



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Planting in good soil

By Rev. Sharon Gracen

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On the 4th of July, I came across a quote from William Sloane Coffin whom you all may be more familiar with than I, as he was a local trouble maker for many years. Coffin was a consistent voice for civil rights, peace, and justice throughout his career as an ordained minister, 18 years of which were spent as chaplain at Yale. He was a passionate activist with the arrest record to prove it. He was one of those individuals in whom faith and patriotism collided and informed each other. Here's what he said,

"There are 3 kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers & the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with all the world." William Sloane Coffin loved this country and he quarreled with it with gusto. He believed that whenever we were not living up to the ideals of freedom and equality and justice, it was up to the people to insist that we do. That's what made a good patriot in his mind. What made a bad patriot was cynicism – those who see no good and are only negative in their relationship with country. The other kind of bad patriot is the one with blinders on who refuses to admit that this shining city on the hill might have a darker side or some skeletons in the closet. Neither of these two types contributes to the development of our common life and the actualization of the transcendent vision that created this nation. It's tough to live up to such a vision and it takes the good patriots to hold appointed leaders accountable to the dream.

But this is not a sermon about patriots; it's about believers. I think that William Sloane Coffin's three kinds of patriotism also apply to religion. Religion is nothing more than an attempt to organize our thoughts about God, to give us a framework for our beliefs. That framework might be Judaism, Islam, Wicca, Hinduism; for us it is Christianity and the church, in all of its different manifestations it is our government – creating the rules and doctrines, and deciding what constitutes belonging and salvation.

When I read Coffin's quote, I knew I wanted to preach about it and then I realized Jesus' parable of the sower and the three different kinds of soil was saying the same thing. I love it when that happens! I think that the thin rocky soil, where no seeds can establish strong roots, are the uncritical lovers approach to one's faith. Shallow faith is always at risk of being scorched or washed away by doubt and contradiction. Without strong roots, which tether us to the deeper mystery, we cannot find our way past anything that challenges what we have been

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taught, be it scientific advances which contradict scripture and tradition or contradiction within the Bible itself. Much has been made in the last 20-30 years of the fast growing mega-churches. Throw those seeds out there and see how they sprout very quickly. But they have to be watered furiously with things that our secular culture says are important – including making it all as easy as possible, not asking much of people in the way of true sacrifice, not challenging individualism. Many of these churches—at least the ones that surrounded us in California—have preached a gospel of wealth, claiming that God wants you to have success and the material prizes that come with it and heaven will be even more of that. When those who have been drawn into that message suddenly find that they are underwater on their mortgage and might lose the house, or they have been laid off from work, they stop coming to church because they don't want anyone to know, they feel ashamed and according to the prevailing message, they just might have fallen out of God's favor. That is very thin soil.

Likewise, those who cannot bear criticism of their faith tradition. In 2000, Pope John Paul II offered a big apology. It acknowledged the wrongs done over centuries by those within the church against many groups, Jews, women, other Christians. There was great acclamation for this apology and hope for a renewal. But there was also great consternation within the Vatican hierarchy and among the faithful. Some felt bereft of a sense of infallibility while others worried that it could lead to an examination of ongoing problems through a more critical lens. Belief in an institution can be very thin soil. If the roots cannot get down into the fertile realm of divine cause and purpose, an institution can be exposed as a collection of fallible people, hard to believe in.

Now onto the seeds cast into soil full of thorns – these are the loveless critics. This is the over-simplification of Karl Marx and religion as an opiate for the people. This is Bill Maher, the comedian turned social commentator and his movie *Religulous*. I admit that I have not seen the movie, but from all of the pieces that I have seen, it is an approach to religion that is choked out by thorns. Mr. Maher has sought out the most ridiculous expressions of religion, the craziest representatives and assumes that all Christians believe that the world is 6000 years old. This is a commitment to focusing what is wrong with no attempt to find what is good. A loveless critic if ever there was one.

The truth is that hopefully as we mature, we will all go through a period of separation from the ways that our faith has been taught as spiritual children. We need to ask ourselves if we think that Jesus was important because he could walk on water or because he revealed God in a unique way and continuously invites us into deeper mystery. People are turned off religion when it claims to be something it isn't – the owner of Truth or isn't what it claims to be – a place built on God's unconditional love for each and every one of us.

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But now I want you to consider what good soil looks like. I am planning a kitchen garden at the rectory. I've never undertaken a gardening project like this before and I am learning a lot about what I have to do before I put the first seed in the ground. First I have to know what's there; how much do I know about the dirt in my back yard? I need a soil test. I already know that it will be counterproductive if I go the easy route and just roto-till the soil and allow weeds and thorn to stay where they are. First I have to root them out. Then, taking what I learn from the soil analysis, I have to fill the soil with good things – all of that compost that I'm making – old leaves, coffee grounds and banana peels turn into black gold. The essential goodness of creation returns to give life to something else. And then I need to know how to put things together so herbs, vegetables and flowers support and help each other. Then, and only then, will the garden become all that it can be.

It's the same with the church. This place is a garden and for it to be all that it might be we have to work at it. Starting with, how much do you know about your faith? There's lots to learn, what's in the Bible and how to make sense of it? How did we get from Jesus to now? What is the Episcopal Church and what makes it unique and the right place for someone? Why do we worship the way that we do? What does it mean to be a spiritual being having a human experience? This is in understanding the composition of the soil.

Then how do we know what doesn't belong here and how do we get rid of it? Fear, prejudice, judgmentalism, close-mindedness, smallness of thinking and being, blindness to the wonder of God at work in us. Imagine a community unencumbered by such weeds. William Sloane Coffin would call that being good patriots for our church – being engaged in the lover's quarrel that names our weeds, pulls them out, and keeps moving toward the vision.

Having rooted out the weeds, what nutrients do we put in the soil? How about love, beauty, a sense of mystery and transcendence, joy, curiosity, wonder and compassion? One other critical nutrient is creative restlessness – the call to go beyond where we have been and what we have always done. What else could cause us to bloom? You are the seeds for God's garden and together we help one another burst into glorious flower and when we do, God will proclaim, "Now, that is very good!"

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