

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 20 (C) ~ 21 September 2025
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Psalm 113:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

The Church in These Times

God, whose mercy is ever faithful and ever sure, who art our refuge and our strength in time of trouble, visit us, we beseech thee — for we are in trouble.¹ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I.

In 1983, the Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin stood before his congregation at The Riverside Church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and prayed:

O God...we are in trouble.

We need a hope that is made wise by experience and undaunted by disappointment.

We need an anxiety about the future that shows us new ways to look at new things but does not unnerve us.

By the time he uttered these words, William Sloane Coffin already had made a name for himself as a civil rights activist, a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War, Chaplain at Williams College and Yale University, and now as pastor of the majestic church built by John D. Rockefeller — a towering monument to God that is, at the same time, a stately shrine to the elite of the elite in this country. If you have never been inside the Riverside Church, let me just say that its beauty and opulence are dizzying. And it was from this platform of privilege and power that William Sloane Coffin preached with the voice of a prophet, leveraging his

¹ <https://christisvictorious.typepad.com/christusvictor/2021/03/a-prayer-for-our-times-from-a-surprising-source-rev-dr-william-sloane-coffin-and-a-great-quote-by-pl.html>

position and location to critique those places where he saw this country going astray.

William Sloane Coffin was not, of course, universally beloved. Many took offense at his overtly political rhetoric, and more than once he wound up in a jail cell for his acts of protest and dissent. Whether one endorsed his causes or not, there was no denying his courage – the very virtue, he preached, that “makes all other virtues possible.”²

(This reminds me of another prophetic voice we know well, that of our own Bishop, Mariann Budde, who famously took a bold stance in another pulpit just a few months ago. She literally wrote the book on courage: Her most recent title is *How We Learn to be Brave*.)

Now back to 1983:

Although not nearly as turbulent as the 1960’s and ’70’s in this country, 1983 was, nevertheless, a time of both great technological advancement *and* mounting – and frightening – global tension.

In 1983, life as we now know it was beginning to take shape, as the internet was “born.”³

This was the year that GPS technology became available to the public, not just to the military, for the first time.⁴

This was the year that the Space Shuttle *Challenger* made its triumphant maiden voyage, only to meet a tragic end just three years later.

And in 1983 the world was brought to the “Nuclear Brink,” in “what many historians describe as some of the most dangerous moments of the Cold War.”⁵ I was a Senior in high school at the time, and I still remember – vividly – a “made for tv” movie that imagined the aftermath of a nuclear

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/13/us/rev-william-sloane-coffin-dies-at-81-fought-for-civil-rights-and-against.html>

³ <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2016/04/this-is-what-the-internet-looked-like-when-it-was-first-invented/>

⁴ https://www.historic-newspapers.com/blogs/article/1983-timeline?srsId=AfmBOorGDM1Lr5Hc6gP5ayjLYficWgxAnlsBAnfSg_6iWXf312m0G6PH

⁵ <https://www.lse.ac.uk/International-History/Events/2023/1983-Remembered>

strike on rural America. It was horrifying, and it made a big impression on this then-17 year-old.

Hence the importance – and timeliness – of Dr. Coffin’s words.

II.

The more things change...

Here, more than 40 years later, you and I gather in another house of worship, in a different place of privilege and power. While St. Dunstan’s may not claim quite the same influence and social capital as the historic and hallowed Riverside Church, we cannot deny the advantageous position we occupy in this city and in this Diocese. I realize that being in Washington right now may feel more like a curse than a blessing; nevertheless, we might well follow William Sloane Coffin’s example and leverage our location on behalf of the “polis,” or the community. And we can begin by lifting our hearts and minds and voices in lament. That is the work of the prophet, after all: To name when and where we as a people have gone astray, and to ask God fervently to intercede.

O God...we are in trouble.

III.

You may have noticed that the Scripture readings assigned for this morning speak to what it means to be a person of faith in the midst of an imperfect and deeply troubled world.

“First of all,” writes the author of the Letter to Timothy, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions...” I confess that I was tempted to exercise my liturgical authority this week and omit that opening phrase, “First of all,” because it seemed like a bit of a distraction, since the passage doesn’t continue with a “second,” or a “third.” But then I read that “a more appropriate translation...would be ‘above all’ or ‘the most important thing is that ...,’” which, as one scholar puts it, “introduces an appeal to be persistent in prayer.”⁶

⁶ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-3/commentary-on-1-timothy-21-7-3>

One of the most impactful and efficacious things that we can do, according to today's reading, is *pray*.

I know that right now many of us are finding it difficult, if not hypocritical, to pray for "all who are in high positions" in this country. I get that. I struggle, too. *And* I want to share an analogy that has become helpful to me; it concerns the power of the purse.

