

We All Know, Love, and Respect a Woman Who...

May 8, 2022

Prayer

This winter, when the folks from the Neville Public Museum were interviewing me to be part of their HerStory exhibit, one of the questions they asked was how being a woman affects my ministry. I spoke a little about my experience that people are often more willing to speak with women about emotional and difficult topics, and so that has been a gift in my ministry.

But I also lifted up that being a woman inevitably affects my preaching because who one is inevitably shapes how they see the world. This came across loud and clear one of the first Mother's Days that I was pastor here, when the pastoral prayer I lifted up invited us to pray blessing on a wide-array of the mothering experience, those whom Hallmark seems to know best – the women who inspire us and nurture and sustain us – as well as those who are struggling with infertility, those who are estranged from their children, those who grieve, and more.

Added to gender among the things that I bring to the pulpit is the admonition from the late, great William Sloane-Coffin who said that we are to preach with the Bible in one hand and the New York Times in the other. His quote has become the cornerstone of how preaching is taught. We are to make sure it's relevant to what's going on in the world.

The roots of Mother's Day are in the Civil War, when Julia Ward Howe campaigned for a day when mothers would band together to teach their children charity, mercy and patience in the hopes that:

“women of one country, will be too tender toward those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.”

(Julia Ward Howe, Mother's Day Declaration)

In short, Mother's Day is rooted in the practice and promulgation of empathy.

As I preach, today, with the headlines in one hand, the Bible in the other, and the calendar flipped to Mother's Day in yet another – I'm a mom now, so I often feel like I have more than two hands – after long, deep prayer, I offer these reflections on abortion and the right to choose, not out of politics, but as a woman tasked with moral and ethical leadership of souls. Because of the very, very intimate and volatile nature of this topic, I ask every heart gathered here to center yourselves in prayer:

Holy God: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of every heart gathered here bring us closer to understanding your ways. Help us to be open to your Holy Spirit, a Spirit who you promised to send as our protector and guide, a Spirit who is so much larger and broader than we can ever imagine. And when we disagree, which we inevitably will, wrap us again in your unfathomable love. May we remember that love unites us beyond all else. Help us to move forward in mutual respect and charity. Amen.

Empathy

Arthur Shopenhauer (who, if you know his work, you know he is probably the least likely philosopher to be quoted on issues related to women) suggested that compassion and empathy are the root of ethics and morality. Ethics are, at their core, relational.

One of my dearest friends gave me permission to tell her story. She went to seminary a couple of years after college. Married in her late 20s. Was on track to have a normal life – whatever that means. They started trying to have children when she was about 30. When she didn't get pregnant after two years, they began fertility treatment.

(As someone who has gone through these treatments myself, I can tell you it's not fun. The poking and prodding, the hormone therapies that take you on a roller coaster you can't control, the feeling month by month by month that your body is letting you down.)

They were ecstatic when, after a couple of years of treatments, she got pregnant. And then, they found out that it was ectopic. The embryo had implanted in her fallopian tubes. If allowed to continue, there was a high likelihood that the pregnancy would kill her. If it didn't, it would inevitably destroy her chances of ever getting pregnant again.

Because she was serving a rural church by then and the only hospital in the area was Catholic, the local hospital would not perform the life-saving procedure she needed. And so, as a 32-year-old married pastor with two masters degrees, she found herself being escorted past protesters into an abortion clinic. The state where she was living at the time required women to come in two days in a row: once for scans and to see an ultrasound, a test which she had already done with her OB/GYN, and then after a "cooling off period," the next day she could access the procedure.

The nature of this pregnancy meant that my friend was able to have a medical abortion; that is, she was able to take pills to induce a miscarriage. This meant that she was led to a bank of four stations that looked like dentist's chairs, three different nurses were required to tell her what she was ingesting, and then she had to sit and wait for the pills to take effect. She was still reeling from the reality that they weren't going to be welcoming a baby in seven or eight months. The hormones that they'd been pumping through her body for years were still wreaking havoc.

And there she sat. She says that the other chairs could have been filled by central casting, the widest array of womanhood you could ever imagine, in a line of four chairs.

It would take another five years of fertility treatments, but my friend and her husband are now parents. I tell this story, because:

- You and I both love a woman who has had an abortion.
- You and I both love a woman who found out at her 20-week anatomy scan that the pregnancy she had been so excited about had developed without life sustaining organs.
- You and I both love a woman who hemorrhaged due to a placental abruption, causing her parents, spouse, and children to have to make the impossible decision on whether to save her or her unborn child.
- You and I both love a woman who realized that she was in no way financially, emotionally, or physically able to raise a child.

- You and I both love a woman who went through IVF, ending up with SIX viable implanted eggs requiring selective reduction in order to ensure the safety of her and a SAFE number of fetuses.
- You and I both love a woman who doesn't want to be a mother, but birth control methods sometimes fail.
- You and I both love a woman who is FINALLY getting the strength to get away from her physically abusive partner, only to find out that she is pregnant.
- You and I both love a woman who went into her confirmation appointment after YEARS of trying to conceive only to hear silence where there should be a heartbeat.
- You and I both love women who have had abortions.

