

Lectionary 14 A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

July 9, 2017

Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30; Psalm 45:7

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Our second reading this morning. The Apostle Paul. The Letter to the Romans. *“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”* Paul is talking about the struggle to be a good person. The struggle to do what is right.

Christians can be divided into two groups. The people who possess what modern psychologists call the *scrupulous conscience*. And the people who possess what modern psychologists call the *robust conscience*. The *scrupulous conscience* is the conscience of a person who feels guilty a lot of the time. That person has *scruples*. They are sensitive and disturbed by life. The *robust conscience* is the conscience of a person who feels pretty good about themselves and about life. The person with a *scrupulous conscience* feels guilty a lot of the time. The person with a *robust conscience* feels okay most of the time.

In Christianity, there has been a constant tension between those who have a scrupulous conscience and those who have a robust conscience. I say “constant tension.” But at times it has nearly been all-out war. And arguably, there are two entirely different versions of Christianity that co-exist alongside each other. The Christianity of the scrupulous consciences. And the Christianity of the robust consciences.

Lutherans are decidedly a religion of the scrupulous conscience. *“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”* Paul says that very clearly today. I want to be a good person. But I keep doing the opposite of what I should do in order to be a good person. Paul expresses this in terms of an alien power, a force that has taken partial control of me. Sin. He writes, “if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

I am a Lutheran, perhaps even a staunch Lutheran. I have a scrupulous conscience. I look in the mirror and I do not see a good person. I try to be a good person, and I fail. Over and over and over. Once again, let me quote our second reading: *“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”* I think anyone who has tried to lose weight or who has tried to give up smoking understands this. I *know* that I would be better off without the extra pounds. I *know* that I would be better off without cigarettes. But I find that it is very, very hard to do the things that I ought to do. I want to be healthy, but I fail in my endeavors. To quote Jesus: *“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”* There is a part of me that sees the good and knows the good and

wants the good. But I lack the willpower to get there. Paul says that there are two parts of me. One part that wants to be good. And another part that resists being good.

Of course, being good has involves more than having healthy habits. Being good involves community and family, responsibility and kindness. Being good means caring about the poor. Taking responsibility for climate change. Protecting the vulnerable. Overcoming sexism and racism in society and in myself. In all of these things, the people with a scrupulous conscience feel inadequate and feel guilty.

The person with the robust conscience feels good about themselves. They look in the mirror and see a good person. They see a person who does not commit homicide, and who does not commit adultery, and who is therefore in compliance with the Ten Commandments. They feel good, they feel righteous, they feel justified. They are not “*that* guy.” And when they see humans who fail to do a good job— the people who fall down in their responsibilities— toward them, the Christians with a robust conscience can be pretty judgmental.

As I said, there are conceivably two different forms of Christianity in existence. That was clear in the disputes around the year 400 between Augustine and a British theologian named Pelagius. Augustine believed that for human beings, it was impossible to not sin. Pelagius believed that it was a possibility— and therefore it was a human responsibility— to *earn* salvation by refusing to sin. The official Church sided with Augustine, and Pelagius was declared a heretic by the council of Ephesus in 431. But Pelagianism and its imitators lived on for centuries and in some sense are still with us today. For most of church history, the teachers and leaders of Christianity have been advocates of the scrupulous conscience. While I suspect the robust conscience has remained popular with ordinary people. *On the surface of things*, it’s easy to believe that there are good people and bad people, and that choosing to be a good person is as simple as choosing a pair of shoes. This is, after all, the way most of us rear children.

But God sees deep inside of us, beneath the surface of things. God looks into our motivations, and the church of the scrupulous conscience knows this. The two most famous and most influential Christians of the scrupulous conscience are Augustine and Martin Luther— who, more than a millenium after Augustine, was an Augustinian friar and was influenced by Augustine. Augustine and Luther were deeply affected by Paul’s letter to the Romans. And this very same passage which is in front of us this morning.

Augustine believed that the Church was sort of a hospital, and that over time, the Holy Spirit would help us to become less and less enslaved to the power of sin. Augustine’s famous prayer to God was: “Command what you will, and give what you command.” A prayer that God will make known his will, and then give the believer assistance in obeying that will. It’s a prayer that acknowledges God’s supremacy, but also seeks God’s help. The prayer was published and that, more than anything, set off Pelagius, the man with the robust conscience. He said that God would make known his will, and that we should obey God’s will on our own. That we don’t need any divine help in doing the right thing.

So Augustine takes a long-haul view of Christian character. Where Paul says that *I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do,*” Augustine’s view is that the fortunate Christians very slowly improve. The Holy Spirit and the care of the soul in the Church make it possible for us to become what God intends. Augustine believes that conversion is not something that happens in order to make you a Christian. You become a Christian so that God will convert you over time. Augustine’s view is congruent with today’s gospel reading. We have a master, but HIS yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

Martin Luther, also reading this portion of Romans, taught that even though we struggle with sin we are granted the status of a saint for Christ, by Christ, and through Christ. We are both saints and sinners— Luther’s famous Latin phrase is *simul justus et peccator*. Luther believed that the gift of forgiveness would itself make us better people. So although I look at myself in the mirror and see a person who is not the person he really ought to be, Luther thinks that God’s grace will free me from man in the mirror, and turn my attention to my neighbor and to the creation. I won’t ever be perfect, not in this life. But Luther thinks I can be freed by God from my own self, and be freed for the sake of God’s world.

The *scrupulous* conscience and the *robust* conscience. The scrupulous conscience on display in our second reading shapes the kind of Christianity that the Lutheran tradition represents. Broadly speaking, the Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions are also religions of the scrupulous conscience. We are called to look deeply at our own selves and our own lives. We are called to be honest about our true limitations and our true motivations. We are called to rely on the mercy and assistance of God. Our faith is not in our selves. Our faith is in God, and as our psalm refrain tells us this morning, God is gracious and full of compassion. Amen.