

**THE VOICE OF CONSCIENCE**  
**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan**  
**University Public Worship**  
**Stanford Memorial Church**  
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This morning I'd like to talk with you about the voice of conscience. My perhaps surprising conclusion is that there's no such thing. Instead, I think we should be substituting for the concept of conscience something called moral conscientiousness, which has to do not with internal commands or universal rules but with imaginative inquiry and lived stories.

Let's start by reviewing today's Old Testament or Hebrew Scripture reading from First Samuel.<sup>i</sup> Samuel's mother was Hannah, who had been barren and felt bereft and oppressed since her husband had taken another wife, who then produced sons and daughters for him and lorded it over Hannah. Today's reading is Hannah's song of praise, celebrating the gift of her child and God's magnificent power in having made it possible. The theology of the poem is that God directly controls human destiny – bringing to life and killing, making some rich and others poor, exalting some and bringing others low. God's omnipotence is forcefully affirmed,<sup>ii</sup> and human conscience is exercised by aligning with God, the Rock, and the one who weighs all actions.<sup>iii</sup> God “will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail... The Lord will judge the ends of the earth.”<sup>iv</sup>

In the gospel lesson from Mark,<sup>v</sup> written at least 600 years and perhaps more than 1,000 years after the composition of Hannah's song,<sup>vi</sup> Jesus is cited as predicting the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem because the people of Israel have not been faithful to God. Jesus speaks in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, who are not so much fortunetellers or soothsayers as those who diagnose the current moral health of the people. Their prophetic words of judgment

are intended to promote repentance and reform in the present. Destruction will only occur if words of warning are not heeded.<sup>vii</sup> Jesus also warns about false prophets who will come in his name and lead people astray. “Beware that no one leads you astray,” he tells his disciples. Jesus instructs them on how to conduct themselves in the midst of wars and turmoil, within days of his own arrest and crucifixion. He wants them to be willing to testify to his gospel, even though they’ll face persecution for it. So, hearing the voice of conscience in this case will be remembering Jesus’s instructions on how to conduct oneself morally under duress.

By the time of the theologian Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, moral judgment was considered to be based on two fundamental activities, which he called *synderesis* and conscience. *Synderesis* was seen as “a natural disposition of the mind by which one directly apprehends the basic principles of morally correct behavior, such as ‘Do good and avoid evil.’”<sup>viii</sup> These principles were considered by Aquinas to be intuitively known and self-evident; they had been implanted by God in every person. Then, conscience is the application of these self-evident principles to our actions. The philosopher Immanuel Kant 500 years later eliminated the reference to God and collapsed these two principles into one, stating that all normal adults have what he called practical reason, which, when we exercise it, issues categorically-binding moral imperatives which are capable of moving us to act. Instead of God implanting the moral principles within us from outside, Kant claimed that moral law comes from within our own rational capabilities, which are shared in common by all human beings.<sup>ix</sup>

The reason I’m so fascinated by conscience at this time is that just over a week ago there was an amazing three-day interdisciplinary conference held here at Stanford, organized by literature professor Nancy Ruttenberg. The fourteen co-sponsors were very diverse, ranging from the law school to the Department of Art and Art History, from Jewish Studies and the

history and philosophy departments to the Creative Writing Program and the English department. The speakers from all over the country included a filmmaker, two journalists, two physicians, an Air Force colonel, and professors of law, political science, church history, Jewish studies, philosophy, English, and comparative literature. We took the concept of conscience apart -- up and down, inside and out, backwards and forward. And by the end it had disappeared for me. Then the hard work began of what to salvage and how to reconstruct a more robust understanding of the moral enterprise. So, today I'm giving you something of my own work in progress, which I hope you'll find interesting and important enough to bear with some more history of the development of the idea of conscience.

Many English and American theologians and clergy of the seventeenth century, like John Cotton, Robert Sanderson, and Samuel Jennings held that conscience is a matter of knowing and acting in accordance with God's law, which can be externally determined and for the dereliction of which one should be punished by religious and civil authorities. Others, like William Penn, George Keith and Robert Barclay claimed that conscience is a matter of what a person thinks his or her duty to God is, even if erroneous, and that no one should be punished for acting upon their own deep sense of faithfulness to God, even if theologically incorrect.

