

A Good Conscience

A sermon by the Rev. Robert B. Edson, in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Rogation Sunday, April 27, 2008.

Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. 1 Peter 3:16

Today is traditionally known as Rogation Sunday, coming from the Latin, *rogare*, to ask, when people in rural times asked God's blessing upon their recently planted crops. Today we may ask God's blessing on our newly planted flower or vegetable gardens. Even in business and professional life, we may ask God's blessing upon any new project, a start-up business or new enterprise for which we ask God's blessing and guidance.

There is theological basis for the church being concerned about the environment. The Bible says that we have been given dominion over the earth. This does not mean that we are to consume and destroy the earth and all God's creatures, but have the responsibility to conserve the gifts of the earth that God has entrusted to us. Each of us in our own world can and must do our part to maintain the delicate balance in the ecology of our environment. It is all a matter of having an informed conscience about what is expected of us as caretakers of the gifts of God's earth.

Jesus' reference to himself as the vine and us as the branches illustrates our mutual interdependence through caring and nurturing and supporting each other to make us fruitful and productive. Those of who are planting gardens know that we can't just stick a plant in the ground and ignore it. We have to cultivate, feed and prune for it to grow into fruition.

In the letter of St. Peter today, we read that we must always follow our conscience and do what is right, even if we are maligned for doing it. It is better to suffer for doing what is good than to suffer for doing evil. This is the basis for the Christian ethic to do the right and loving thing in each and every situation. The Ten Commandments are a good beginning, but rules and regulations can't cover every situation in guiding and directing us. We can't rely on being told what to do in each and every situation. The Christian faith is based not on laws, but on grace. This is why the Bible is far more than a set of rules. We are expected to use our minds and use our sense of judgment based upon a reasonably sound conscience. We aren't born with an innate conscience, it must be learned. Those who commit crimes for which they show little or no remorse appear to have no conscience about the right and wrong of harming others.

In the Ten Commandments we are told not to steal, but if a person has gone berserk and is running around with a hunting knife threatening to harm someone, I would have no problem stealing that weapon from him before he hurts someone. We are told not to bear false witness, but in times of persecution of ethnic groups, I would not give away a family in hiding that was a target of genocide. We are told not to kill, but it might be necessary in self defense or keeping someone else from being harmed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Protestant pastor and theologian in Nazi Germany took part in the plot to kill Hitler and stop the madness. Bonhoeffer was arrested and sent to a prison camp and was executed just three days before the camp was liberated by the American forces.

When a person tries to make himself look better than others by following a strict code of rules, he is missing the point. Legalism leads to self-righteousness. An informed

conscience takes into consideration the importance of our inner attitude and our motivation in our relationship to God and each other.

St. Augustine said, "Love and do as you please." That sounds dangerous, but what he meant is that if you really know what it means to love, you will be pleased to do what love demands in every situation. The kind of love we are talking about is agape love, the self-giving love of God that seeks the good of others over our own. Self-giving love is an essential part an informed conscience. It means loving God with all our heart, soul and mind and loving our neighbor as we would love or respect our self. When agape love permeates our whole being, it enables us to love the unlovable and to forgive the unforgivable.

For me, an informed conscience is what keeps me aware of the appropriate boundaries in relationships. It enables me to grapple with complex problems regarding politics and war and business ethics. In striving to do the right and loving thing in each and every situation, we may not receive any reward and may even be reviled for it. Love demands that we strive to do the right thing anyway.

Mother Teresa, who persevered in doing her in her work with the poorest of the poor, left these memorable lines that speak to this point:

People are unreasonable, ill logical and self centered; love them anyway.

If you do good people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives; do good anyway.

The good you do may be forgotten tomorrow; do it anyway.

What you spend years building up may be destroyed overnight; build anyway.

People who need help may attack you if you help them; help them anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you may get kicked in the teeth; give the best you have anyway.