

The Right of Conscience©  
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman February 18, 2018

In the reading that Beth just shared it is clear that Henry David Thoreau was a man of principle and of conscience. He was also a deep thinker and a mystic who sought to live life fully and deliberately. His influence on our faith tradition, as well as the larger world, has been significant to say the least. The essay "Civil Disobedience," from which our reading was taken, was an inspiration to both Leo Tolstoy and Mohandas Gandhi. Thoreau is considered by many to be one of ours. As a child he was baptized at and regularly attended the First Parish in Concord, which at that time was a Unitarian congregation. At the age of 23 however, he sent a note to the town clerk stating, "I do not wish to be considered a member of the First Parish in this town." It is quite possible that this action was one example of his tendency to exercise his right of conscience.

In reading "Civil Disobedience" I found myself feeling both inspired and, at the same time, quite troubled. I felt inspired by Thoreau's commitment to his values. As we heard in the reading, he believed that justice matters. And he was disturbed and distressed about fellow citizens being sent off to the war of the day, the Mexican-American war, which he believed to be an unjust war. I was also inspired by his complete and utter contempt for slavery and any law that supported it. He felt so strongly about these two issues that he refused to pay his taxes and was put in jail as a result. Someone who knew him paid them so he could be released. He continued not to pay his taxes as long as the war and slavery were being supported by the government. Here is another quote that indicates how strongly he held his convictions. "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison." These kinds of sentiments inspire and challenge me.

But as I mentioned, I also found myself troubled. Thoreau's conscience was alert to war and slavery. But there were other issues, and important issues at that, which his conscience seemed either to discount or to neglect entirely. Let me offer an example. Throughout the essay his choice of words left out half of the adult population of the country, namely women. He wrote, "Why has every man a conscience, then?" Was Thoreau unaware that women possess a conscience? I doubt it. Was he simply accepting the norm of his day and using the masculine pronoun to include individuals of both genders? Quite possibly. Did his conscience recognize how this practice kept women oppressed? Honestly, I don't have any idea. And that is what troubles me. Here is another of his quotes from this essay. "Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn." Despite this statement, Thoreau's language demonstrated acceptance of and support for a cultural pattern that was oppressive to women.

This reading and the entirety of the essay then give us an opportunity to consider the first portion of our Fifth Principle, the right of conscience. And I believe we need to consider it deeply and with great care. While I am grateful that our Principles affirm the importance of conscience, I am concerned that the way this Principle is written seems to imply that one's conscience is always present and benevolent. From my training and experience in the field of mental health, I do not hold this as a given. I know that every person's conscience is unique and limited in its scope and quality. In Thoreau's time,

conscience was generally considered to be something that each person received from the Divine. Today, however, there are a multitude of theories about the origins of conscience as well as how it develops as we grow and mature. The research on this aspect of our makeup has been quite minimal since Charles Darwin, in his book, *The Descent of Man*, first proposed an evolutionary origin of conscience. The research that has been done indicates that there is something present in people across all cultures that we would associate with the word conscience. For example, people across all cultures have virtually the same blushing response to the experience of shame. What specifically is considered shameful, however, varies considerably between cultures. This lets us know that the culture we are raised in has a powerful influence on our conscience and what we perceive to be right and wrong. Using Thoreau as an example, his use of language that excluded women and left them invisible was considered appropriate and perfectly acceptable to him and his male companions. I am very glad to say that the practice of using male dominant language no longer gets a free pass in many portions of our culture today.

But I want us to consider more issues than just language in regards to what someone's sense of conscience may allow or even encourage. Today the consciences of a significant number of people in our country allow them to act as if a person of another race or religion is inferior to them. Today the consciences of many people in our country allow them to determine the worth, dignity and rights of someone based on that person's sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. Today there are people whose conscience allows them to take sexual advantage of others with no sense of guilt, shame or remorse. And today, our Federal Government is proposing to establish a Conscience and Religious Freedom Division of Health & Human Services. Such an office could, and I emphasize the word could, support the kinds of attitudes and behaviors I just mentioned. Such an office could seek to legitimize prejudice, discrimination, harassment and even abuse. This concerns me greatly and I hope it concerns you as well. But we need to be concerned about more than just this proposed new Division of Health and Human Services. We also need to be concerned about the right of conscience portion of our Fifth Principle. The way it is written could, and again I emphasize the word could, allow and support prejudice, discrimination, harassment or abuse. If taken out of context, someone could assert that any belief or behavior should be affirmed and promoted because of a their "right of conscience." That is completely unacceptable to me.

So far I have been focusing almost entirely on conscience. But now I believe it is important that we consider the word "right" as it is used in the phrase, "the right of conscience." This Principle seems to assert that each and every person has not only a just claim but also the privilege to act in accordance with what their conscience will allow. Take this to its furthest point and you end up with a situation where any and every person's conscience is superior to all other factors having to do with moral actions. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian minister who was a contemporary and mentor of Thoreau, seems to promote this perspective in his essay "Self-Reliance." There he writes, "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature." I am definitely not a moral absolutist, but the level of moral relativism that such a perspective promotes is beyond my limit. I have seen far too much of what my own nature may at times cause me to

think or do to believe this perspective is either reasonable or appropriate. And I am not willing to affirm or promote such a perspective.

That said, I am very willing to affirm and promote the right of conscience, with conditions. And what, you may wonder, might the conditions be. The conditions are everything else that is contained in our Principles and Purposes. It is here that I believe we ought to turn to affirm our conscience and to check the boundaries of the rights we exercise or support. No one element of our Principles and Purposes should either be neglected or elevated above any other. Let me be clear here. I am not claiming that our Principles and Purposes hold all of the truth or every answer to what is right or wrong. I am reasonably certain that the Principles and Purposes could be restated or rearranged, and there quite possibly are things that need to be added. They are and need to continue to be a work in progress. But even as they are currently written, they provide a firm and dependable foundation to which we can turn as we contemplate and assess the moral code we live by. Our Principles and Purposes draw upon wisdom and teachings that have been espoused across cultures for millennia. The values they contain have been tested and tried by countless numbers of people over centuries. And the full range of what is contained there, in my estimation, is considerably more dependable than my own conscience or nature, than Emerson's conscience and nature, or for that matter the conscience or nature of any individual I have had the privilege to meet in my lifetime.

So here is what I propose in regards to the right of conscience as it is set forth in our Fifth Principle. Let us first acknowledge that all of us need to continually develop and hone our own conscience. Our conscience, like the Principles and Purposes, is short of being complete and perfect. With this awareness in mind we also need to support and assist those we meet and interact with in furthering the development of their conscience. And let us acknowledge that we must have a right to follow our conscience when it is at its best. We can acknowledge that we have such a right as long as doing so acknowledges and respects not only other people but also other living beings and this planet we call home. To affirm and promote anything less would be a travesty and could have the potential to do more harm than good.

In closing I want to return to Thoreau. As I stated at the beginning of this sermon, he was a man of principle and of conscience. He was a deep thinker and a mystic. Yet, like all of us, there were elements of his conscience that may not have been fully developed to the point either we or he would have preferred. He set himself a high standard though, one that I believe we could all benefit from embracing. Let's hear his words again. "What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn." As we go forth, may we seek to see the wrong in the world and not lend ourselves to its continuation. Instead, let us offer our time and energy to change what is wrong through responsible, considerate and compassionate utilization of our right of conscience. And may we continually feel gratitude for those who have helped us develop, attend to and honor the conscience we have.

So may it be.