

"What Does the Lord Require of Us?"

Micah 6:6-8

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June 11, 2023

Last month, 37-year-old Tony Peralta borrowed a phone, called police and tearfully confessed to a secret that had been eating away at him for almost 15 years- the murder of his landlord in Roswell, New Mexico in December, 2008. "I'm just tired of covering it up," Peralta said. "I'm tired of living with my life, sir," adding that it was his guilt that drove him to call in the first place. Throughout those years, Peralta had been considered a suspect but because there was no body, no one was arrested and the case eventually grew cold. The victim, William Blodgett, had gone to see Peralta to evict him from the premises but he never returned home.

Later in the interview room, Peralta admitted to the detective, "I killed somebody, dude. I killed him with a screwdriver." He repeatedly confessed to Blodgett's killing, even telling authorities the weapon he used and where he buried the victim's body. "I confess. I don't want to live life anymore without confessing. A lot of people have an excuse, but I don't have one. He was always good to me and I took his life for no reason." For his act of conscience, Peralta now faces a first-degree murder charge and the possibility of spending the rest of his life behind bars.

Well, if TOO FORCEFUL or STRINGENT a conscience can sometimes be a troublesome thing, no LESS problematic can be TOO WEAK a conscience, or worse still, to lose one's conscience ALTOGETHER- to no longer possess a sense of fairness, of what's right and what's wrong, to lose an awareness of our accountability before God and our neighbors. Honestly speaking, that's something I worry about in my OWN life. I see how easy it is for me to get caught up in my OWN needs, my OWN hurts, my OWN activities and projects that I forget to take notice of ANYBODY ELSE'S tragedy and pain. Day after day, week after week, from the lead stories on the nightly news to the front page of our national newspapers, we are continuously confronted with the images of the dead and wounded in the Ukraine, the victims of gun-on-gun violence in our inner cities, another report of a mass killing in one of our children's schools, the sight of homeless people huddled over open grates, the casualties of auto accidents, plane crashes, and assorted natural disasters, to the extent we are no longer shocked by it, to where it no longer provokes any kind of response in us.

For instance, last week on TV, I saw a report on how at least 275 persons were killed and more than a thousand others injured after a passenger train in India slammed into a parked freight train and I hardly blinked an eye over it. Then reading how in Darfur, Western Africa, genocidal violence has led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of its inhabitants due to civil war that has raged there for the past twenty years, I found myself casually turning the page with the same ease as I would the local sports section. It seems the human psyche can only absorb so much after which we are forced to turn it off and tune it out. Which of us doesn't change the

channel when one of those appeals from the Christian Children's Fund comes on displaying all those pictures of starving kids? Which of us doesn't turn our head when we pass a homeless person hunched over on a street corner or stepped over a helpless drunk sprawled across the sidewalk? I venture to say we ALL do! It isn't until something affects us PERSONALLY that the brutality of life and the tragic nature of the world then hits home- when a parent is mugged, a brother is murdered, a sister succumbs to drugs, or a child becomes another hit-and-run statistic.

The fact is that it is quite common for us to be a very selfish, self-absorbed people who think of little else than our OWN problems and concerns- oblivious to so many GREATER tragedies going on all around us. This is the result of what the early Protestant Reformers like Luther and Calvin referred to as "curvitas en se" or the heart curving in upon itself so that we end up caring exclusively about ourselves and our own situation at the expense of the tragedy and pain others may be experiencing. For the reformers, such turning inward was viewed as the essence of all sin, the origin of all our pride, selfishness, and neglect.

Almost half a century ago, social critic Christopher Lasch published what has since become a classic- *The Culture of Narcissism*, in which he carefully examined our society and our values only to discover how we are becoming more a nation totally absorbed with ourselves. A few years after that, sociologist Robert Bellah published HIS widely discussed bestseller- *Habits of the Heart* in which he described a society that is becoming less and less social and communal in nature, and instead more and more solitary and independent. America has become a nation that is progressively "curving in" upon itself and as a result our VALUES are becoming more "curved in" AS WELL.

