

6th Sunday of Easter A (Mother's Day)
John 14:15-21
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus says, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. Let's pray: ...

Who remembers, Pinocchio? Pinocchio is a fictional character created by Italian writer, Carlo Collodi in 1883. He's a wooden marionette [puppet] carved by a woodcarver named Geppetto. Pinocchio dreams of becoming a real boy one day, and is best known for his long nose which grows when he lies. Walt Disney Productions adapted the story introducing to us, Jiminy Cricket, whose task it is to keep Pinocchio on the straight and narrow. We could say that Jiminy Cricket acts as Pinocchio's conscience.

Our conscience is an intrinsic guide that helps us to distinguish between moral safety and moral hazard. Jesus talks about another inner guide whom he calls the Advocate. Jesus says: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you" (John 14:16-17). This Advocate is the Holy Spirit.

You and I are people of the Holy Spirit. We were baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son † and of the Holy Spirit. We were born anew of water and the spirit, transferred from the realm of this world to God's eternal kingdom. With the laying on of hands and prayers we received the gifts of the Spirit, were anointed by the Spirit, were sealed in the Spirit, and marked by the cross of Christ forever. It's the Holy Spirit who calls us to remember all that Jesus taught. It's the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith, and through life in the Spirit, we're encouraged, strengthened and led.

Saints, it's important for us to co-operate with the Holy Spirit's advances to build faith and power in us. Why? In order that we may proclaim God's gospel of saving grace to others, and, be reassured of it ourselves. We must be guided by our conscience. Luther valued the importance of this relationship between the Spirit and our conscience so highly, that when he was instructed by the Roman Catholic Church to withdraw his writings he replied: "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."

However, caution is necessary. The conscience can sometimes go very wrong. Think of St Paul. He acted according to his conscience when he persecuted the early Christians. Throughout history, many people have been massacred in religious crusades, pogroms, and jihads—all in the name of truth and in the name of God. Two examples:

1. German Nobel laureate, Gunter Wilhelm Grass, was a practicing Catholic during the time when Jewish synagogues were destroyed and Jewish people were exiled or sent to concentration camps in WW2. He said he never remembered a single word about the fate of the Jewish people in church or heard a single prayer for them. He did remember praying each week for the Fuhrer and the victory of the German armies.

The conscience of the Christians allowed them to persecute the Jews, take away their property, even send them to death camps. Their conscience wasn't being guided by the Spirit of truth; rather, the spirit of the father of lies.

2. Martin Niemoller was a prominent Lutheran pastor in Berlin during the Nazi regime. He played a crucial role in organising the Confessing Church to resist Adolf Hitler's interference in German Evangelical Church affairs. Niemoller was persecuted and eventually imprisoned by the Nazis but for too long he remained silent in the face of injustice. His poem, *First They Came*, was penned from bitter personal experience:

First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me

Even for Christians, it's possible to so dull our conscience, that we numb ourselves to the point of silence regarding injustice, bigotry, corruption, exploitation; worse, salvation. If we're to be guided by our conscience, we must make sure that the spirit within us is the same Holy Spirit promised by Jesus. The Spirit will always point us to the Lord, direct us according to God's Word, enable us to witness to the love of God. We must test our inner urgings against the external Word. We've been promised the Advocate. God's Spirit will never contradict God's Word. God's Spirit will always glorify God and be true to Christ.

The Holy Spirit is often called the "shy member of the Trinity." Shy because Holy Spirit always points us to Christ. The work of the Spirit enables us to believe, to understand, to be strong enough to follow the Lord. The Spirit keeps bringing us back to the real Jesus who loved and died for all people. For sure, Jesus condemned sin, but never, ever condemned the sinner. Jesus ate with tax-collectors and publicans, welcomed the outcast, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, cast out demons, restored relationships. It's the Spirit of truth who shows us that grace is more powerful than the law. It's the Spirit who reminds us that the gospel is freedom not bondage; forgiveness not rejection; wholeness not brokenness. It's the Spirit who works in our conscience and alerts us when our conscience obstructs God's will.

You see, Satan specializes in high quality knock-offs. He cunningly lures a person into being moral and upright, proud and self-righteous - having no need for God. Plenty of people live clean and wholesome lives, yet, fall short of God's intention for them. They may follow their conscience but forget their relationship with God.

Whereas, Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," (John 14:15). It's good to keep the commandments, but note that first, Jesus talks about loving him. Many in Jesus' day kept the law meticulously so as not to break the commandments; yet, their hearts seemed to be far from God. I fear there's little difference today as people seek to be "right" according to their opinion, but show little enthusiasm for "righteousness" – those things approved of or accepted by God according to his grace, love, and mercy.

Jesus wants us to focus more on the spirit of the law than the letter of the law. St Augustine knew this well when he said, "Love God and do what you want." If we love Jesus, we'll lead lives in accordance with God's love. The law never makes us righteous, it always condemns. Paul understood that the law makes us rebellious when he said that the law made sin increase all the more (Romans 5:20). Luther understood it too. He said, "A good man does what is right by his very nature. What a foolish man that would be who gave an apple tree a book of rules and laws about how to grow apples and not thorns when the tree naturally knows how to do that better than all the books can describe or command. In the same way, all Christians have it in their very nature to do good and right, more than all the laws can teach them."

Friends, it's important to do good. It's important to love God and live life with God. It's important to let our Holy Spirit guided conscience, lead us. The gift of the Holy Spirit is given to us so that we might know the will of God and do it. The Spirit of truth is greater than custom or tradition, common knowledge or common sense. It may be opposed to what our conscience tells us—especially when it's numbed and dumbed by worldly concerns or evil influence. Or, it may be that the little voice within us urges us to remember Jesus, to recall his words, actions, promises, love, and sacrifice. God hasn't left us orphaned but sent the Holy Spirit to be our guide, keep us in faith, reassure us of Jesus' presence, and bring us to eternal life. To God be all glory, honour, and praise. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.