

“What You Taught Me”

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Text: Philippians 1:3-11

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The words are probably familiar to you. The words from Philippians open a window upon a relationship – a relationship between a pastor and a congregation. A relationship which by means of the letter is remembered, enjoyed, nourished, and informed. A letter was the next best thing to being there. Paul’s expression of affection for the Philippians is stronger than in any other of his letters – his regard for them is high, his feelings deep. His words reflect the bond that often exists between a pastor and a congregation. It is, as you have heard me say before, a relationship knit together with the strongest fabric that human hearts can weave. That a relationship between a pastor and a congregation can exist at all is remarkable – given the extraordinary investment emotionally of people in their faith – given the incendiary nature of much of what we discuss in church – given the many roles the pastor plays in relation to the people. Sometimes out in front calling, sometimes over against in confrontation. That the relationship exists at all is remarkable. That it survives for years in some cases is incredible. That it flourishes in some places is miraculous. Paul had a beautiful and loving relationship with the Philippians. He is grateful to God in his remembrance of them and for their partnership in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The words of Paul I have been able to claim as my own – I am grateful to God as I remember all of you and all those who have been part of my ministry these last 25 years. The people with whom I’ve ministered, the congregations I’ve served, those colleagues who have taught me – I consider all of them partners in the gospel. I want to take a few moments this morning to remember and celebrate those partnerships and express my appreciation for all that you have taught me.

One of the persons who taught me much was a man who died just a few weeks ago. William Sloane Coffin was a tremendous influence upon my life and ministry. During the 1960’s, Coffin was chaplain at Yale University. He was one of the freedom riders during the early civil rights struggle. He was one of three clergy who went to celebrate Christmas with the American hostages in Iran in 1979. Coffin served ten years as senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York City. Riverside is the church which the great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick helped establish. Riverside is the flagship church of American liberal Protestantism, and is my favorite place to worship when I am away from home. I had the pleasure of spending time with Bill Coffin on several occasions – I heard him preach, and have read his books. So important was Coffin to me that I made a quick trip to New York a few weeks ago to attend his funeral.

I learned many things from Bill Coffin. I learned that the separation of church and state is not designed to separate Christians from their politics; that a faith which does not get beyond the garden gate is a monument to irrelevance; that our faith is always personal and never private. Bill Coffin taught me that the Old Testament prophets were ones who spoke truth to power – God’s truth to civil power – who brought the word of God to bear upon the contemporary setting. In good prophetic tradition, Coffin continually reminded fellow clergy that it was our calling to be both pastors and prophets, but that we had to earn our prophetic voice. I heard Coffin tell a story years ago that has stuck with me. He told of a young pastor who was outspoken on social issues from the pulpit, and who ruffled lots of feathers to the point of facing an elders’ vote as to whether he should be fired. The pastor kept his job by one vote. Some of the disgruntled went to the elder who had cast the deciding vote and asked him why, when he himself didn’t agree with what was being said from the pulpit, why would he vote to keep the outspoken pastor. Because, he told the others, “When my wife was dying, he held her hand the last twenty hours of her life, and my hand the next twenty-four.” I learned from Bill Coffin, and you have confirmed, that folks care what the pastor knows only when they know the pastor cares.

Coffin would occasionally chastise clergy for their lack of courage. He once said, “Too many ministers are dependent on the love of their congregation. A real friend is one who risks his friendship for the sake of his friend, rather than using the friend for the sake of their relationship. The clergy don’t speak out because they don’t want to risk the love of their congregation.”

I believe over the past 25 years I have become more pastoral but I hope and pray that it has not been at the expense of being prophetic. I know that here, as in other congregations I’ve served, I can risk our partnership for the sake of my partners.

Bill Coffin offered me a new way to look at patriotism. He said that there are three kinds of patriots – two bad, one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. “Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, which is a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.” What that says to me is that in keeping with good Biblical prophetic tradition, there are times when it is appropriate to

speak out and question governmental policies or attitudes which are in conflict with what and who God is calling us to be. We are, after all, citizens and not subjects, and to disagree with our government may at times be the most patriotic thing we can do.

While I have learned a great deal from Bill Coffin, other colleagues and teachers, it is from you that I have learned the most. It is from you that I have learned about one of the biggest paradoxes of ministry, which has to do with the way I spend my time. Very few people have the freedom to set their own schedules the way pastors do. For the most part, how the work day is laid out is pretty much up to me to determine. However, that flexibility in scheduling is subject to the needs and demands of a few hundred people. We pastors by the nature of our calling and profession are expected to relate to many persons and many situations. You've heard me say before that someone once described being a pastor is like being a stray dog at a whistler's convention. We're pulled lots of different ways! Please hear me – I'm not complaining. Because one of the biggest paradoxes of ministry makes possible what I consider the greatest reward in ministry. That reward is the awesome, awesome privilege of being with people at critical times in their lives, whether those are times of joy or times of sorrow.