Let me give you an example. Back in the mid-80s, Michael Milken was known as the king of junk bonds who during one four-year period alone earned over a billion dollars. His example inspired scores of young college students with newly-minted M.B.A.'s to go to work for stock brokerage firms with dreams of becoming the NEXT Michael Milken or Ivan Boesky. However, it was eventually revealed that the fortunes of both men were in fact ill-gotten- the result of securities fraud and insider trading which led to long prison sentences and being fined hundreds of million dollars for their crimes. Not long afterwards, John Stossel of ABC's *20/20* interviewed a leading business ethicist who was in the business of advising corporations on the morality of their business and financial practices. He asked him, "Which person do you think has done more good for the world- Michael Milken or Mother Teresa?" Without batting an eyelash, the ethicist responded "Michael Milken, unquestionably! Where Mother Teresa may have touched a few helpless kids in India, Milken was responsible for the junk bond revolution which helped pull such companies like Chrysler and Disney from the brink of possible bankruptcy." Stossel was FLOORED by his response. Needless to say, it would be a mistake to blame people like Milken and Boesky for being the cause when they were merely SYMPTOMS of what has become a growing cancer in our national psyche, an ethic that proclaims you must "GET what you can, WHILE you can, and as FAST as you can REGARDLESS how you do it!"

You'll often hear me say how the church must be "the conscience of our culture." I believe that as Christians, each of us has a summons to courageously point out the deficiencies

and abuses within our society or the world at large wherever and whenever they present themselves. But what happens when the church can NO LONGER take a stand, when as Christians we fail to critique the society we live in or the greater world at large because our OWN conscience is far too dull to recognize the conditions of neglect and injustice all around her? This would be a terrible judgment, for I am convinced that a Christian without a conscience ceases to be Christian ALTOGETHER!

Former Republican Senator Mark Hatfield, a devout Christian, once wrote in his bestselling memoir *Conflict and Conscience*:

*We as evangelicals must regain sensitivity to the corporateness of human life-- we must become sensitive to issues of social morality as well as to issues of private morality. We must learn to repent of and respond to collective guilt as well as individual guilt. This becomes increasingly important as the structures of life become more interdependent and interrelated. An ethic which deals solely with personal mores is singularly inadequate if it fails to deal with war, poverty, and racial antagonism as well.*

Senator Hatfield was saying, of course, that the Church of Jesus Christ must REMAIN the conscience of our culture and society, that our interests must extend beyond mere private ones to the community and nation at large. It was the British historian Arnold Toynbee who theorized that nineteen out of the twenty-one great civilizations deteriorated from within rather than being conquered by an external power. Today, the greatest threat to our future remains NOT FROM OUTSIDE the United States but rather from WITHIN- from a spiritual malaise that has left many of us bored and apathetic about our current condition and the promise of the future. The American conscience is rapidly becoming dulled to much of the social abuse and neglect that goes on around us. It's not that we Americans are a bad people, but rather, a people who are losing the capacity and will to care. As the saying goes, "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do absolutely nothing!"

As members of Christ's Church, we MUST keep our consciences sharp and clear and tender before God and our fellow man. We must fight each day against the temptation to become cynical or pessimistic or uncaring. We mustn't surrender to the worst instincts and prejudices and fears within our country as are expressed in so much of the anti-gay or anti-immigration or anti-Muslim talk coming from certain quarters of the media. We must remain ever vigilant with a heart towards God and our own people, ever willing to confront injustice and oppression when it is directed towards our weaker brethren. This must be CENTRAL to our calling as Christians, as the people of God.

This morning's text is one of the best loved verses in all the Bible. To ask what it is God desires of us is one of the most important questions we can ever raise. It was uttered by a minor prophet who had been given a major message more than seven hundred years before the birth of Christ. Micah had come from a small village where he gained notoriety for the fearlessness in which he spoke truth to power. He courageously spoke out on behalf of poor farm workers who were suffering at the hands of the powerful landlords. Thus he became the voice of the worker and that of common people everywhere. He understood all-too-well that justice would never

come from the state or the ruling power structures. They were far-too concerned with amassing power and riches and comfort for themselves than to take interest in the concerns and needs of the common laborer. Rather, TRUE reform would have to arise from the people THEMSELVES and only insofar as they remained obedient to their God who would lead them in their struggle. All God asked of them was that they practice justice and love kindness and walk humbly before him and all persons; God would do the rest. The closer they came to embodying and living out these three principles in their relationships to one another, the more peace, happiness and harmony they and their society would enjoy.

As Christians, we are currently at the forefront of many battles- struggles on behalf of the poor and the rest who are pushed to the margins of our society; struggles on behalf of the elderly who are often our forgotten citizens; those on behalf of the handicapped for whom the easiest tasks become a great struggle; those on behalf of minorities whose only sin was they were not born white and of European ancestry; those on behalf of the homeless, the imprisoned, and the mentally ill.; those on behalf of gays and lesbians and the transgendered who are constantly threatened with violence and discriminated against. We must NO LESS be willing to speak out on behalf of our planet and making it more livable as well as sustainable for future generations.

