GROWING CONSCIENCE, GROWING SPIRIT
Unitarian Universalist Church of St. Petersburg

READINGS (see below)
The Work of Christmas by Howard Thurman (Hymnal #615)
Psalm 1 interpreted by Stephen Mitchell (Hymnal #669)
"Where is the Child?" - Gospel of Jesus According to Matthew, chapter 2
"Conscience with a Respectable Voice",
from Eichmann in Jerusalem by Hannah Arendt

SERMON

Here’s what I’ve gleaned over a lifetime about the purpose of a church, or it could be any religious congregation. The purpose of a church is to be a community that helps people grow to their fullest potential so as to help make life its best.

The purpose is to help people fulfill their potentials in two ways. One way is to grow in faith – that is, to grow in understanding of life and how to live it. And the second way is to grow in spirit – that is, to grow in appreciation, in concern and caring, for more and more circles of life.

And people who grow in these ways help grow communities that are in turn wise and caring helpers. It seems to me a very healthy cycle, and necessary if life is to flourish – and by flourish I mean for all the people to be able to say with the poet, “It seems, so great my happiness, that I am blessed and can bless.”

This church year, which started in September, we are using our Wednesday discussions to encourage our faith development by challenging our individual faiths - our understandings, our answers to life’s questions - by comparing our beliefs with the beliefs of the wisdom traditions of humankind – religions, philosophies, sciences, cultures. And we are using our Sunday services, in part, to encourage our spiritual development by exploring the “what, why, and how” of fulfilling our potentials for concern and caring in relationship with self, others, and all.

It’s been four months of Sundays now. To date we have examined four of the seven dimensions of spiritual growth typically identified by developmental psychologists and pretty well represented in the principles or
affirmations in the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant. These four dimensions were a sense of individual worth; a sense of just, compassionate relationship; a sense of acceptance and encouragement of growth in others; and a sense of seeking further truth and meaning – all in context of relationship.

We have three more months and spiritual dimensions to go. Now January is the month of Sundays to inquire into the dimension of spiritual development we often call a sense of conscience. Like all growth of the human spirit, it comes with a lifetime of unexpected epiphanies – sometimes of glory and gratitude, sometimes of shame.

But what is it? What is conscience?

Very early one morning, Alisun heard the pitter-patter of little feet making their way to the kitchen. Alisun looked out from the bedroom and there was three year old Daisy. She had just opened the refrigerator door and was blinking as the light overcame the darkness. She turned to Alisun with a look of *Whaddayaknow*, spreads her hands in surprise, and said, “I’m up!”

I don’t think Daisy evidenced any sign of conscience about raiding the forbidden treats in the refrigerator in the early darkness. There was, I believe, only a dawning sense of self and of power. But isn’t that a necessary foundation for a good sense of conscience, for the gradual awakening to what we can do, and to what we should do to advance the good and should not do to avoid the bad? If at 3:00 a.m. in a state of nightmare-driven anxiety and fierce hunger pangs you raid the fridge and all you can find is the last small portion of a household member’s favorite but forgotten dessert, do you go ahead and eat it? Or do you go back to your fearful craving bed? Or do you go wake the owner up and ask permission? By what mental process do you decide? That’s conscience for you. Nasty thing.

My sympathies were with Daisy. I have seen the refrigerator light. And consider: Buddha at three had no budding conscience, because he hadn’t yet experienced any boundary put on his desires – though when he did finally experience the boundaries of life, he sought to dissolve them, which turned out to be a path to the highest consciousness and conscience.

Jesus even up to twelve years old did not have conscience enough to apologize for terrorizing his parents by abandoning them to hang at the Temple with the Pharisees and Sadducces, the very people he later called
vipers and hypocrites – though when he did finally experience a full-blown conscience, it resolved in lovingkindness for all peoples. (When you think about it, even his critique of the Pharisees and Sadducees was primarily psychoanalytic - a viper person just being one who is still reacting to life out of the reptilian brain of hunger and fear – and the hypocrite just being one who is reacting out of the confused bicameral brain where reason and desire cannot agree, sort of like Congress. More objects of mercy, pity, and love than damnation for Jesus

So it may be regrettable that conscience only wakes up gradually; but it is not bad; it’s normal.

My normal wake up routine every morning is to stretch for a sense of flexibility, pray for a sense of purpose, meditate for a sense of happiness and courage, pour me some coffee for a sense of “I’m up!” I usually drink out of my green UU St Pete chalice cup because I can think of no better bearer of grace or spur to epiphany for making life its best.

But sometimes I drink out of my “Live, Love, Laugh, Bloom” cup, because each of these words stands for a spiritual fulfillment of the potentials of the life force within, the grace of the soul. These words guide me in an exercise of conscience as little reminders of what’s worthwhile, of blessing. Am I blooming? If yes, keep on. If not, am I at least doing things to let laughter refuel my life? If not, am I at least doing things to let love enter in and guide my life? If not, am I living the right life or following the right light?

“With knowledge” – that’s what the root Latin words of conscience add up to -- living with awareness of what to choose to make life its best and not do harm.

