

Sermon

May 8, 2022

*Finding a Way Forward:
Mother's Day and Roe v. Wade*
Pastor Dan

It's a happy coincidence. Today is Mother's Day, and our first reading lines up with it **perfectly**. Acts 9:36-43 tells us about Tabitha, a disciple of Christ whom Peter brings back from the dead.

The story of Tabitha, which is her Aramaic name, or Dorcas, which is her Greek name, has **profound significance** when it comes to our understanding of the status women enjoyed in the early church. As Mark Allen Powell points out in the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, "Dorcas is the only woman in the New Testament who is specifically called a disciple" (p. 202).

Think about this for a moment.

Normally, we associate the term disciple with the *twelve men* who followed Jesus. The prohibition against the ordination of women in the Catholic Church largely depends on the **exclusive identification** of these twelve men as disciples.

Thankfully, Luke, who was also the author of Acts, preserves for us an inclusive alternative. Indeed, Acts offers more information about Tabitha than we might at first assume. As Raj Nadella of Columbia Theological Seminary points out, Tabitha committed herself constantly to the ministry. A literal translation of Acts 9:36 supports his reading: "she was full of good deeds and alms which she **continually** did."

The fact that Tabitha gave alms and provided garments for the widows suggests she was a person of means, a woman who used her wealth to help others instead of hoarding it for herself.

From there, still in honor of Mother's Day, I planned to talk about several other notable woman of the New Testament, including Prisca or Priscilla.

Textual evidence suggests she was likewise a person of means: Paul refers to her **multiple times** in his letters. We also read about her in Acts as well as in 2nd Timothy, a later first-century letter attributed to Paul.

Modern scholarship has long been aware of an important detail in the case of Priscilla that most of us (myself included) overlook. With one exception, her name consistently appears *before* that of Aquila, her husband. This suggests that she enjoyed a higher degree of social status than he did, due perhaps to inherited wealth. Alternatively, it may have been her **authority** in the church that exceeded Aquila's. Perhaps she was a **superior teacher, a greater charismatic, or a more effective administrator** of the house church they ran. Whatever the reason, he "was remembered primarily as her husband" (Powell, p. 830).

After Priscilla, I might have also talked about Phoebe, the deacon Paul mentions in Romans 16.

She was the “benefactor” responsible for delivering the letter he wrote to the various house churches in Rome.

Because Paul mentions **nobody else** who would have delivered the letter, Phoebe may have been the one who read the letter to its recipients. “It is [accordingly] not at all far-fetched,” writes Beverly Gaventa in the *Women’s Bible Commentary*, “to identify Phoebe as the **first interpreter of Romans**, both in her informal comments to gathered believers at Rome and in her actual reading of the letter (reading any text aloud invariably interprets it, depending on the pace, stance, tone of voice, and many other factors).”

Thus, I may have concluded, while **male** Christians over the centuries have lifted up 1st Timothy’s admonition – which, like 2nd Timothy, was not written by Paul – that no woman may “teach or have authority over a man,” the accounts of Tabitha, Priscilla, and Phoebe all suggest otherwise. These women were among the first leaders of the church: they taught others the Way, they oversaw house churches, and they provided an example of what it meant to live for others.

No wonder Paul refers to them as his “coworkers” in Christ!

Mother’s Day, in turn, need not only be a celebration of women who bear or adopt children. From a Christian perspective, it should be a celebration of all women who, equal to men in the eyes of God, contribute just as much to Christian ministry as well as the broader society in which we live.

A Change of Plans

Then it happened.

On Monday, *Politico* broke the story of an impending Supreme Court decision that will likely revoke the federal right women presently have to an abortion.

Each state, in turn, would determine if women indeed possess “bodily autonomy,” that is, the right to decide for themselves whether they wish to carry a pregnancy to term.

The issue is one I have never (by intention) addressed from the pulpit. For one thing, it’s divisive. For another, it’s controversial. I can much more easily challenge my listeners to reexamine their theology, to rethink – as I did in my Easter Sunday sermon – their view of Christ’s atonement or the manner in which he was raised from the dead.