Just this past week, Pope Francis--inspired by the words of ANOTHER prophet, Amos-- chose "let justice and peace flow" as the theme for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, which he established in 2015. In his address, he condemned "consumerist greed" and "selfish hearts" as responsible for the climate crisis, declaring that modern societies, more interested in profit than in future generations, are responsible for the disharmony between humanity and the environment. He said, "Consumerist greed, fueled by selfish hearts, is disrupting the planet's water cycle. The unrestrained burning of fossil fuels and the destruction of forests are pushing temperatures higher and leading to massive droughts. Alarming water shortages increasingly affect both small rural communities and large metropolises." Such change can only occur through the transformation of "our hearts, our lifestyles" that take place when we first repent of what he called "our ecological sins."

The church MUST BE WILLING TO STAND IN THE BREACH AND BE THEIR SUPPORTERS for often, we are the ONLY advocates they have. And we CAN if only our consciences remain SHARP, if our notions of what is right and what is wrong remain CLEAR AND UNAMBIGUOUS. This requires that we recognize the deep spiritual roots from which our conscience springs. Over two hundred years ago, the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant's stated that two great realities that never stopped fascinating him were the starry heavens above and the human conscience deep within. The conscience is that spiritual organ implanted by God within the human soul to speak to us. Through it, God reminds each of us that we are part of his creation and thus wholly accountable to him. It is through the conscience that God tells us what is fair and what is not, what is right and what is wrong. It reminds us how our highest obligation is not to another man or to the state but foremost to GOD. Without these moral intuitions, we would forget there even IS a God.

But it ISN'T ENOUGH to allow our conscience to be formed and molded by SOCIETY ALONE for our conscience often reflects the same values and interests as that of the society we live in. What if the values and customs espoused by it are corrupt or immoral? For centuries, people in our country believed that slavery was an acceptable practice because that's what they were taught; the morality of it was bred into them. It was only when Christians took a stand and declared from their pulpits that such a system was evil, that the Bible teaches because we are all created in the image of God, each one of us is not only EQUAL before him but, as our Heavenly Father, we are no less BROTHERS AND SISTERS TO ONE ANOTHER. Only THEN did the abolitionist cause take off and precipitate the eventual end of slavery in our nation.

No, if we fall into the error of letting our culture ALONE to develop our conscience for us, we can just about excuse and make acceptable ANY philosophy or form of behavior. This is why our conscience must be SPIRITUALLY shaped and developed. It must be grounded in the scriptures as the only reliable guide upon which to base our lives. By humbly sitting before it and thinking upon certain scriptures and meditating upon their meaning, it begins to transform us from within- altering our attitudes, changing our desires. It is a fact that the Word of God at work in us over a period of years starts to transform our character more and more gradually into the character and personality of Christ himself.

And if Bible reading is important for educating our conscience, so too is reflection and prayer and the worship of God with the rest of his Church. Our conscience must always remain connected to the power source which is God himself. Without God to refresh and replenish our faith through prayer, the Christian conscience can easily dry up into rigid self-righteousness. The rediscovery of the Bible, the return to prayer, and the recovery of worship and the spiritual life are central to the survival and maintenance of the Christian's conscience.

Friends, we must continue to exercise our conscience, to keep it clear and sharp and sensitive that we might hear the summons of our Lord and respond to it whenever we are confronted by the abuses, the neglect, and the injustices within our society. We can't sit quietly on the sidelines waiting for God to raise up ANOTHER Micah to boldly speak his word or ANOTHER Dorothy Day or Martin Luther King or Caesar Chavez willing to courageously advance the interests of peace and human rights when God ALREADY HAS- God does so in and through EACH ONE OF US. Yes, YOU AND ME- WE are now Micah; WE are now Amos. Each of US has been summoned to be that voice for justice and peace, and NOT because we happen to be liberal or conservative, a Republican or a Democrat, but because it is GOD'S WILL for us, because we are COMMANDED TO in the Bible, and because with a conscience MUCH SENSITIZED through reflection and prayer, we can do no other. Let us pray...

*Loving God, lead us beyond ourselves to care and protect, to nourish and shape, to challenge and energize both the life and the world you have given us. Lead us through this time of spiritual confusion and public uncertainty, beyond all our fear and apathy to new hope in you with hearts full of faith. Grant your Church the courage to confront those things that compromise our conscience that we might challenge that which is wrong and change it, whatever the cost to ourselves. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*