Consider who by conscience blesses the world in the story of the Magi and King Herod. The Magi were Zoroastrian priests from Persia -- believers in the cosmic struggles of light versus dark, good versus evil, and believers that there is a light within each person to help goodness triumph in the end. As Magi they were adept cosmologists, able to follow the star to the new light in the world. They were Zoroastrian Jedi, called to bring the shadow-side into the light to use the Force for the work of goodness.

Little did they expect to find the divine light in a stable. But the star was guide to their conscience. And as Persians they were of a scientific bent, called to employ a critical conscience to what they were experiencing, called to analyze the needs of real Being according to humanitarian principles. So
doing, they realized the child was an epiphany of the divine power in every
human soul -- well worth the investment of their lives, their fortunes, and
their sacred honor, even against Herod’s wrathful power. People of mature
spirit.

In contrast, we often think of Herod as having had no conscience – willing to
block divine aspirations with plotting and murder. But perhaps he simply
had what is called a “traditional conscience” – one guided by the traditional
and conventional authorities of one’s society, not by a universally true
principle. Herod’s authority was Rome, not the stars. And for Rome, if there
was to be a new king in Israel, he would be appointed and anointed, not by
Yehovah and certainly not the enemy nation of Persia, but by Rome alone.

By Rome’s standard, the moral thing was to sacrifice 20 or 30 toddlers and
infants to insure no further warfare between the empires. Big important
Herod and the people of Jerusalem felt they had more reason to be afraid
than did the little people of little Bethlehem. Jerusalem had never fared well
in the wars between empires. And Persia (modern day Iran) was one of
those empires.

Mary of Nazareth, too, worried about the politics. But to her conscience –
though only of a young Jewish maiden, already a critically examining
conscience - the current Roman order was not good for the people.
Conscience called for resistance, she proclaimed to her cousin Elizabeth.
The mighty shall be cast down and the poor and humble shall be exalted.

Think of this as Twelfth Night arrives on January 5th and the Magi stake
their treasures on Mary’s child. That child is named in Aramaic, “He will
save his people” and he will become Twelfth Night’s Lord of Disrule among
the empires – calling the world to turn the established order upside down –
to elevate the last to first, honor the humble with blessings, invest the needy
with resources. Oy! Just like his mother! Resist! Resist! Resist! And just
like his father, the carpenter - build a new temple, in the heart.

That is institutional systemic change from the ground up. But if we do have
to build it from the ground up, heart by heart, will it ever happen?

Let me conclude by reminding you of Hannah Arendt’s analysis. Arendt’s
observations at the 1983 trial of Adolph Eichmann and his generation of
Germans complicit in Nazi rule and crimes against humanity reveal a side of
human conscience that is worrisome, for they are not alone. “In the Third
Reich” writes Arendt, “evil lost its distinctive characteristic by which most
people had until then recognized it. The Nazis redefined it as a civil norm (so) Eichmann did not need to close his ears to the voice of conscience because his conscience spoke with a ‘respectable voice’, the voice of respectable society around him.”

True enough – conscience is developmental and subject to many perversive, socially accepted influences. But as Arendt points out, it needn’t have been that way, because we know some groups of people who succeeded in retaining their humanity by refusing to comply with the Third Reich – like Denmark, following the call to conscience of its king, and like Le Chambon, France, following the call to conscience of its Huguenot church pastor.

In some places, values of universal human dignity and worth prevail against all odds because of critical conscience, which in troubled times is all that saves the integrity of the majority and the lives of the minority.

“An instinct in such matters” wrote Arendt, “(is) truly the last thing to be taken for granted in our time.”

Two Sundays from now, with the questionable view that it isn’t already self-evident, we’ll consider why we should seek to develop our conscience.

In the meantime, I look forward 15 minutes after our service this morning to hearing your views on what is the nature of the human conscience.

**READINGS**

**Reading for Meditation**

"Where is the Child?” - Gospel of Jesus According to Matthew, chapter 2

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him....Herod secretly called for the Magi (and) sent them to Bethlehem, saying ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’
“When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

“Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother; and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt.... When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the Magi.”

**Reading Before Sermon**

"Conscience with a Respectable Voice”,

from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* by Hannah Arendt

"Eichmann did not need to close his ears to the voice of conscience ... not because he had none, but because his conscience spoke with a ‘respectable voice’, with the voice of the respectable society around him."

“In the Third Reich evil lost its distinctive characteristic by which most people had until then recognized it. The Nazis redefined it as a civil norm.”

“What has come to light is neither nihilism nor cynicism, as one might have expected, but a quite extraordinary confusion over elementary questions of morality—as if an instinct in such matters were truly the last thing to be taken for granted in our time."

[Under conditions of terror] most people will comply but some people will not, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that "it could happen" in most places, but it did not happen everywhere....

It was not just that the people of Denmark refused to assist in implementing the Final Solution, as the peoples of so many other conquered nations had been persuaded to do (or had been eager to do) — but also, that when the
Reich cracked down and decided to do the job itself. It found that its own personnel in Denmark had been infected by this and were unable to overcome their human aversion with the appropriate ruthlessness, as their peers in more cooperative areas had.

One is tempted to recommend the story as required reading in political science for all students who wish to learn something about the enormous power potential inherent in non-violent action and in resistance to an opponent possessing vastly superior means of violence.