I cannot begin to tell you how much it has meant to me these last 25 years to be allowed into your lives at special times. Sometimes you've invited me in; sometimes I just stumbled in; sometimes I just happened to be there when you were in need. So let me thank you. Thank you for the privilege of officiating at your wedding or the wedding of one of your children; for the joy of immersing your child in the waters of Christian baptism. Thank you for allowing me to be at your hospital bedside for prayer before you underwent surgery. I appreciate you sharing your family with me while you were in surgery – for letting me spend time with them while we awaited a report from the doctor. Thank you for trusting me when you came to my office burdened because of a troubled child, a broken marriage, an indecisive mind, a grieving heart. Thanks for choosing to let me be part of the last days and hours of your loved one's life – to witness their passage from this earthly world into the eternal one; for the honor of being able to be part of celebrating your loved one's life at a memorial service.

While I cannot speak for you, I want you to know that having shared with you an experience as I've just mentioned, whether that was an experience of joy or sadness, my relationship with you changes – it grows stronger and deeper, and for that, I am extremely grateful. I have learned that I can trust you to do your best in being the church. Several years ago, I attended a conference on long pastorates and I was sharing my frustration that things in the church I was serving weren't going my way; that the board was choosing to do what it wanted instead of what I wanted. Can you imagine? The leader said to me: "Neil, do you want to be in control, or do you want to be taken seriously?" From that point on I have been more intentional in letting go of control. Certainly I want to have my input, but you have taught me that it's okay to trust the process and your leadership; that you bring insight and perspective which I cannot bring; that the Holy Spirit will work through us and our process.

I have learned from you that even though we in the church get it wrong occasionally, there are many times when we get it right – when we are the church at its best – when we really do function as the body of Christ. You have taught me what powerful ministry can happen at the hands of the laity. I've seen it – I've seen you be there for each other – when someone in the congregation was in need and you wrapped your collective arms around them and they were comforted, supported, warmed, and sustained by your love and God's.

And they would later say that they don't know how they would have made it through their ordeal if it hadn't been for their church family. I've seen ministries happen that wouldn't have been successful if I as the pastor had been coordinating them, but because you as lay persons were there – speaking, creating, doing – they were effective and well received ministries. You have taught me that I can trust you to be an equal partner in the ministry we share. You have also taught me that some of the ways of doing and organizing ministry that were effective thirty, forty, and fifty years ago are no longer helpful, and that you are open to change. That's why I've been so excited about the spiritual gifts study we offered last fall and our decision to look at a different way of structuring our ministry and our life together. We want to be doing the work of the church instead of doing church work.

You have helped me learn that the church does not exist for itself. You have reminded me that Christ didn't call us to go and make members; He called us to make disciples. A congregation that reaches out beyond itself – with money, with ministry – will continue to grow. A congregation which is only interested in maintenance of the membership, in keeping the members happy, will eventually die, and deservedly so.

Through the witness of many of you, I have learned about the importance of taking care of my own soul – of tending to my own spiritual life. Fred Craddock once said that ministers often make the mistake of thinking that talking about God is adequate substitute for talking with God. I must confess that I was guilty of that to some degree, but I'm doing a much better job of that now. For the past five years I have been meeting with a spiritual director, who helps keep me accountable for my spiritual journey.

I have many to thank for where I am on my journey today. My home church – Countryside Christian Church – in Mission, Kansas – for its encouragement and support during my youth. For its pastors – Gene Frazier, whom I credit for my commitment to outreach causes; and A. C. Cuppy, whom I credit for my involvement with peace and justice issues. I want to thank my parents, Clem and Darlene, for raising me in such a loving and close family, and for their examples of faith and devotion to Christ's church. I want to thank my brothers and sisters for providing me with a wealth of sermon illustrations.

And I want to say a word to our children – Ben and Gretchen. I know that it hasn't always been easy for you being preacher's kids – I know that sometimes I expected things from you that I wouldn't have otherwise just because you're PK's. But I have always been very proud of you and could not have had two better or more loving kids. You know that the flexibility of my schedule has allowed me to do things with you that lots of parents don't get to do – have lunch with you during grade school; go on field trips; read to your class. The flip side of that has been those times when I couldn't be at one of your activities, or when we had to cut our vacation short because of a need of a church member. I am confident that on those occasions, you knew that the church member's needs weren't more important, just more urgent. I want to thank Holly, who is on occasion my toughest critic, but who is always my strongest supporter. You have been an important part of my ministry, and it's difficult for me to envision doing the ministry I do without you to love and encourage me. You have been a blessing to many people, even though you may not realize it. Thank you for being willing to be open to wherever the call of ministry takes us. I know you didn't set out to fall in love with a minister, but I'm really glad you did.

At Bill Coffin's funeral, his son David shared with us that Bill's wife Randy made the following statement about being together for the funeral: "You know, we say we're here because of our love for Bill. But really, it's the other way around." On this occasion, you may be here out of love for me, and for that I am grateful. But please know of my love and affection for you. I thank God in all my remembrance of you. Thanks, thanks, and ever thanks. Amen and Amen.