

## “Checking In With Our Consciousness”<sup>i</sup>

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Psalm 19:12

But who can detect their own feelings? Who can expose their own hidden faults?

Romans 2:12-15

Everyone who sins outside the law will also die outside the law, and all who sin under the law are judged by the law. It isn't the ones who hear the law that God finds righteous. It's the ones who do what the law says. Even pagans who never heard of the law, can be said to “be” the law; it is engraved on their hearts. Their consciences affirm it. And their own inner mental dialogue will accuse them or perhaps excuse them.

Matthew 21:17

Jesus left his followers, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

Jesus has had a busy day in Jerusalem. Now as it grows later, he leaves everyone behind, probably to spend the night with his friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha, and to be alone. Notice that it doesn't say he goes to pray, though scripture tells us a few times that he does. The language is different here and this is our topic today.

We need regular time away to connect with the Spirit which resides in us – a sometimes different, active type of prayer where we open ourselves and look within.

We are three-quarters of the way through our sermon series on 12-Step Spirituality. In January, we looked at Steps 7, 8 and 9: We ask God to remove our shortcomings as we make a list of everyone we have harmed and then make amends wherever possible except when to do so might injure someone. Today we explore Step 10: “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.”

The first few times I read the 12 Steps, I got to this point and thought, “Yeesh, again? How long are we supposed to be confronting our mistakes?! Can't we get something a little more positive?” So, before we go further, let's notice that Step 10 does not say take a *moral* inventory. It says, “Take a personal inventory” – as in “Watch yourself, objectively and compassionately. Pay attention.”

The early Church talked about examination of conscience. But Richard Rohr, author of *Breathing Underwater: Spirituality in 12 Steps*, suggests that an examination of consciousness will be more helpful to most of us. There is a difference. But what does it mean?

Remember, we're all addicted to something, even if it's only to our own ways of thinking and being. Once we have faced our addiction and acknowledged where we have messed up, now that we are working to make amends, we move forward into a new day. From a new perspective, seeing ourselves more fully as God's children, we find that we can let go – of control, of the need to defend ourselves.

As you come to believe that God sees the Christ in you and embraces and loves you fully, you find that you have a new compassion for yourself. As Paul says, the Spirit helps us in our weakness (Romans 8:26).

Consciousness is not simply our feelings. It's "the subtle and all-embracing mystery within and between Everything. It is like the air we breathe, take for granted, and do not appreciate. ... You must step back... to be truly conscious" (85). Rather like the air all 'round us, it's hard to describe. It simply *is* and it affects everything we think and feel. When we follow our consciousness, we can learn wisdom from deep within the soul (Jeremiah 31:33, Romans 2:15 "the law written on our hearts"). Is this what we've been taught to call the Holy Spirit?

To be truly conscious, we have to distance ourselves from who we think we are so that, as we can look within, we're ready to live into our God-given identity. We become unconscious when we rely on any habit – exercise, social media or news, alcohol or food – to fill a void. We are, or become, unconscious when we let our job, our play, or even our family distract us from living in God.

Anytime we say or do anything "stupid, cruel... or destructive to ourselves or others, we are at that moment unconscious of our identity" as beloved children of God, co-heirs with Christ (91). It's when we close ourselves off from this God-relationship that we can practice any kind of hatred or violence. When we are in a mental/emotional place where we can hold onto our belief in this identity, we speak and act from a place of love.

We need to love – not just sometimes but always. We need to love everything on some level, even our mistakes. When we live this way, then we are fully conscious. "Loving people are always highly conscious people" (91).

I know we've gone deep here. Just one more piece about consciousness. Jesus tells us we are to love our enemies. I used to have trouble with this. "I don't have any enemies," I'd say. And yet I was always fighting against my imperfections. When I would speak sharply or growing patient, I'd let that distract me from God's focus for me. I forgot that God loves me, just as I am.

So, I suggest along with Richard Rohr that perhaps our sins, our mistakes, our self-absorbed moments and human imperfections can also be enemies. Enemies that prevent us from being fully conscious and aware of our accepted and loved state. When we focus on anything that separates from God, and when we live in that separation, it's only our own minds and hearts that are depriving us of that God-relationship.

Jesus speaks of giving us the Spirit. We might think of this as his sharing his consciousness with us. When we are "in the mind of Christ," our soul is awakened (1 Corinthians 2:10-16). We are transformed. And transformed people perceive things differently, in a more expanded and compassionate way.

Jesus says that the Spirit is with you and in you. She causes you to live with the same life that Jesus lives, and unites you to everything else. This Spirit of truth, Jesus goes on, will teach you everything and remind you of all you need to know (John 14:17-20, 26).

Sometimes we have been led to believe that we only get the Holy Spirit as a reward for good behavior or in special need. When we act on this mistaken belief, we limit the Spirit's activity. We put God in a box instead of in the center of our life where we would receive the greatest benefit. We are "orphaned" – just what Jesus did not want.

St. Francis of Assisi referred to everything as brother and sister. Everything has its start in God. In our essence, we each have God within us. When we allow ourselves, we can grow spiritually from just about anything. Human beings have been separated from our connection, not just with

each other, but with the earth itself and its other inhabitants. We are unconscious. But we can be brought into consciousness again.

The apostle Paul speaks of the mind of Christ and the inner law which seems to be an inherent sharing of this one Spirit or consciousness (1 Corinthians 2:10-16). This is what we find in our second scripture lesson. Even someone who lists “none” on their census form or who has some faith other than Christian, can still live within God’s law because it is written on their hearts. It’s part of their essence. Their own conscience validates it so that their inner mental conversation can either excuse them or convict them. And we who live as Christ-followers are reminded that we are to be and to do as God leads us. We do this by looking within and examining our consciousness.

Whenever we believe that God truly loves us – so much that we have trouble accepting it – we can look at ourselves compassionately, without bitterness or ill-will, without judging or labeling. We simply look. And now, we see ourselves with the eyes of God. We can see others with the eyes of God.

In the Wednesday evening study last month, we talked about evil. Evil relies on camouflage to exist. Only with this camouflage do we believe that this act or those words are harmless. Evil is another name for unconsciousness.

Once we recognize our inherent dignity as God's children, once we accept that God is particularly fond of us – just as we are, we can let go of our addiction to our own ways of thinking and being, or anything else. Unconsciousness leaves us doubting that nobility, for as God’s children we have a certain nobility. And when we doubt, we become unconscious. Then we are prey to doing what we otherwise would not do.

You are God’s child. God is particularly fond of you.<sup>ii</sup> Just as you are. Here. Now. Today. Knowing this, what can you let yourself be? Accepting that you share the same identity as Christ, for this is Jesus’ teaching, what more might you find within yourself, that God has been just waiting for you to notice?

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<sup>i</sup> This sermon borrows heavily from Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, “Chapter 10: Is This Overkill?” Franciscan Press, Cincinnati, 2011, 83-92.

<sup>ii</sup> A phrase borrowed from William P. Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity*, 2007.