

“This Epistle of Straw: 3) Understanding the Will of God”

a sermon by

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Text: “Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that’ (James 4:15).

On April 12, 2006, William Sloan Coffin died at his home in Vermont. He was, in many ways, one of the best-known ministers over the last half a century. Coffin was an ordained Presbyterian minister and a premier social activist. He was best known in his roles as Chaplain at Yale University from 1958-1975 and later as the minister of the Riverside Church of New York City from 1977-1987. In the 1960’s he was one of the early “Freedom Riders,” who rode buses throughout the south in the early days of Civil Rights Movement. During the late 1960’s and into the 1970’s, he was an outspoken critic of the War in Vietnam. He later became a leader in the antinuclear war movement, as the founder of a group called SANE.

I heard William Sloan Coffin preach on a number of occasions at the Riverside Church in New York City. One sermon in particular sticks in my mind. It was the Sunday after the death of Nelson Rockefeller, who had served as Governor of New York and was a highly visible political leader. Funeral services for Rockefeller had been held on that Friday in the Riverside Church. It was obvious that it had not been an easy week for Coffin or the church. Nelson Rockefeller’s father, John D. Rockefeller, had given the money to build the Riverside Church, and though none of the family were members of the church, the family decided that they wanted the service at the Riverside Church. In addition, they wanted Henry Kissinger, the former Secretary of State, to give the eulogy at the service. According to Coffin, that was a touchy subject in the church. Kissinger had been closely associated with the Vietnam War and there were a number of members of the governing board of the church who did not want Kissinger in the pulpit.

Moreover, because Kissinger was the former Secretary of State, it meant that the Secret Service would be present, which would entail the presence of weapons in the sanctuary, and many of people were opposed to that.

It was obvious to me that Coffin had suffered a difficult week, caught in a web between members of his church, the Rockefeller family, and the Secret Service of the United States. He said that during all the struggles he decided that he was going to have to be firm. After all, he reasoned, he was the Senior Minister. He said he wanted to put his foot down. He just didn't know where to put it. Finally, he decided to stand firm. He told the Rockefeller family that under no circumstances could they have a cash bar in the sanctuary.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once observed that people would probably remember the hymn he authored, "God of Grace and God of Glory," long after they had forgotten every word he ever uttered. In the same fashion, William Sloan Coffin may be remembered for a remarkable and very painful sermon he preached after the death of his son Alex, who died in an automobile accident, when the car he was driving careened off the highway and ended up in Boston Harbor. In the sermon that Coffin preached at his son's funeral, he mentioned the fact that during the night after his son's death, he was sitting in his sister's home when a nice looking middle-aged woman entered the house carrying about eighteen quiches. As she made her way to the kitchen, she looked over at this grieving father and said sadly over her shoulder, "I just don't understand the will of God."

Coffin said that something in him snapped. "I'll say you don't," he replied. "Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield 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 on that stretch of road, and no guardrail separating the road and Boston Harbor?" "For some reason," Coffin concluded, "nothing infuriates me 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 fingers on triggers, his fist on knives, and his hands on steering wheels."

I.

There are few questions as perplexing as understanding what we mean by the "will of God." Over the past several weeks we have examined again the Book of James, one of the small but important books of the New Testament. As I have noted before, the Book of James has not always been well received. In fact, the great Reformer, Martin Luther, once referred to it as "An epistle of straw." But as we have seen, the Book of James has some very important things to say. It reminds us that "faith without works is dead." James also speaks of the power of words to both bless and to curse.

In the passage that I read from this morning, the Book of James warns against an arrogance that pretends that we are in control of our lives. James has two pieces of advice: the first is that we should always qualify claims about the future by recognizing that everything is

subject to God's will; the second is his warning about boasting. The thrust of this passage is that our lives are all contingent on God's will.

In seeking to understand the will of God there are at least three things that must be said.

II.

The first thing that we must say is that God is personal. The Christian faith stands or falls on its assertion that God is an active God who is active in human lives and active in human history. The picture of God in the Old and New Testament is the picture of a God whose love for us is personal, intimate, and real. Jesus warned his disciples not to be anxious about what they would eat, drink, or wear. He reminded them of the birds of the air who neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet, God feeds them. He showed them the lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin, yet whose beauty exceeds that of Solomon in all his glory (Matthew 6:25-32).