In the political realm, starting with thinkers like John Locke, this led to the idea of liberty of conscience as every person's natural right, which may not be prosecuted by the state except when it results in behavior that violates peace and public order.<sup>x</sup> In 1948, liberty of conscience was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted unanimously by the General Assembly of the United Nations with eight countries abstaining -- from the Soviet bloc, South Africa and Saudi Arabia.<sup>xi</sup> The Universal Declaration states that "All human beings are

born...endowed with reason and conscience...[and] everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”<sup>xii</sup>

The lecture at the Stanford Interdisciplinary Conference on Conscience that totally knocked my socks off was by Professor Mark Johnson of the philosophy department of the University of Oregon (apparently the University of Oregon wasn't able to knock the socks off the Stanford football team this year, though). He traced some of the history of the concept of conscience and concluded that it “turns out to be a very messy and convoluted issue,” and that ultimately he's “not convinced that there is any such thing as a so-called conscience – at least not...as the traditional conception of an innate faculty that supposedly distinguishes right from wrong and motivates you to pursue the right and avoid the wrong.” He looked at the idea of conscience from a number of perspectives, including contemporary cognitive science, and determined that “there doesn't appear to be any area in the brain, or any component of mind, that could be the site of something called ‘conscience.’” In fact, the brain systems that support ethical behavior in humans are likely not exclusively dedicated to ethics, but instead more broadly to biological regulation, memory, decision-making and creativity.

To help us understand the traditional notion of “conscience,” Mark Johnson reminds us of Jiminy Cricket in Walt Disney's movie *Pinocchio*; he was appointed by the Blue Fairy to be the lying, nose-growing Pinocchio's official conscience. (Professor Johnson didn't say this, but of course it's not coincidental that his initials are J.C., and the name has more than once, before and after the film, been used as a polite expletive euphemism for Jesus Christ<sup>xiii</sup>). Whenever Pinocchio was morally confused or tempted to do something wrong, he could just “give a little whistle,” and Jiminy Cricket would be there to help out. J.C. told Pinocchio, “always let your conscience be your guide!” The most common current understanding of conscience, Mark

Johnson claims, is the “Jiminy Cricket” view, which assumes that every human is possessed of a universal capacity for moral judgment; conscience is the “still small voice” within each of us that allows us to know the right moral thing to do and gives us the impetus to do it.

However, there are lots of problems with this view, only a few of which I have the time to catalogue here. 1) There is no such thing as a universal pure practical reason in a culturally-diverse, historically changing world; 2) There is no emotion-free rationality; 3) There are no literal rules or moral absolutes which we all agree upon in all circumstances; 4) We make most of our moral decisions intuitively and later create rational justifications for them; 5) Our moral judgments are the products both of evolutionarily developed emotional and cognitive capacities and also of culturally-learned practices, values, and modes of evaluation; 6) the Jiminy Cricket view of conscience loses any useful value once we realize we’re really talking about the complicated interaction of evolved dispositions and culturally-shared moral values.

So now what do we do? Where do we get our moral guidance from if there’s no Jiminy Cricket conscience on our shoulder or within us? Mark Johnson suggests “conscientiousness” instead. By this, he means open, perceptive, broad-based, imaginative moral inquiry. Instead of finding absolute moral principles inscribed deeply within us, which we then apply to particular situations, he suggests what John Dewey called “dramatic imaginative rehearsal.” We imaginatively try out alternative courses of action available to us, searching for the best way to resolve the conflicting duties, consequences, loyalties, and values involved in each morally challenging situation. Dewey described this kind of deliberation as “dramatic and active, not mathematical and impersonal.” As Mark Johnson explains, “the Good and the Right are not pre-existing Platonic entities just waiting to be discovered or uncovered as we consult our

conscience.” Instead, the Good and the Right emerge through conscientious inquiry that has open, broad-based contours.

So, for example, abolitionists in the nineteenth century could be seen as applying supposedly universal, eternal moral principles to the enslaved condition of other people and calling all of us back to the inner voice of our shared consciences. Or, instead, those abolitionists can be seen to have progressively entered into the stories of other people who were enslaved, imaginatively empathized with the conditions they were living under, learned about the conflicting duties, consequences, loyalties and values of all involved, and self-critically and in community challenged their intuitive judgments and prior valuing. This second account doesn't require, or benefit from, reference to a universal moral conscience. In fact, by looking for moral guidance in the wrong place – as in the first account in a pre-given wellspring of absolutes to be applied to the facts with the assumption that this should be convincing to all if only they would listen to their own internal voice of conscience – (by looking in the wrong place) we are diverted from the conscientious imaginative moral deliberation that could most effectively and most fully get us to the best results. Much better would be activating empathetic responses, being open to changing perspectives and worldviews, and experimenting with creative actions.

