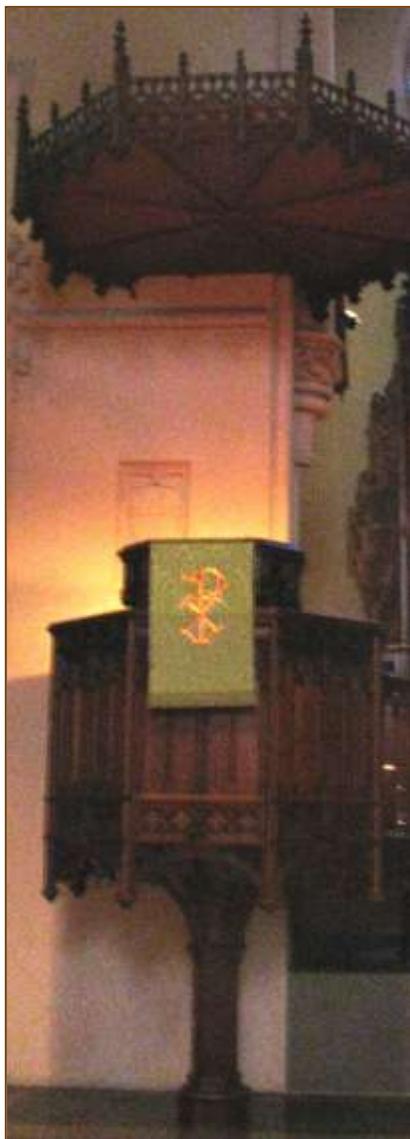


May 18, 2014

Sermons

from a church with a conscience



“Church with a Conscience – Redux”
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What would it mean at this critical moment in human affairs did we in the churches show growing graces and services! A church with a conscience out in front of its age and outdistancing its own best past, in a sense of responsibility for an entire world, in its stand for economic justice, in its demand for, and illustration of, mutual honor and fellowship among races – a church with members whose convictions and characters were ahead of their contemporaries, so that it pulled them forward and lifted them Godward! Then both we on the inside and those on the outside would be in no doubt that Christ is alive and in the midst of His churches and is using them to guide and inspire the world.

Henry Sloane Coffin,
Preaching at the Church of the Covenant,
June 11, 1944

“A Church with a Conscience – Redux”

Psalm 73:1-11, 16-20, 28

Luke 5:36-39

When I first came someone said to me that I probably had a lot of sermons I could use and therefore didn't have to spend eighteen hours a week preparing. I don't repeat sermons; they're old news. Sometimes phrases or examples I keep in a little black book but not whole sermons, never have. That said, some perhaps bear repeating, but with a different slant, and that's the case this morning as you stand on the cusp of a new tomorrow. So this effort in part comes from September eleventh two thousand and five as we kicked off my first year, but there's a twist. Like one of my favorite authors, John Updike with his book *Rabbit Run* and its sequel with his main character Rabbit much older in *Rabbit Redux*, here is, I hope, much of the same dreaming that went on but with reality brought home to roost.

In about nineteen seventy eight in Youngstown, Ohio, I was a young minister when thirty three thousand steel workers lost their jobs over night. I first met our late member Carlie Clark there; he represented US Steel but became a lasting friend when we re-met here. I have been blessed with great mentors all of my life, one of which had invited me to make a presentation at a United Nations lecture because of our efforts to save those steel jobs. Our labors had been marked as a sign of hope at the World Council of Churches meeting in New Delhi, India.

The evening of that lecture I made my way to Union Seminary in New York, up the steps to the Reinhold Niebuhr apartment. If not humbling enough, I knocked on the door to be greeted by Sidney Brown, leading feminist in her own right and spouse of the legendary Robert McAfee Brown, perhaps the greatest practical theologian of modern time of whom Riverside Church's Bill Coffin said, "He brought the best out in us all."

Now let me be clear, this is not about dropping names. It's not even about a "wet behind the ears" minister who found himself plopped in a chair beside a roaring fire with twenty or so international students at his feet and, in childlike fashion, Bob Brown sitting cross legged saying, "So tell us how a small Ohio town and a local Presbyterian church is bringing signs of hope of

God's kingdom into our world." The entire United Nations Assembly would have been less intimidating, so I had a good sip of the scotch Sidney had poured for me, took a deep breath, whispered to myself "Toto we aren't in Kansas anymore" and began to share our story. That remembrance is about churches and people just like you and great things anyone can do, with God's help.

In his reflections Brown writes, "While a student at Union Seminary I did my field work at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, a fashionable place under the leadership of Henry Sloane Coffin," (If you know our history maybe you're starting to get the connection) "The policy," he continued, "since the church was between Park Avenue and the lower east side, and needing to minister to both, was to welcome the well-to-do and the needy without distinction. It was radical stuff!" (1) Mink coats and poor people side by side in God's house.

