

Choose Life Abundant

Rev. Sarah Campbell

February 13, 2022

We were gathered around an outdoor fire. It had been a long and rich day together on retreat. We were about to say good night. That's when the subject of abortion came up, in a very personal way. Several of the women gathered shared that they had had an abortion.

This was our annual women's spirituality retreat at my last church, which was a purple church, probably more Republicans, in one of the most conservative cities in the US Grand Rapids Michigan.

I helped lead these yearly multi-generational women's retreats filled which were filled with bible study, sharing, and rituals. I was so gratified that evening that the women felt enough trust to share their personal stories.

But this is not so unusual-- when women are talking honestly about our lives-- that it is often deeply connected to our bodies... Our bodies. Ourselves... to issues of fertility, breast cancer, miscarriage, abortion, birth, adoption. There is more to women than our bodies, but our bodies are not incidental to our lives.

It's not surprising that so many stories about women in the Bible touch on these same body themes—fertility, pregnancy, adoption... remember the story of Miriam and the baby? Though too often we forget or overlook all the other stories about women in the Bible, their leadership, their courage, their wisdom. Remember the other story of Miriam, during the exodus?

There are two subjects I swore I'd never preach about... (why? not sure... because there are so many different opinions that are so close to people hearts?... because the subjects are so sensitive that I couldn't see the ultimate purpose in raising the issue?... because scripture is very unclear...not sure...) But this morning, after thirty years of ordained ministry, I'm choosing to preach on one of my two taboo subjects. Abortion.

Has this subject ever been addressed from this pulpit before? I don't know. But I wouldn't be surprised given the history of this ground-breaking church in two areas. Women in leadership. And human sexuality education in our Sunday school, now called OWL. Was it the 1970s when Mayflower first gained its reputation in South Minneapolis as the church that talked with kids about sex and birth control?

I don't know if I'm the right person to preach about this. I may not say what you want or expect. I thought of trying to weave in numerous perspectives, or trying to reflect more fully and adequately the UCCs national voice on this subject, but I find I can't do this. See what I mean about this being a sensitive subject? I will preach from this pulpit with authenticity about my beliefs, but you must promise to talk to one another about your story, your experiences, your beliefs and how they've changed, if they have, and not be silenced. And do send me your thoughts. Women's voices need to be privileged but men are invited into this conversation also. (If you are a patriarchal, misogynistic man who believes in the submission of women, you will need to listen a lot more.)

This is **not** a time for silence on this issue. Especially from the churches. Those who claim the voice of the Christian on this subject can not speak on our behalf. Abortion is once again being criminalized in parts of our country and at risk of being criminalized in the nation as the Supreme Court revisits Roe vs. Wade. This means criminal penalties for doctors and civil fines for women, no matter their impoverishment.

I want to assert two assumptions about abortion.

1. There are more diverse and nuanced opinions than we might expect in the progressive church
2. There is more common ground than we might realize in the two "opposing camps", often called pro-choice and pro-life.

I don't know when it was that I strayed a bit from the feminist path that I was raised on. My mom was a Ms. Magazine, UCC, YWCA feminist through and through. Ms. magazine was always on our coffee table while I was growing up. Mostly I'm glad for that... And my grandmother, my mother's mother?... I remember one week when I was in high school and she was staying with me while my parents were gone, and that was the week that my Women's Consciousness-raising Group was meeting at our home and the speaker from the university, with her big tackle box, was going to teach us about birth control methods. I told my working class, first generation, Czech American grandmother from Chicago, what was about to go down in our house and she said, as she walked up the stairs to give us our space: "Good for you girls! That's so important!"

Yes, I was raised with the Ms. Magazine language about abortion, with euphemisms like "tissue extraction" But at some point, I left *that* way of speaking about abortion behind...

Was it that first year when I was in seminary, UTS, a very liberal seminary, and I was spending hours absorbing the beauty and the meaning of the biblical poetry of the psalms-- like today's passage, that attempt to put words to the awe of the unspeakable mysteries of life-- and reflecting more systematically than ever before on the miracles of creation, being itself, and love. And at the same time, that first year in seminary, I was going to the doctor's office with my spouse every few months, and looking at an image on the ultra sound screen, of that being taking shape in my body, and hearing the never to be forgotten cherished sound "woo, woo, woo" and then feeling the quickening, the feeling of a body inside my body... New life...surely one of the greatest miracles of existence! My perspective enlarged and that Ms. magazine language = did not work for me anymore.

When does personal human life begin? Is it primarily a theological or a medical question? Or both? It's a real question. And the answers differ between religions and even within religions. From the 1971 UCC General Synod resolution regarding freedom of choice, I quote: "Although a form of life exists in the sperm and the unfertilized ovum, a new kind of life emerges at the moment of their union. Many regard conception (up to 72 hours after coitus), others implantation (7 days) as the beginning of an inviolable life. Alternative candidates for the beginning of significantly human life are the final fixing of the genetic code (3 weeks), the first central nervous system activity (12 weeks). Some time after the 12th week quickening occurs, the mother can feel the arm and leg movements of the fetus. "Viability", in the present state of technology, begins between the 20th and 28th weeks and the fetus has a chance for survival outside the womb." Again, religions differ in their answer to the question. Judaism, at least one strand of it, "does not legally see a fetus as a person, but as a potential life." And note that: "Abortion is legal in every major Orthodox Christian country". (Demacopoulos quoted in Washington Post article.) We can't avoid the question... though the answer is anything but clear.

