

Sermons at St Paul's

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

For many of us who grew up on early Walt Disney animated films (we called them cartoons), the character called Jiminy Cricket was a favorite. In the 1940 cartoon *Pinocchio*, and in several subsequent films, this talking cricket became the official voice of “conscience” for my generation.

Today, we do not hear much about the human quality called conscience. Our public discussion focuses more on the relationship of ethics and law. This reflects the growing tendency of our 21st century culture to professionalize everything. Ethics are basically professional standards of good and bad conduct.

But our lessons today point us back to the deep relationship of law, morals and finally, our own conscience. So let's spend some time this morning thinking about them.

In the selection from Deuteronomy, the Israelites who are becoming a people bound by God's laws – as opposed to slaves dominated by Pharaoh's might—are learning how to accept the discipline of a codified set of laws. In other words, they must learn and accept a written set of rules about behavior and its consequences. They are to memorize and interiorize God's laws, neither adding to them nor subtracting from them. And when they act in accordance with these “statutes and ordinances” and can expect their fellow Israelites to do the same, they will earn the reputation of a “wise and discerning people.” They will become something unique, a law-abiding nation with a set of God-given guidelines for behavior.

Then in verse nine, the writer adds a caution: ***“but take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind...”*** And there, friends, we have the stirrings of conscience.

In our Epistle, we have another celebration of living as God's people by following God's gift of law, but this time it is focused on doing “generous acts of giving.” How we act is as important as knowing what the law of God is. So we are to care for widows and orphans, the poverty-stricken and needy. If we just congratulate ourselves that we know what the law of God is and do not act on it in God's world, we may think we are religiously righteous, but we are fooling ourselves. ***“The implanted word that has the***

power to save your souls” will be our guide for action. Ah – sounds like the voice of conscience again, doesn’t it?

So we are beginning to see a distinction between knowing and doing based on God’s laws. We become aware of the gift God has planted in our hearts that allows us to judge whether our actions are congruent with God’s desire for us and for Creation. Whether we call it Jiminy Cricket or conscience, or as our Quaker Friends describe it as “inner light,” we know this early warning system exists.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus starkly contrasts the legal experts of his time and his followers, whom he asks to keep his Way of Love. He says that they have turned the laws of God into a human tradition of laws. They give lip-service to the tradition, but their hearts do not serve Love. The legalistic criticize those who eat in hunger without washing their hands, but they do not bring food to feed the hungry.

Listen, says Jesus, pay more attention to what a person does than to how or what another person eats. Like the writer of Deuteronomy, he urges the crowd to watch themselves closely , and pay attention to how their hearts are guiding their actions. The evil actions that emerge from the human heart are far more dangerous than the type of food we eat.

When we “watch ourselves closely” and live by “the implanted word”, we pay attention to that mysterious quality we call conscience. OK, so what is a conscience? It’s a simple word from Latin roots, meaning with (*con*) knowledge (*science*). It is also a concept that has had thousands of words written about it by religious teachers and moral philosophers, because you can’t see it.

The paradoxical thing about conscience is that it is the individual response to an external set of legal or moral laws. My conscience is not the same as yours. Unlike a codified set of statutes, regulations and ordinances established as the rules by which society will function or a church will be governed, conscience is an internal, personal early warning system that tells us when our actions do not match what we know to be right.

Did you see the very cute little video that has been making the rounds in the last couple of days of the eighteen-month old twin girls in their head-to-head cribs? They are supposed to be taking a nap, but Judy Travis, their mother, can see them on the baby monitor – and they are standing up and playing together. She says: “Hi babies!” over the monitor and the two of them drop into “sleeping” positions as fast as their little bodies can move.

That’s what our consciences do for us. They say “Hi Babies!” when we are about to do something that violates our sense of right and wrong. It does not have to do with

the law—though we may be law-abiding people. And it does not have to do with church teachings – though we may wish to live lives in accordance with what our religious teachings say.

Conscience is that deeply implanted voice that reassures us when we act in accordance with it -- and keeps us awake at three in the morning when we have violated its knowledge. It is “with knowledge” in a way that is deeply personally ours, and we have it almost as a birthright in our hearts. A well-exercised conscience, fed with prayer and good works, will help us deal with those desires and temptations that arise in our hearts, giving us early warning, doubt and hesitation before we can act on them.

This is what Jesus is talking us about. *For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.*

As Paul has said, we will experience temptations we do not want, and do things we wish we had not done. We are human. So perhaps that is why we have been given this gift or goad called conscience. If it cannot prevent us from falling into sin, it will work its inner work until we are led to confess our faults and seek reconciliation. Our consciences know that we are not perfect, and Jesus promises us that with true repentance, we will be forgiven and can begin again – seventy times seven, at the very least.

Conscience is at the heart of the prayer that Jesus taught us: Forgive us our sins and we forgive those who have sinned against us. If it can't keep us out of trouble, it will help us confess and make amends. And in the end, it will bring us back to the table where we receive Jesus into our hearts and souls.

Oh yes, says Jiminy Cricket. *“Just give a little whistle, and always let your conscience be your guide!”*

Amen.