That is the love of God of which the New Testament speaks. It is personal, specific, and real. Someone once told of the great conductor Toscanini, who was approached by a bassoon player just before a concert. The bassoon player was distraught. His instrument had suffered an accident and he told the conductor that he could not play E-flat. Toscanini bowed his face in his hands for a few moments, and then lifted it again. "That's all right," he said. "The note E-flat, does not appear in your music today." That is how Jesus conceived of God's knowledge of us. "It is not the will of your father in heaven that a single one of these little ones should be lost."

III.

The second thing that we must say is that "God's ways are not our ways, and his thoughts not our thoughts." One of the central affirmations of the Reformed faith is the maintenance of the distinction between the creature and the creator. We are the creature; God is the creator. This means that there are some things in life that we do not understand because we are limited and finite.

Throughout the ages, theologians have struggled to understand the will of God. John Calvin insisted that nothing happened apart from God's will. He believed that every drop of rain that falls from the heavens and that every single event in human history and in our lives is a manifestation of God's will. Other theologians have viewed the problem in a different fashion. William Temple, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, spoke of what he called God's permissive will. There are some things, argued Temple that God allows to happen, even if they are not consistent with what God intends. When faced with a tragedy such as the death of a child or young person, Temple reasoned, "We should not say, 'Why does God choose to do this?' God does not choose to do this. What God chooses to do is to create a world in which human freedom is a reality and which the natural order is allowed to operate without impediment."

That means that there is a certain mystery in life. We do not understand everything that happens to us or to other people. St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, once reflected on his own life. As a young man, Augustine led a profligate life. He had a series of mistresses and lived a

life that was by any standards immoral. His mother Monica was a devout Christian who wanted more than anything for her son to be a Christian. One day Augustine announced that he was leaving their home in North Africa to travel to Italy. His mother was horrified. She knew that Italy was a coarse and immoral country and she begged her son not to go. She prayed all night in the monastery, even as her son set sail to travel to Italy.

Something happened in Italy, however, that Augustine's mother could not have imagined. During his travels Augustine came about a brilliant teacher and preacher, Ambrose of Milan. Augustine was so captivated by Ambrose that he converted to Christianity. Later, he returned home and became the Bishop of Hippo. In his *Confessions*, Augustine reflected that he was converted to Christ in the very place that his mother's prayers would have kept him from going. He concluded that God had to deny her specific request to grant her what she deeply wanted.

IV.

The third thing that we must say is that "God works in all things for good with those who love him and who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Paul Tillich, in a remarkable book of sermons entitled *The Shaking of the Foundations*, speaks of our belief in the Providence of God not in terms of the vague hope that with the help of God everything will come to a good end. There are many things in life that do not come to a good end. Nor does it mean that there is a divine plan by which everything in our lives is predetermined.

Rather, Providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility implied in every situation that cannot be destroyed by any event. Providence means that the demonic and destructive forces in our world and within ourselves can never have an unbreakable grasp upon us, and that the love that binds us to God is a love that can never be severed.

The key to this, of course, is God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Paul says this not simply to be solemn, but because he knows that the only thing that can destroy our faith in Providence is our disbelief in the love of God, our distrust of God, our fear of his wrath, and our hatred of his presence. It is not the depth of our suffering that destroys our faith in God's Providence but the depth of our faith. That is why Providence and the forgiveness of sins are not two separate aspects of the Christian faith. They are the one and the same—the certainty that we can reach eternal life in spite of our suffering and our sin.

Several years ago I visited the National Gallery in London. There was a painting there that captured my imagination. It is a painting of Christ hanging on the cross in a dense darkness. At first, that is all one sees. But as one peers in the dense darkness, gradually one sees another form, God's form; and other hands supporting Christ, God's hands; and another face, God's face, more filled with agony than even the face of Christ.

That is our great hope, and it is a hope that will not fail.

Amen!