

Church of the Crossroads
Second Sunday in Lent
March 4, 2007
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RESISTING THE TEMPTATION OF MELANCHOLY

Isaiah 61:1-4
Psalm 42
Luke 13:31-35

This morning, my text comes not from the scriptures but from a prayer written for the Season of Lent by William Sloane Coffin when he was the pastor of Riverside Church in New York City.

The prayer, in part, reads:

O God of mercy and hope, deepen, we pray, our faith, so that we can remain our best when circumstances go against us. Resisting the temptation of melancholy, may we embrace the asceticism of cheerfulness, remaining tender, loving and loyal to one another even as thou art tender, loving and loyal to each one of us. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

What struck me particularly was the petition “*resisting the temptation of melancholy, may we embrace the asceticism of cheerfulness.*” Now, the notion that we can be tempted by melancholy speaks to me in a way that is astonishing. It indeed describes a temptation to which I am continually attracted. There are times when I languish in melancholy, and from the reactions of those who came to our lectionary study last Monday, I am not alone! Hence, this sermon.

Please be assured that when I speak of melancholy, I am *not* speaking of clinical depression. I do not believe that we can simply think our way out of a clinical depression, although I am aware that some do believe just this. I am the first to say that clinical depression cannot be resisted. Indeed, it must be faced, bringing to its treatment both in-depth counseling and medication, if necessary.

Now, while it is true that those who are clinically depressed can surely experience melancholy, I also suspect that melancholy can also be a chosen

way of responding to the repeated disappointments and failures that come with modern life. Melancholy arises in us when we repeatedly think, “What’s the use?” What we want will never come. We begin to see life as characterized by defeat after defeat, and more of the same, and then, more of the same. Melancholy can be a response to all of this, allowing us to give up and become cynical about the capacity of human beings to do anything worthwhile, really worthwhile, including ourselves.

In spite of all the official promoters of the “American way of life” who urge everyone to “keep moving forward,” (in Iraq, for instance, even though we know that it is impossible), we sense that the world instead is continually moving backwards, and ourselves included! No wonder we are subject to melancholy. It used to be thought that melancholy was caused by too much “black bile,” but these days is more to be associated with the general “dis-ease” that comes with modern living. We human beings are too programmed for success and too prone to failure. We place high demands on ourselves that never can be met. We become burdened and defeated. We give into the temptation of melancholy. We end up sad, gloomy, dismal, cynical, and negative.

Now, although the word *melancholy* is not a word to be found in the Bible, the Bible nonetheless acknowledges its reality. In the scriptures, human beings easily lose hope. They are subject to despair. They can become mournful over many things. Their souls are often cast down.

Yet, the promise is that these can be transformed. The prophet is anointed to

*bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners . . .
to provide for those who mourn in Zion-
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.*

- Isaiah 61

“Why are you cast down, O my soul,” says the Psalmist. *“Why are you disquieted within me?”* *“Hope in God; for I shall again praise the one who is my help and my God.”*

And melancholy is not a word we ever would think to associate with Jesus. Jesus is the opposite of melancholic. He is one who is internally motivated, determined to do what must be done, knowing full well that it may well lead to failure. Let us hear him speak. After some Pharisees come and say to him, *“Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you,”* he says to them, *“Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’”* I love that phrase, “go and tell that fox for me.” It is a spirited phrase, bordering on the humorous. Here, surely, is one who resisted the temptation of melancholy, and if anyone ever had good cause to be melancholic, it was Jesus. He can hardly be described as a success story.

The faith of Jesus was strong, of course. He was filled with hope for the world even though he must have suspected that things would not go all that well for him personally. Hope, my friends, is here to save us as well. Hope is the great antidote to melancholy. And so is the *asceticism of cheerfulness*. What a great phrase William Sloane Coffin has coined. He was a crafter of memorable phrases. *Resisting the temptation of melancholy, may we embrace the asceticism of cheerfulness.*

Now, the asceticism of cheerfulness is not to be confused with “putting on a happy face.” American Protestant Churches have had their fill of that! God save us from happy faces!

No, what Coffin has in mind is a discipline of cheerfulness. That discipline is rooted in hope and it allows us to pay attention to the basic things that enrich our humanity, basic things like “remaining tender, loving and loyal to one another even as God is tender, loving and loyal to each one of us.” Besides the idea of resisting the temptation of melancholy, the idea of practicing an asceticism of cheerfulness has helped me tremendously. An asceticism of cheerfulness is possible only when we set aside all that which prevents us from keeping hope alive in us, in much the same way that monks in going into the desert set aside all that would distract them from their task. The kind of cheerfulness William Sloane Coffin speaks of is rooted not in

any notions of American progress or success, nor in any sort of American optimism, all of which are, in the end, illusory and worthless. Nor is it a product of positive thinking in the manner of Norman Vincent Peete or Robert Schuler of the Crystal Cathedral. No, the cheerfulness William Sloane Coffin has in mind is rooted in the hope that comes when we have the faith of Jesus, the kind of faith that, in the words of Julian Norwich, trusts that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing(s) shall be well.”

It’s a discipline to be practiced. “*Only be still, and wait God’s pleasure,*” reads the hymn. “*in cheerful hope, with heart content, trusting that grace which knows no measure will by unbounded Love be sent*” (“If You but trust in God to Guide You”)

Resisting the temptation of melancholy, may we embrace the asceticism of cheerfulness. My friends, the next time you notice that I have let melancholy get its hold on me, the next time I show the signs of a dismal, hopeless sadness, remind me of what I preached to myself this morning, and when I notice the same kind of dreariness in you, may I do the same for you. Let us not get so overwhelmed by life, let us not get so down on the world, let us not get so disillusioned with others or ourselves that we drift into melancholy and fail to embrace the asceticism of cheerfulness. Let us hold fast to hope, having within ourselves the faith of Jesus. And yes, let us remain tender, loving and loyal to one another, even as God is tender, loving and loyal to each one of us.

And may peace and joy, both of them gifts from a gracious God, abide with us forever. Amen.