In nurturing conscientiousness, it turns out that this kind of moral inquiry is best done through reading literature rather than through the analysis of proper application of principles and rules. As Mark Johnson observes, “it is usually literary narrative, with its remarkable power to enact moral situations and run them out in imagination to see where they lead, rather than treatises in moral philosophy, that give most folks genuine moral insight and guidance.”<sup>xiv</sup> It is literature like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, more than the rational moral arguments of anti-slavery tracts, which really helped the abolition movement grow.

So, this brings us back to the Bible lectionary lessons for today from 1 Samuel and Mark. They could be seen as referring to concepts of conscience: One must know God's law and apply it to one's actions, as the theology of Hannah's song seems to teach. Or one must continually testify to Jesus' gospel, even in the face of persecution and death, avoiding false prophets leading one astray along the way. Or, these same Bible readings could be viewed from a literary perspective – as stories we enter into imaginatively with our minds open to inquiry. We could get deeply into the story of intra-familial conflict for the barren Hannah, the joy of the birth of Samuel, and the ensuing sense of gratitude and thanksgiving for the gift of life, connecting this tale to parallel narratives like Sarah and Isaac, Rachel and Joseph, and Elizabeth and John the Baptist. Or we could plumb the story of discipleship of Peter, James, John and Andrew, fishermen who left their nets on the Sea of Galilee to follow Jesus, but who often misunderstood their master, struggled continuously with their faith, denied Jesus and fled after his death, and then returned under considerable duress to preach his gospel and to be martyred in their turn, with the exception of John who died of natural causes.

In fact, to be a Christian in its essence is to live in the master story of discipleship to Jesus, to learn how to walk in his footsteps as Peter, James, John, Andrew and others tried to -- just as Jews live in the master story of their people's liberation from slavery in Egypt and Exodus to the Promised Land of Israel, struggling with how to remain faithful to a common understanding of law and prophetic and wisdom-based challenge as played out in the history of Israel. It's in the process of sharing our different readings of the stories, opening up to new insights rather than closing down, and experiencing each of the biblical characters and the plots of their narratives that moral conscientiousness can grow. Entering into the story of Jesus' encounter with the adulterous woman and into those stories of when he broke the prohibitions of

working on the Sabbath so that the hungry could glean in the fields give us much deeper moral insights than simply applying the rules of the Mosaic law to stone the adulterer and put to death those who doesn't keep the Sabbath, as was apparently required in Leviticus and Exodus.<sup>xv</sup>

The voice of conscience may have been silenced in our time, but the stories to be lived with moral conscientiousness are rich indeed. God remains our help, as in ages past, not by telling us what to do, but instead by standing with us as life force, as we face our ethical challenges, armed with the great stories of our wisdom traditions, which are complex and deep enough to help us deal with real life and not the puppet Pinocchio's.

## **BENEDICTION**

For all who long for God, may God go with you.

For all who embrace life, may life return your affection.

For all who seek a right path, may a way be found...

And the courage to take it, step by step.

Robert Mabry Doss



## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> 1 Samuel 2:2-3.

<sup>iv</sup> 1 Samuel 2:9-10.

<sup>v</sup> Mark 13:1-8.

<sup>vi</sup> *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 163; Harold W. Attridge (ed.), *HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 1722-1723.

<sup>vii</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, pp. 686-687.

<sup>viii</sup> Mark Johnson, "Who's Got a Conscience, Anyway," a lecture delivered at the Stanford Interdisciplinary Conference on Conscience, November 9, 2012.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Andrew Murphy, "The Politics of Erroneous Conscience," a lecture delivered at the Stanford Interdisciplinary Conference on Conscience, November 9, 2012.

<sup>xi</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: 1978), Vol. X, p. 278.

<sup>xii</sup> "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (1948), Articles 1 and 18, as reproduced in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: 1978), Vol. X, pp. 1049-1050.

<sup>xiii</sup> "Jiminy Cricket" in *The Disney Wiki*, [http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/Jiminy\\_Cricket](http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/Jiminy_Cricket)

<sup>xiv</sup> Johnson, "Conscience".

<sup>xv</sup> See Leviticus 20:10 and Exodus 31:15