

### *5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, B*

Deep inside of every one of us is a little voice that speaks to us about matters of right and wrong. When we take certain actions, the little voice says to us that we ought to do this or we ought not to do that. When life is viewed in retrospect, the little voice commends us for some things we have done and condemns us for others. We, of course, call that little voice our conscience.

Some people make light of it. Someone has said, “A clear conscience is nothing more than a poor memory.” Still others take conscience in all seriousness and look at it as an unfailing authority. The truth, of course, lies somewhere in between. Conscience is not a joke to be laughed out of court, but neither is it a god before which we should bow in strict obedience.

Our reading today from First John says, “No matter what our consciences may charge us with, God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.” In other words, your conscience or mine is not the final authority on matters of moral and ethical behavior. That place belongs to God alone. So it is altogether possible that at times the voice of God and the voice of conscience will disagree. Your conscience may accuse you when God approves you, or the other way around. You may have a perfectly clear conscience, when all the while God is disapproving of your attitude or action.

This idea may be disturbing to some. We have believed that conscience is a dependable guide, and here we are suggesting that it can lead us astray. That is like giving a sailor a compass and then telling him that it cannot always be trusted. But that would be the truth. A compass can be off a few vital degrees, and therefore should be periodically checked for

accuracy. So it is with your conscience and mine; if they are going to keep us on course, then we must see to it that they stay on course.

To do that, I would suggest, first of all, that you keep your conscience focused on big issues. Do not allow its tremendous power to get locked-in on trivial matters. John began this part of his letter by telling us to “love in deed and in truth.” Deeds of love and truth are big concerns, about which we should all be careful. But how sad it can be when conscience becomes obsessed with small things, most of which matter little or none at all.

During his public ministry, Jesus had his greatest difficulty with people who were careful about trivialities. They would not think of eating without washing their hands, which may be good hygiene; but to them it was more than that. It was a ceremony with serious moral and spiritual implications. They tithed; they fasted; and they observed the appointed hours of prayer. On one occasion, Jesus got tired of such pettiness and said, “You pay tithes, while neglecting the weightier matters of the law and mercy and good faith.” That is the curse of a misguided conscience. It can be careful about trivialities and all that while ignores the real issues of life.

If someone here is concerned about questions of right and wrong, let me suggest two or three practical tests by which you can run a check on your conscience. One is the test of the golden rule. If this thing that you are doing or planning to do were done to you or someone you love, how would you feel about it? Your answer to that question is a big issue.

Another is the test of sportsmanship. If everybody in the whole world did what you do or neglected what you neglect, what would the impact on society be? How you answer that question will determine whether or not you are dealing with a real issue. But the most reliable test of all is to take your concern into the presence of your best understanding of Christ. Did he ever

deal with it? Was he concerned about it? Are you truly convinced that he would be concerned about it if he were here in the flesh today? Would he approve of it or disapprove? An honest answer to each of those questions would help any of us check the focus of his conscience and keep it concerned with big issues.

One other thing I would suggest, and that is that you keep your conscience warm and kind. The entire tone of our reading is love. John, at one point, reaches back and reminds us of our Lord's commandment to love one another. How important that is in matters of conscience. One of the cruelest things on earth is a conscience that has grown hard and cold.

Remember that scene in John's gospel, when they brought to Jesus the adulterous woman. Her accusers stood there with stones in their hands, ready to kill her. They were eager to enforce the law and to rid the community of sinners. But Jesus had a different view of the matter. First, he dispersed the accusers, and then he said to the woman, "I do not condemn you. Go and sin no more." Does that mean that Jesus had no conscience about the matter? Not at all. Conscience, you see, can move in one of two directions: It can be harsh and condemning, or it can be kind and healing. It can make a person an unfeeling judge, or it can make him a loving savior.

The older brother of the Prodigal Son was a conscientious man. He stayed home and did his job. He obeyed his father's commandments. Yet Jesus used him as an example of what we ought not be. A large part of his problem was a hard conscience. He felt nothing for his disobedient brother but anger. How sad and what a tragic waste of moral energy. Take care, my friend, to keep your conscience warm and merciful, don't let it grow hard and cold.

Conscience is a powerful part of our spiritual life, but it is not perfect. We need to check it once in a while to keep it on course. What about our conscience today? Is it focused on the big issues of life, and is it ready to help instead of condemn? **Amen.**