

July 29, 2018 - Pentecost 10 - Rev. Seth D. Jones

“When did humanity develop a conscience?”

What do the Beatitudes of Jesus have to do with our conscience?”

What does it mean to have a ‘conscience’?

Emanuel Swedenborg, the great 17th century mystic, said “Conscience is God’s presence within us”. Swedenborg believed that, whenever there was a conflict in your conscience, it was God’s presence, the Holy Spirit, telling you to pay attention to what you are about to do and to the situation which surrounds you. Conscience is a deep awareness within us that guides us in our decision-making and in our thinking.

At its simplest, and in most modern understandings, having a conscience means the interior ability to discern right from wrong, but Paul and the early Christians and Swedenborg added another element to what it means to have a conscience. The conscience is that aspect of our being that bears witness, and since conscience is God’s presence within us, it is how we bear witness to the world with the eyes of God.

So a conscience is the presence of God within us which bears witness to the world in such a way that we develop a deeper awareness of how God through us can be present in the world. This is an awareness we must develop and does develop over time.

Our question this morning, though, begins with ‘When did we as human beings develop a conscience?’, and I would answer that by saying we *have had* a conscience from the very beginning of our existence. It is likely that most animals have some form of a conscience. Having a conscience requires self-awareness, which we now know fish, dogs, cats, dolphins, monkeys, birds, and many other advanced creatures have. What differentiates us from most of the animal kingdom is the sense of narrative about ourselves and others, a story we tell ourselves about who we are. We connect actions and thoughts across time and build a moral, political, and religious framework from that story and this allows us to develop and train the conscience we already have. We have no way of knowing if other creatures do this, but I would say the strong candidates would be higher mammals, like great apes, elephants, dolphins, and whales.

In a day and age when truth and fiction, fact and opinion, worldview and partisanship all fight for the top spot in our minds and hearts, the ability to develop our conscience becomes more and more important. Truth, though, can be hard to discern through the smoke and mirrors of the culture and our training. Facts can be fit into alternative narratives to tell a completely different story.

Worldviews become concretized and solid walls built that can never be breached by any external idea. Conscience requires us to go deeper. Conscience requires deep self-reflection and resolve, trusting we are being brought closer to the truth, guiding the decisions we will make. Because, even though our conscience may be God's voice within us, we are still free agents who can and do make decisions. The Holy Spirit may be acting through and with us, but we are still fallen creatures in a fallen world.

Conscience is a deeply individual awareness, and it is developed and finds its meaning in our community of faith. In the Christian way, conscience cannot be just about what is right and wrong; it must also be about who we are and who we are committed to in our deepest being.

Jesus' Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount provide a sharp and bright light into ourselves, and provide an opportunity to form and deepen our conscience of and with God and Christ. The Beatitudes strengthen our conscience by focusing on our identity, our behavior, and how we handle what the world brings to us.

The first four Beatitudes are about the core of our being. The next three are about our attitude toward doing things in the world and for others. The last two are about how we handle the reaction of the world because of who we are.

The core of our being

Jesus begins by telling the crowd who they are at the core of their being. Once chosen by Christ, or once we choose Christ, we are given a new foundation for our being. Jesus tells us in the first four Beatitudes what that foundation is, who we are in Christ. Understanding who we are strengthens our conscience.

As a follower of Jesus, you are poor in Spirit.

Being poor in spirit means you understand, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you are incapable of doing anything, either in this world or in your spiritual life, without God. The motto of my Welsh ancestors is "Without God, without nothing." which is a weird phrasing of this Beatitude. It means that without God, I am nothing. Without God, I can do nothing and anything I have done without God amounts to nothing. The kingdom of Heaven is only available to those who know there is no way to attain the kingdom of Heaven except through the will of God. And isn't that what we pray whenever we say, Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done?

As a follower of Jesus, you mourn.

Paul says in Romans 12: Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another...(15-16a). Comfort is available to us when we put ourselves in positions of mourning with others their sadness and losses. We only know true comfort when we have provided comfort.

The follower of Jesus knows the depths of the world's sadness and suffering. A big part of why we know something of the sadness of the world is because we know how far our own actions and thoughts, our own sin, separate us from God. We mourn for the losses of others, the difficulties of the world, and our distance from God. If we take the Beatitudes seriously, mourning becomes our partner, one of the pillars of our deepest being. We can only walk in mourning because we also know the joy of the comfort of the Lord.

As a follower of Jesus, you are meek.

“Meek” in ancient Greece and in Rome was a word used for self-control. Self-control, in Jesus’ sense here, is humility before God. There is no pride here. Self-control in the Christian sense means God-controlled, or God-empowered. Meekness means recognizing on a deep level that there is really very little we know about the world and others. It means recognizing there is very little we have control over. We have taken “meek” in our day and age to mean “willing to be walked all over.” That is not what I mean here. Meekness in Jesus’ terms means being willing to say, “I don’t know, but I am willing to find out with you.” Meekness means letting go of being right all the time.

Meekness means walking upon the earth with a faint but present sense of God knowing what I do not. We don’t know everything. We know very little. We don’t know enough about much at all. But we do know Christ, and relying on Christ means we know we are heirs, and if heirs, then children of God. That is a good place to begin learning about God and others.

As a follower of Jesus, you hunger and thirst for righteousness.

The words for hunger and thirst here are meant to invoke famine and drought. Jesus means what the Old Testament means by righteousness - justice for the impoverished and downtrodden, the orphans and widows.

Do you hunger and thirst for justice? Not for yourself, but for those who have been disenfranchised and thrown away by our culture. What would justice look like for all those who have been messed up by rapacious banks; for those who have been made homeless by the deliberate and

structured erasure of earning power in our economy; for those who cannot find work even if they have paid their debt to society in prison?

