires, and students can see a great topical preacher at work. Some of his sermons are classic, such as the one he preached after the tragic death of his son in a car accident (“Alex’s Death,” vol. 2, January 23, 1983). Lesser-known sermons shine forth even more brilliantly in these volumes. Students of preaching will appreciate his October 5, 1986, sermon, “Why I Became a Minister.” His Christmas, Easter, and All Saints’ Day sermons alone are worth the cost of the volumes.

For those of us who were cognizant in the years these volumes span (1977-1987), the sermons read like a theological commentary on history as Coffin grapples with the issues America was grappling or beginning to grapple with—the aftermath of the nuclear arms race and Watergate, racism, the Iranian hostage crisis, the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, abortion, muggings, and vigilantes like Bernard Goetz, rampant consumerism, loss of family farms, El Salvador, the rise of the moral majority, homosexuality, AIDS, apartheid in South Africa, the growing divide between rich and poor. Coffin used female pronouns for God in 1978, dropping them in without explanation or apology most times. The sermon he preached after his visit to the Iran hostages at Christmas (“Report from Tehran,” December 30, 1979) is spell-binding for historical reasons alone, but then it ends with the prophetic truth that probably only the clergy of the nation can resolve the hostage crisis since politics only polarizes what is essentially a divine cry for justice on all sides.

But there’s Something More (like God?) at work in and through these sermons, due in no small part to the man himself. Coffin was brilliant, disarmingly personable, honest, and fair, though passionately committed to working for God’s peace and social justice. He loved people. However, it is Coffin’s vision of God that is attractive beyond his political pugnaciousness, for he saw all things--moral, personal, and political—as being under the care of God. He simultaneously addresses the contemporary social scene as well as psychological concerns with God’s Word that is at once biblical and alive, stinging with judgment yet full of tender love. One is left wondering why we don’t have more of such preachers today. Perhaps Jeremiah Wright’s recent excoriation by the press is one reason, but in his day Coffin rode the tide of such criticism like a child playing on the ocean’s waves in a rubber raft, and he just kept preaching with the joy of love’s wild abandon.

Young preachers could learn from Coffin how to weave all aspects of life into a sermonic vision of God at work in the world. They could also learn something of the scope of a preacher’s development through time as they see Coffin wrestle with history, humanity, God, and some of his own issues--all with the “powerless” power of words. But they can also see that good preachers are more than just mere words; there is a power of personality at work here as well, but it is a personality intent upon service to God, not self-aggrandizement. In addition,

through the prodigious breadth of Coffin's knowledge, preachers-in-training can see how to serve the intelligence of Logos. Coffin refers to a stunning variety of philosophers, authors, theologians, physicists, news reports, and pop-culture phenomena in order to highlight the nature of God, yet he does it as naturally and unpretentiously as if everyone knows Pascal, Goethe, and Heisenberg.

Of course, many of his parishioners were quite learned, which is part of the reason why these sermons, full of contemporary and historical allusions, could serve as excellent material for homiletic analysis. Students can learn from Coffin's sermon structure and his use of language. His descriptions are short and to the point with poetic precision, such as when he describes a "church soprano who looked as if she had been bred by a pair of tomahawks" (I. 343)—politically incorrect, perhaps, but we instantly get the picture. No one does aphorisms quite like Coffin, as we can see in just a few: "It is the cracked ones who let the light through" (I. 370), "A sense of need is the passport to Christ's presence" (I. 504), and "most of us resemble the caterpillar who said, looking up at the butterfly, 'You'll never find me flying around in one of those crazy things'" (I. 366). Such pithy sayings are expounded in profound statements that make readers stop for further contemplation. One of Coffin's favorites (since it is repeated a few times) is his analogy for helping us understand that "life is limitation. Just as a stream has no possibility of running deep until it finds its banks, so we, until we discover our limits, haven't a chance of being profoundly honest, compassionate, understanding" (I. 127). One of his wryest is his assertion that "the worst thing a congregation can do to its ministers is to domesticate them. The result is always the same: the bland leading the bland!" (II. 307).

A homiletic analysis will also reveal Coffin's theology and some of its problems. One can become exhausted just reading about all a Christian should be doing, with the implication that it is we who save the world. Nonetheless, joy is also a common theme in Coffin's preaching. There are other themes that emerge as prominent, including "love's truth: 'Freedom for the beloved demands equality with the beloved.' . . . [Christ] wants to be as weak as we, so that we can be as strong as he" (II. 591). Over and over we see Coffin wrestle with the powers of death to assert the powerless power of love that disarms (see, especially, "A Habit of Caring," December 13, 1981). Other themes include those of humility, limitation, lack of love for change, forgiveness, growing discouraged, acquiescence to injustice, and being less than we are called by God to be.

I don't recommend that preaching enthusiasts alone buy this book, however. Get this book as a gift for those who want substance to counteract the saccharine effect of too many devotional materials. As I was reviewing these volumes, I had the books lying around, and my mother, a *Guideposts* connoisseur, began reading the sermons and actually pilfered the volume I was working on, using it for her daily devotional reading. "This is much better reading than all those skimpy things we get at church," she gushed, handing me the book with a sheepish shrug. "This man actually has something to say. It does my soul good." Indeed, it does.

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