In my first ministry setting as a campus minister (with UMHE, mainline protestants...) I worked closely with the Catholic Newman Center and the Lutheran Campus Ministry, and we did some exploration together, with students and faculty, about whether we could find common ground between the so called "pro-life" and "pro-choice" camps. In conversation we discovered *a lot* of common ground. We agreed, though the Catholics had to be a little more careful with their public stance, that excellent human sexuality education should be widely available; that birth control should be easily accessible; that the social safety net needs to be made much more family friendly with universal health care access, paid parental leave, childcare assistance and more; and that the path for professional success for women needs to be more open and varied, more inviting of different reproductive choices.

With some people of faith, the common ground continues. With some, it can't. You organize around what you can agree on and then you move on and organize with others. Many of us, from different religions, Catholic, orthodox, Jewish, UCC, believe that ultimately women must have the choice for their own bodies, but that the goal is fewer abortions, and that abortion is not just another birth control measure. And what we know, from countries like the Netherlands, is that the lowest abortion rates are in countries that have comprehensive sexuality education, widespread availability of contraceptives, a compassionate social safety net, *and* legal, safe, and accessible abortion. Restrictive laws do not reduce the number of abortions but only increase the rate of unsafe abortions.

As a Christian preacher, which means, a practicing, non-academic though always engaged in continuing education, theologian and Christian ethicist, I understand only too well that there is a reason why abortion is morally unsettling. And I am left wondering, could it be that abortion is both a tragedy (and by tragedy I mean a very bad event that causes great sadness, a sorrowful event, and not a calamity or catastrophe that destines a lifetime...); could it be that abortion is both a tragedy *and* a social good? Could it be that Christian ethics is not always black and white, that we can hold seemingly contradictory views?

Jesus, our messenger of God, came to tell us that we are meant to have life abundant. He spoke especially to the marginalized, the oppressed, saying you are not meant to stay asleep, and you are not meant to stay in the roles laid out for you by those in power. Caste is not God's will. Women were at the heart of the Jesus movement. He taught them. They taught him. Biology affects us profoundly, especially women. But it is not destiny. We are not chattel. We are all meant to have abundant life, to choose our life with whole sight and responsibility and love. How can an unborn life ever be more important than the woman's life? Let us be thankful for modern science and medicine that makes safe abortions possible so that women in dire straits can choose abundant life for themselves.

We *are* in a most concerning time in our country for women. For our bodies, ourselves. Mayflower, will there come a time in the not-so-distant future when we, as a faithful church on the Jesus path, will harbor women from states that have constricted or eliminated access to abortion? Will we harbor them, care for them, pay for their travel, support them while they seek an abortion in our state? In the meantime, let us keep to our work-- human sexuality education for our children at church, and our justice work for a strong social safety net, and political organizing around women's reproductive choice at the state and national level. We must, or women and our trans siblings will die or be trapped in a life not of their own choosing.

Looking back on those women's retreats in my last church I wonder why we didn't create rituals about the womb. Our bodies, ourselves, our wombs, whether about infertility, or miscarriage, or adoption, or birth, or abortion... Why didn't we create a ritual around abortion, knowing that probably ¼ of us had experienced this life event? Not a ritual of confession or regret, but a ritual that acknowledges the truth of this sorrowful but necessary event in our lives. There's a beautiful Jewish Abortion. (I will attach the source to my sermon manuscript) Here are just a few of the words from this ritual... She says: "I come here today to commemorate a potential life and to affirm my decision to abort. This has not been an easy decision for the following reasons".... which she shares. The community says: "We recognize your pain in this decision and are here to help you move through this." She prays: "O merciful one, grant me the hope and courage I need to accept my decision to have an abortion. My tears, represented by the salt water, wash away my pain, and I am ready to move into a state of affirming my life, moving on from this difficult place".... The leader says: "May the one who blessed our foremothers, Sarah, Esther, Deborah and Miriam, bless, heal and renew, her name is spoken... May the Healer give her support and strength, patience of spirit and courage. May she be thoroughly healed in spirit and in body. We are ready to affirm life as it will now be. We acknowledge that you made the best decision for your life at the time and honor your right to do so....As Jewish women through the centuries have had to make hard decisions, we remind you of our chain of tradition. We urge you to find strength in it." Those are some of the words of this ritual...

I end with these words from this pulpit:

May we do everything we can to prevent the need for abortions.

May we keep abortion safe and accessible for all.

May we who have had an abortion acknowledge its significance to our soul.

Sources

Abortion Ritual, by Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael found on the site RitualWell.

General Synod Statements and Resolutions Regarding Freedom of Choice, United Church of Christ, starting with Eighth General Synod, 1971.

Boorstein, Michelle, "The threat to Roe v. Wade is driving a religious movement for reproductive choice", Washington Post, Feb. 5, 2022.

Davies, Chris, "Let's Talk About Abortion", Feb 18, 2021.

Green, Emma, "A Pastor's Case for the Morality of Abortion", The Atlantic, May 26, 2019.

Richardson, Cecile,

Warren, Tish Harrison, "The Systemic Realities Created by Legal Abortion", Opinion, Jan. 22, 2022. And Readers responses, To the Editor, Feb 6, 2022, New York Times.