Theology

Most of you know that I've been a geek my whole life. In college, instead of the usual band or movie poster above my bed, I had a poster with a quote from St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the most important Christian ethicists of all time. The poster read, "Nothing is intrinsically good or evil, but its manner of usage may make it so." Framing our conversation is critical in building mutual understanding in the abortion debate.

Because of coming up in the Roman Catholic tradition, I am well aware of the anti-abortion logic. It goes like this: If life begins at conception, all abortion is inherently evil, because it is the taking of a human life.

It's simple and easy to explain – which of course ends up being both its beauty and its flaw. The idea that when two cells merge they become inviolable is just patently absurd in this morally complex arena. Remember the quote by St. Thomas on that poster in my dorm room: "Nothing is intrinsically good or evil, but its manner of usage may make it so."

On the flip side, the base-line logic of the pro-choice argument is just as incomplete: Choice above all else does not a healthy ethic make.

So, what about the majority of people, who believe both that life is sacred and a woman has not just the right but the moral responsibility to shape her life?

Reality

First, it is important to be based in reality, not spin from either side. The Centers for Disease Control has been keeping data on abortions in this country since 1969.* The vast majority of abortions take place early in gestation: 91.1% of abortions are performed in the first trimester; only 7.6% are performed at 14 to 20 weeks' gestation, which leaves 1.3% to be performed at ≥ 21 weeks' gestation. Conservatively, the absolute earliest a fetus can survive outside of the uterus is at 24 weeks gestation, well beyond the stage at which 98.7% of abortions take place.

Furthermore, the abortion rate continues to decline as better contraception and education become more readily available. In short, we are not looking at an epidemic of infanticide.

I've read countless first-hand accounts about that last group. Of the 1.3% of abortions performed past 21 weeks' gestation, the overwhelming majority are done because of maternal and fetal health. Over and over again, I've read the heartbreaking testimonies of women who were longing for families, who were preparing nurseries, who were the guest of honor at baby showers, only to

go in for an ultrasound and find devastating news: if the child were to be born, it would be without a brain or other critical organs. Or the brain had liquified.

So, what are we to do? What is ethical?

I know each of us has nuanced understandings here, and rightfully so, and yet I'm going to make an assumption that the majority of us believe in both the sanctity of life and in bodily autonomy. We're firm that no one can make me take chemo or any other prescription for that matter. We believe that adults have to make their own decisions, whether we agree with them or not.

For quite some time, the secular arena has used as its anthem around abortion, "Safe, Legal, and Rare." In addition, as Christians, I believe that Jesus would invite us to lift up the ethics of mercy and compassion, to encourage women who find themselves faced with the prospect of abortion – either because of unwanted pregnancy or because of the health of the fetus or mother – to wrestle with the question of what will be the most merciful and compassionate course of action going forward for all involved?

Friends, the decision to have an abortion should not be taken lightly. But we're facing government action that ignores a woman's wisdom, and that of pastors, doctors, and others who know her life.

A clergy colleague tells me that part of why he and his fellow pastors worked tirelessly to legalize abortion fifty years ago is because of women like one of his parishioners, Mary, whose name he changed for her privacy. It was 1960, and she had a miscarriage at six months. She was bleeding on an examination table with the dead fetus not yet extracted, and had to sit and wait while covered in blood with her legs open, because the police needed to investigate and prove she had a miscarriage and had not committed manslaughter. During the unbelievably tragic event of losing a wanted child far into pregnancy – she had to sit in her own blood so that evidence could be turned over to the police. The dehumanization of women set up by these laws is harrowing.

The reading from the Letter to the Hebrews which was our first scripture today tells us, "the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to the point of dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of God to whom we must give account."

And in today's Gospel, Jesus tells us that we are to love one another as God has loved us. We all know that love is not simple. Our church knows better than most that love is not one size fits all.

Both of these should remind us of two of the core values articulated by the United Church of Christ: Continuing Testament and Changing Lives. Continuing Testament reminds us that we are at a different place in human history than ever before, and that our lived experience is absolutely sacred. God cares about you. As an individual. How we make our most intimate, most complex decisions is not a one-size-fits-all model.

Conclusion

Friends, I started out by saying that, after a lot of prayer, I felt called to preach on this hard topic today because I am a woman who has been called by God to preach, and therefore my preaching cannot ignore the real-life experiences of women. For too long, we have allowed zealots to control the abortion narrative, preferring to keep the peace by keeping quiet, allowing them to build up the stereotype of careless women flippantly getting abortions after thoughtlessly and carelessly getting pregnant.

Our silence has helped no one. The statistics are that by the time they reach 45 years of age, 25% of women will have had an abortion. So when you look around your Mother's Day brunch table this afternoon, a full one quarter of those women have had or will have an abortion by the time their childbearing years are through. These are women you know and love, these are women you respect, and even more, these are women with full agency to make reasonable and informed decisions.

You know that I often end my sermons with homework, what I'm praying you'll do with the sermon you just heard. Today, your homework is to not allow the moral and ethical agency of women to be circumvented by an argument that makes this complex issue into a political pawn. Speak up, not despite your faith, but in light of it. Speak up in advocacy for the full human dignity and agency of all women. And when you do, may Christ's mercy and compassion lead your way.

Through all, may the peace of Christ, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

* Data cited on page 3 is from a published report from the CDC in 2015.

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