We know that one of the ways we can exercise our agency is by choosing judiciously where we spend our money – or where we don't. We have the right and the ability to use our economic power (limited though it may feel at times) in support of causes and organizations that are important to us. Likewise, we have the ability to *withdraw* financial support when we disagree with the direction in which we see the cause or organization going. This happens all the time, and it suggests the inherent power of our money: We wield it like a tool or a weapon, believing – knowing – full well that doing so makes a difference.

So it is with prayer. When we decide that we cannot bring ourselves to pray for someone – our leaders, perhaps – because we do not endorse their actions and policies, what are we saying, implicitly? I think it's clear: We are acknowledging the potential potency of prayer. We are asserting that prayer really does make a difference. Otherwise, our offering or withholding it would be of little consequence.

Why, then, would we *not* pray for those entrusted with authority? This is the very place where our spiritual capital has the most influence, where we see the greatest "bang for our buck," so to speak. And this is also where the analogy to money beaks down a bit, because unlike with a financial contribution, prayer does not equate to endorsement: Rather, it is asking God to work through that person's position of privilege and power to bring about God's vision – or, in the language we've been using lately, to help build the Kingdom of God here on earth.

IV.

O God...we need a hope that is made wise by experience and undaunted by disappointment.

We need an anxiety about the future that shows us new ways to look at new things but does not unnerve us.

I think this is precisely what Jesus is getting at in today's Gospel. This morning Jesus tells what might be called an "uncomfortable" parable, one that does not – shall we say – preach itself. Often called "The Parable of the Unjust Steward," it tells the story of a guy in middle-management who messes up at work and, in desperation, cuts a deal with his boss's debtors to save his own skin. So much for integrity in business! Yet Jesus lauds this behavior, telling His disciples to "make friends for [themselves] by means of dishonest wealth."

What is He talking about??

This is where William Sloane Coffin's prayer is particularly helpful, I think. Coffin's call for "a hope made wise by experience" and "an anxiety about the future" is realistic and, like Jesus Himself, *incarnational* – it meets a broken and troubled humanity exactly where we are. As with Jesus' parable, the prayer does not promote an idealized, "pie in the sky" spirituality, but rather one that acknowledges the unrighteousness of a world in which God's Kingdom has not yet come to fruition. (Remember that a parable is an exaggerated story told for effect, to make a point about God; it's not about real life!) We need to bring our hard-won wisdom about that world to bear on our relationship with God and on our expectations for one another. It is right to be anxious, not complacent, about the future, because that is the only way that things change. Blindly maintaining the *status quo* does not, as a rule, lead to new life.

And Jesus is all about new and resurrected life.

V.

So where does this leave us here in this new "Age of Anxiety" (to borrow a term coined by the poet W. H. Auden)? What is our role, where ought we to stand as Christians, at a time when Gospel values such as integrity, justice, and mercy appear to be questioned at every turn? What does it mean to be faithful? Who are we called to be as the Church?

It seems to me that both today's parable and Dr. Coffin's witness suggest an outwardly-, as well as inwardly-, focused spirituality. We tend to think of our relationship with God as a private matter, like our income or our weight. *We*

ought not to talk about it in polite conversation, the reasoning goes. But if Jesus is clear about anything, it is that our faith matters as much in our Monday-Saturday life as it does in weekly worship. It matters more so, actually. To paraphrase Jesus elsewhere in Luke, “What does it profit [us] if [we] gain the whole world but lose or forfeit [our]selves?” (Luke 9:25).

Our faith is not meant to be confined to our life here together at St. Dunstan’s, then put back on a shelf until the next time we’re in church. On the contrary: It is the very life-blood of our souls, the shaping force that gives us meaning and purpose and a reason to get up in the morning beyond our paycheck. And our faith calls us to leverage what we’ve got – shrewdly – for the building of the Kingdom of God.

And what, exactly, is it that we’ve got? Here in this community, I feel that I am on solid ground in saying that we have (at least) three important things at our disposal. They are the “Three ‘P’s’”: position, purse, and prayer.

First, **position**: Like it or not, deny it or not, we do occupy a place of power, especially relative to so many other others in our nation and our world. How might we use this position to “make friends” for the sake of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God?

Second (this time there really is a second – and a third!), **purse**: For all the many demands made on our finances, the truth is that we are incredibly privileged – especially, again, when compared with our struggling siblings in this country and around the globe. How can we use these resources to effect real change? How can our money be a constructive tool for making things better, rather than a destructive weapon we wield or withhold at will?

And third, **prayer**: It is high time that we take seriously the power of our prayers – especially when we lift our voices together, collectively, corporately. How can this congregation, relatively small though we may be, be a beacon of hope and persistence and *resistance* in these times?

I raise these questions not to elicit quick, knee-jerk responses, but to invite longer, broader, more expansive conversation.

And I ask them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, *Amen*.