But abortion?

I am a man. What could I possibly say about the topic?

The truth is that most of us have a view on the subject, no matter where we fall on the gender spectrum. Why? Because “[i]t involves powerful feelings that are based on different life experiences and interpretations of Christian faith and life in the world.”

This morning, therefore, I want to share with you briefly my experience as well as what Scripture and Christian tradition actually say about the topic. I do so not to impose my (or any other) view on you, but to equip you with a *grace-centered* approach as you contemplate the issue for yourselves.

The Spanish Flu

Some of you have heard me talk about my great-grandmother, Ethel Pedersen. I mentioned her from the pulpit when we celebrated Queen Anne Lutheran's centennial back in 2018. Ethel died approximately one hundred years earlier. She was a victim of the Spanish Flu.

What I did **not** tell you about Ethel was that she was pregnant at the time. My grandfather had already been born. He was two.

I will **never forget** what he told me later in life, about twenty years ago now. The medical authorities knew even then, he said, that pregnant women were particularly susceptible dying from the virus. An abortion would have likely saved her life. However, the Catholic doctor attending to her refused to perform the procedure because of his faith. And so, Ethel (predictably) died.

This story had a **deep impact** on the way I view abortion.

While I would certainly encourage a woman in the context of pastoral care to consider the alternatives, especially adoption, in the end I firmly believe she possesses the right to choose for herself. Obviously, we do not all share the same experiences. Our stories differ, as do the conclusions we draw from them.

That said, as Christians we should focus first on what we do share. The ELCA's Social Statement on Abortion makes it clear: "We are united in Christ with all Christians in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." Beyond that, we believe in the Bible as a standard that offers guidance for our daily lives, and we hold fast to Christ, who gives us what the theologian William Hamilton calls "a place to stand."

So, what do Scripture and church tradition say on the subject? Let's find out.

Scripture

The Book of Exodus gives us with a starting point:

When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a *miscarriage*, and yet no further harm follows," it says, "the one responsible shall be *fined* what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Did you see that? A person responsible for causing a woman to miscarry shall pay a fine!

All of us know the saying, an eye for an eye. Perhaps we assume it justifies vengeance: if you do something bad to me, I can do something bad to you. Scholars, however, refer to it as the “law of retaliation,” which was actually meant to curb revenge by making the penalty commensurate with the crime.

Jesus explicitly rejects the law of retaliation in favor of forgiveness (see Matt 5:38-42), but let’s look at several significant details in the above passage anyway.

Recall first the word “miscarriage.” This is an interpretation of the Hebrew which literally says, “the baby falls out of her.” So, if two people while fighting cause a baby to fall out of a woman, what’s the punishment? The penalty, we learn, is *monetary*. It has nothing to do with the “sanctity of life.” Instead, a man’s *property* (i.e., the contents of his wife or concubine’s womb) has been destroyed and for that reason the perpetrator should be *fined*.

The punishment must fit the crime.

If the miscarriage were considered murder or manslaughter, the penalty would not be payment; it would be death. Rabbinical tradition would later deduce from this passage that a fetus is a part of the woman’s body, not a separate being. This means her life takes precedence over the life in her womb.

We should not be surprised, therefore, that many Jews today look upon the issue of abortion differently than Christians. Had my great-grandmother’s doctor been Jewish rather than Catholic, chances are she would have received an abortion and survived.

The health of the woman comes first.

How, then, do *Christians* read the Bible when it comes to abortion?

For those who identify as pro-life, Herod’s massacre of the innocents in Matthew 2:16 would be a pivotal story. This (for them) is what abortion is like. Abortion is the murder of children, the moral equivalent of slaughtering innocent people.

For Christians who identify as pro-choice, on the other hand, the story of Hagar in the Old Testament might take precedent.

“Abraham,” we read in Genesis, “rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.”

Now consider Hagar’s experience.

For many who call themselves pro-choice, this would be a perfect illustration of how the pro-life movement operates: powerful people, as represented by men like Abraham, seek to dictate the lives of women, controlling their bodies, only to abandon them to the wilderness after the child is born.