It's still radical stuff that continues to stir my heart strings every bit as much as when I first read the opening pages of this congregation's history. Words bequeathed by the same Henry Sloane Coffin from this pulpit in nineteen forty four. It's become a statement of your mission and they are words that offer a vision I dare say few churches have the courage to publicly announce, let alone live into. They are words you have often heard me reminding you of in almost mantra fashion. But that's a good thing because they are words needing to be repeated as often as you say your prayers at bedtime.

"A church with a conscience, out in front of its age, out distancing its own best past, (there's a mouth full), in a sense of responsibility for an entire world, in its stand for economic justice, in its demand for, and illustration of, mutual honor and fellowship among races – (which includes all races and might we in these days add all discrimination including gender) – a church (hear this) with members whose convictions and characters were ahead of its contemporaries, so that it pulled them (tugged kicking and scratching if need be) forward and lifted them Godward! Then (and only then) both we on the inside and those on the outside would be in no doubt that Christ is alive and in the midst of His churches and is using them (all of them) to guide and inspire the world." (Henry Sloane Coffin - 2)

When I hear those words I still get goose bumps, not only because they sound like music to a preacher who resonates with the prophets of old but because this is who you are, and with whom I have been given the privilege to serve these few short years. It is who those whom you have installed and ordained this day are charged to continue to lead. Trouble is belonging to and leading such a people from our faiths beginning has been as much a burden as a blessing.

Did you catch the struggle within the Seventy-Third Psalm? It's a before and after account. While we, like the psalmist might believe God is good to the pure in heart it's pretty tough not to ask why "bad things happen to good people?" It's easy to get discouraged when watching the success of those who don't seem to play by the rules, both people and churches. But forget not as the psalmist also reminds us, God or life can put people in slippery places.

I was talking with my eldest son and couldn't help but comment on how much wiser he seems these days (he's almost forty). He replied, "I hope so, I'm older, I have two kids growing up fast and in one year I had three of my closest friends leave and another electrocuted." Then he added, "People ought to get smarter when tough things happen. They don't always but they should. Trouble is, I don't think that can happen until bad things come into your life." I was awed by the emergence of a wise soul I always thought was there. And he's right, tough times, slippery slopes come to everyone and unfortunately epiphanies never seem to appear for some until moments before the doors to life are closed. There are so many who never come to realize that we're not just consumers. That if we only exist to consume, in the end we will be consumed by those things that we have let control our lives. That's why the psalmist insists that it's "only when I enter the sanctuary that I perceive, grasp, recognize my end." Or as St. Paul puts it, "When I was a child I saw through the glass dimly but now. . .". Neither is inferring someone else is going to hell in a hand basket. This is about self-realization, self-awareness as the scales of idols begin to fall from a person's eyes. And it's in this sanctuary, drawing near to the presence of the Lord that we discover God's alternatives and life's deeper meanings found in a Creator's gracious blessings freely given.

So what about this sanctuary and the perspectives we look for in this place? Jesus lays the foundation for all future thinking by talking about new wine in old vessels. Everyone knows older wines are better, new wine gives you a real headache. Yet new wine is about tomorrow and to hold it, there have to be new receptacles for outdistancing even a best past. And to embrace that which is new requires an understanding that memory, while valuable, stops time and time stops for no one. Memory can distort the present and blind you to the future and so to be a people committed to moving beyond the past, even your best requires the constant affirming that we Presbyterians really are always being reformed and therefore always reforming. The purity of Christianity is never in the establishment of defensible beliefs that can be archived for their own sake. The teachings of Jesus have one purpose; to reveal an ever-accepting creator who rejects simple formulas and forever leans with eager anticipation toward creative tomorrows. That means to be out in front, leading the way, you have to embrace your own uniqueness as uncommon persons and never be shy about it. You have to grasp the fact that you have been called in uncommon ways for uncommon times and that it will never be an easy journey. Communities of faith like this one are God's gift to the world. I truly believe that! But there are those who would much prefer you were not the way you are; a bright spot of hope on the landscape of theological mediocrity and judgmental orthodoxy. I pray you will continue always to be such a leader church.

We have done much together since the first time we thought about what it means to be "a church with a conscience," yet as St. Paul said to the Hebrews I must add, "What more can I say for time fails me." Except perhaps for this; the things we have accomplished are but the preface to what awaits, not even your first chapter on a new future has been writ. So, like it or not, you and these officers you have elected are once again being conscripted to be the signs of hope for this community and the world, enabling all whom you encounter to become their own better selves. At the same time, guess what? As long as you are faithful to who you have been called to be you too will be lifted ever more Godward as those outside your doors come to truly know Christ is alive and is in this place.

- 1) Robert McAfee Brown, *Reflections Over the Long Haul*
- 2) Carol Poh Miller, *Church With A Conscience*



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Convinced of God's grace, the Church of the Covenant strives to be a caring and compassionate congregation, welcoming all people regardless of age, race, national origin, marital status, gender, affectional orientation, and mental or physical ability.