Remember why Jesus came. He tells us in the Gospel of Luke, quoting Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor* (Lk 4:18-19). This is what justice and righteousness looks like.

Do we want the same thing like a starving person wants food, a parched person wants water?

This, then, is who you are as a follower of Christ: *you are an impoverished spirit who must rely completely on God, in mourning for a fallen world, knowing that all you really know is that you are saved by Christ and now all you see is the need for justice everywhere.*

This is the foundation for our conscience. We know *we are residents of the kingdom of heaven who are comforted by the joy of the Lord, who has given us the abundant opportunity to learn at the feet of Christ so we can be people of conscience in this world so that God's righteousness might be seen through us for the benefit of all.*

The attitude with which a follower of Christ does things

Our conscience defines the attitude with which we deal with the world, and the next beatitudes give us insight into that attitude.

Because you follow Christ, you are merciful.

Mercy means walking in the place of another person. Mercy means being willing to find out what another person's world is like. Mercy requires relationship and openness. Mercy requires that we be affected by the experience of others. The attitude of mercy breaks down the walls we have constructed between ourselves and others. "Us" and "them" are no longer applicable categories when we are merciful. Because of our foundation in the first four Beatitudes, we have a pretty good idea of the mercy God has shown us. If we have been shown the mercy of God through Christ, the fullest mercy we show another creature is a mere shadow of the great things God has done for us.

Because you follow Christ, you are pure in heart.

What are your motives for the things you do, the decisions you make, the reasons you say this and do that?

Can any of us say a straight line runs from the temple within where the Spirit resides to our thoughts, actions and words?

How many cross-purposes cut across the path from that place where God plumbs the depths of your soul to the point where you make a decision?

Purity of heart is the great challenge of God-focused people throughout time. The desires of ego and personality are extremely powerful. Many times, we substitute 'ego' and 'personal desire' for God, call the substitution 'God' and then act in full belief we are acting in the name of God. A foundation in holy meekness, in impoverished spirit, in mourning, and hunger and thirst for justice have no place in the cross-purposes of the self. More than any other Beatitude, this one convicts us in the mere saying of it by showing us we are not pure in heart. My anger, my lust, my self-proclaimed need to be right corrupt the purity sought by the Holy Spirit.

Remember the words of Psalm 51: *You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart...Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me* (6,10). Only God's work within us allows us to see God. Only the purity of heart instilled by the Holy Spirit through our baptism allows us any possibility of a straight path from deepest being to outward action and word. Once we have disassembled every block between ourselves and God will we be pure enough to see God.

Because you follow Christ, you are a peace-maker.

I think most people love the idea of peace, but very few want to get into the act of actually making peace. We are, as Paul says, by our Beatitude nature, now ambassadors of Christ and ministers of reconciliation. Our work as children of God is making peace. Not just ending conflict and sectarian separation, but in the positive sense of creating a community of hope and faith and love which builds people up and draws them into the loving embrace of God.

Think about the unspoken corollary here: those who sow conflict and deliberately separate (hate) are not acting as the children of God. Peace, in the biblical sense, is always not just the negation of something, it is also an addition to something. Our intended playground as children of God is the positive presence of peace which engenders fellowship, community and forgiveness.

Mercy, purity of heart, and the desire for peace are the building blocks of the conscience of the Christian.

How we deal with what the world throws at us

Conscience depends on continual refinement by engaging the world, and once we stand for something, there is much in the world that will resist that stand.

Jesus says to the disciples: *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* In America, we don't really know what persecution means. There are those who think persecution means being criticized for ideas or words shouted in public places. Christianity is a religion of deep thought and powerful ideas. Throughout its history, Christians willingly put their ideas and thoughts out into the marketplace of ideas to be argued against, challenged and reasoned about. If we claim persecution every time a Christian is argued against, then we willfully abdicate our chair in the throne-room of great ideas.

No, arguments against the faith are not persecution. Persecution looks like the destruction of a cathedral in Mosul, Iraq. Persecution looks like the imprisoned missionary in Turkey, who was to be released and now isn't. Persecution looks like people burning books in Africa. The danger in claiming the label of being persecuted is that it is often a cover for the willful persecution of others. We claim persecution so we can persecute.

Jesus calls us to expect that the tail of the beast will swing around and catch us up in it. When persecution and actual censorship of the faith comes, Jesus has given us a foundation in the Beatitudes for how to face it. We know ourselves to be, first and foremost, residents of the kingdom of heaven, not of this world. We are pilgrims passing through this veil of tears. We also know that a foundation in the Beatitudes is one that brings joy, peace and hope, not only for ourselves but also for others. That is why persecution leads to blessedness and when it comes our way, we respond with gladness and rejoicing, even while actively trying to end it.

This is the fire of refinement that our conscience at once seeks to be exposed to and at the same time seeks to discern the presence of God and what is most needed in the conflict.

The Beatitudes redefine who we are. Paul says in our reading from Romans that our conscience is an innate part of us - a God-given gift to come closer to the truth of God in the world, whether we have the Law in words or not. Conscience must be developed, however, trained and guided. Through that training and guidance by way of the Beatitudes, we become aware that our conscience is the presence of God within us, and that the decisions we make bear witness to the world, for better or worse, with the eyes of God.

Luther called this awareness a “Little Christ” and the more we deepen our understanding the more like Christ we become. Let us all become Little Christs in the way we know ourselves to be, in how we act in the world, and how we receive the troubles and conflicts of the world.

Amen.