(I am indebted to my friend and former colleague, Dr. Kevin O’Brien of Pacific Lutheran University, a Christian ethicist, for supplying these examples. I am likewise

indebted to my friend and former colleague, Dr. Beatrice Lawrence of Seattle University, for explaining the meaning of the Hebrew in Exodus 21.)

Of course, the Bible never directly treats the topic of abortion, much less a host of other modern issues like nuclear proliferation or climate change. Nevertheless, we can see how people of faith can use it either to condemn or support a woman's right to choose.

So, what about church tradition? What does it say on the subject?

Tradition

This is going to surprise you.

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, easily the most significant Catholic theologian of the last thousand years, human life *does not* begin at conception. Instead, unborn life at this stage possesses only what Aristotle, the philosopher upon whom Aquinas relied, calls a "vegetative soul." Only at the end of the first trimester does God endow the "vegetative soul" with human qualities!

An abortion would thus be morally feasible for approximately the first three months of a pregnancy – at least according to the logic of the Catholic Church's most important theologian of the last thousand years. Had my great-grandmother's doctor read his Thomas Aquinas, he may have been more inclined to terminate the pregnancy to save her life, at least within the first 90 days.

Catholicism aside, let's consider what the Lutheran tradition has to offer as evident in its Social Statement on Abortion: "Inspired by Jesus' own ministry our love for neighbor embraces especially those who are most vulnerable, including **both** the pregnant woman **and** the life in her womb."

Notice the emphasis on both the mother and the life in her womb rather than simply one or the other. Three conclusions follow.

First, in cases where a pregnancy presents a threat to the physical life of the woman, the ELCA indicates that abortion is "morally responsible." Had my great grandmother had an ELCA Lutheran as her doctor, therefore, an abortion would have been feasible for the sake of potentially saving her life.

Second, in cases of rape and incest, which the Social Statement rightly condemns as "contrary to God's purposes," abortion is once again morally justifiable.

Third, instances of "extreme fetal abnormality" where the result would involve severe suffering or early death for the infant, the choice regarding how to proceed belongs to the mother.

These conclusions gave our church "a place to stand" back in 1991 when they were written. While many may wish the statement had gone further, we can at least appreciate the attention it gave to the life in her womb *as well as to the mother*.

We can also appreciate the recognition that this is not a black and white issue, and that we should always approach anyone affected by it with sympathy and grace rather than condemnation and judgment.

Finding a Way Forward

Our country seems to be at impasse. While politicians like Elizabeth Warren claim that nearly 70% of Americans favor reproductive rights for women, six justices sit on the bench of the Supreme Court apparently prepared to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

Partisan differences following *Politico's* disclosure of their presumed intent immediately arose, leading to massive demonstrations at the US Capitol as well as in a plethora of major US cities. What will happen?

As Christians, can Scripture and church tradition help us *find a way forward*?

For my part, I think the Lutheran tradition can help in a couple of ways. First, our church should be a “place of grace,” to quote the words of my esteemed predecessor, in keeping with the central teaching of the Protestant Reformation.

Second, as a church tradition born in the context of a university, we should give careful attention to the complexity of the issue. At the very least, exceptions exist that justify the moral permissibility of an abortion, especially when it comes to the health of the mother.

Third, in light of the **co-equal** nature men and women share as made in the image of God, something the early church recognized in the leadership of Phoebe, Tabitha, and Priscilla, we *might* want to consider trusting *women* with such a decision rather than allowing for primarily male legislatures and judicial bodies to take that choice away from them. This does not mean or imply we are “pro-abortion,” but it certainly would make us pro-choice.

Conclusion

We have seen three ways forward – that we should approach the issue and the people involved with sensitivity and grace; that we should resist *cognitive shortcuts* that reduce abortion to a black and white issue; that we should trust women to make difficult decisions just as men of the early church trusted women like Phoebe, Priscilla, and Tabitha to be fellow leaders or co-workers in the ministry of Christ.

Ultimately, of course, whichever position you take remains yours. May God help us all find a way forward.

Amen.