Malcolm Clemens Young Acts 11:1-18

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco 2C22 Psalm 148

5 Easter (Year C) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist Rev. 21:1-6

Sunday 15 May 2022 John 13:31-35

**Theology and Abortion**

“I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more” (Rev. 21).

I try to preach each sermon as if it was going to be my last one, because what we do together every Sunday deeply matters. We are trying to do no less than help each other to grow in grace, to more completely become children of God, to allow Jesus through the Spirit to guide our lives. We seek to be forgiven.

This morning I want to address the difficult question of what we need to know about theology and abortion. A draft opinion from the Supreme Court became public last week. We learned that a majority of justices had privately voted to strike down Roe versus Wade.[[1]](#endnote-1) Since then we have heard many legal, moral, legislative and medical opinions. But what do these events mean to us as people of faith?

Old Puritan sermons used a three part structure. They began with a biblical text, then described a related doctrine or idea and then spoke about its application in our lives. I am going to use a similar structure today as we address a very difficult question.

1. Text. John of Patmos from his island exile writes in poetic terms about the goal of the world. He imagines the biggest picture of what all creation strives for, “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21). And then he adds a puzzling phrase, “and the sea was no more.” Karl Barth writes that in the Old Testament the ocean stands as a symbol of powerful chaos somehow outside the order of God.

My friend the New Testament scholar Herman Waetjen offers a more helpful explanation of what the sea means as a symbol. He calls it “the order of separation.” It is what divides us from them (in the way that the ocean separates Europe from North America).[[2]](#endnote-2) It stands for why we experience life as opposition and conflict against others, rather than as unity or harmony. God moves us toward the intimacy that our hearts long for.

This morning we also have two stories about Peter and his confrontation with “the order of separation.” Unlike the other gospels the Gospel of John does not have a eucharistic meal at its center. Instead it has long speeches and most importantly an action. Jesus strips off his shirt, kneels before his students and washes their feet. He says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another” (Jn. 13).

At first Peter resists Jesus’ offer to wash his feet. And Jesus’ action still upsets our expectations about value, hierarchy and what is clean. Jesus explains that this way of dignifying another person is how God is glorified. It is how we build bridges to others, how we overcome the order of separation.

Finally we have Peter’s dream. Peter believed that following Jesus was something that only Jewish people should do. Then he dreamed of a sheet being lowered from heaven with unclean animals and a voice heaven telling him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 11). God invited Peter to move beyond his preconceptions, to share meals with non-Jews and to recognize them as holy. Peter responds saying, “Who was I that I could hinder God?”[[3]](#endnote-3)

2. Doctrine. How do we approach abortion in the spirit of overcoming “the order of separation,” in the attitude of someone kneeling to wash the feet of another person, in a world where God is challenging our vision of what is clean and pure? One of my best friends at Harvard was a young theologian named Matt Boulton. The rest of my sermon borrows a great deal from his careful thought about this issue.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Matt reminds us that everything we say about this must come out of an attitude of empathy and respect. He begins by explaining that life is precious. This week I looked at all the references to the word “womb” in the Bible. Most of these convey an aura of intimacy, mystery and holiness. We can understand why people might believe that human life begins at conception. Through history some great Christian teachers have taught that abortion is morally unacceptable. Matt writes, “To believe on Christian theological grounds, that in certain circumstances abortion is wrong is a conviction worthy of respect.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

But there is more. Life is precious. A pregnant person’s life is precious. Human dignity involves the freedom to determine our own future. Jesus does not saying anything about abortion or reproductive health. The Bible includes passages that suggest that human life begins with one’s first breath. It also includes ones that distinguish between the well-being of a pregnant woman and that of a developing fetus.[[6]](#endnote-6) Great theologians such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas have taught that abortion is not homicide in the early stages of pregnancy. So to believe on Christian grounds that human beings have the right to have an abortion is a conviction worthy of respect.

Part of what makes life so precious is the sanctity of our conscience, this freedom to decide for ourselves as we seek answers to the most personal and mysterious questions we encounter as human beings. This is especially the case when it comes to matters in which reasonable, thoughtful, faithful people disagree. What greater mystery faces us than this question of when one becomes two? How can any of us know when life begins? Then there is the question of what other criteria matter? How do we take into account sexual violence, incest? Should not the age, mental and physical health of the mother matter? What about other life circumstances such as the way poverty restricts our ability to have power over own lives?

These are such profound questions. Every situation is different. It is not a simple matter that can be easily and permanently resolved. Each person has to decide. No one should be coerced to deviate from their conscience because that is the place we so often meet God.

Matt writes about the conviction of the founding fathers that God does not impose orthodoxy on us by force and we should not impose our opinions about orthodoxy on others. Force should have no place when it comes to questions of belief and conscience especially on such personal, complex and profound matters.[[7]](#endnote-7)

These are some of the reasons that in 1967 a group of clergy was formed to help women to obtain access to information and to safe, accessible abortion procedures. The group was called the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion. They had chapters in 38 states and 3000 clergy were involved. The mission was simple “to offer compassion.”

Even though fifty years have passed since then, for me compassion is still the crucial issue at stake in these matters: compassion for people of conscience who disagree with us, compassion for people who would make different choices than we would make. But above all we need to show compassion for women who have faced painful decisions in the past and those who are vulnerable, afraid or alone today. Is there a way for Christian people to overcome the order of separation, to kneel before them and tenderly wash their feet?

3. Application. Compassion needs to be our guide as we try to understand what to do about abortion. But it also needs to direct us in everything else too. In the prayer book you will find a prayer attributed to St. Francis. “Lord, make us an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred let us sow love, where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith…”[[8]](#endnote-8) What can we do to be an instrument of God’s compassion in our lives today?

Let me share one example. Psychologists point out that on a subconscious level we are constantly comparing ourselves with others and determining who else fits in our group. This is part of the reason why the abortion question is even more complicated than it seems on the surface. Our ideas about abortion are part of how we define who our people are.

Brené Brown recognizes this in her book *Atlas of the Heart*. While it is natural to compare and sort by identity, she believes it is important for us to pay attention to the way we respond to these observations. The German language has a wonderful word for helping us to understand our inner life. It is Schadenfreude. This word means to take joy from someone else’s suffering. It describes the satisfaction that we feel when bad things happen to other people. We all saw this during COVID when newspaper reporters crossed the line into gloating over the deaths of anti-Vaxers.[[9]](#endnote-9)

At a deep level we realize that Schadenfreude is fundamentally anti-Christian and comes out of our insecurity. Many of you have heard this idea before. But I wonder how many of you know about Freudenfreude. This is the opposite of Schadenfreude and means to take joy in the joys of others.

Brown writes that lack of Freudenfreude is fundamentally destructive of our relationships. When she talks about this with children she tells them to imagine themselves holding a kind of flame in their open hands. Some people will try to blow that flame out but your friends will come and cup their hands around it to protect it from the wind.

Abortion is such a complicated issue. This mystery about the beginning of life has come to be surrounded by such fear and anger. The world needs you now. This week for homework. I want you to explicitly seek moments when you can offer Freudenfreude, when you can cup your hands around another person’s dimly burning light.

How will you overcome the order of separation? How will you dignify another person’s soul as if by kneeling before them and washing their feet? How is God inviting us to move beyond our preconceptions into a new mysterious realm of love?

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/05/02/us/roe-v-wade-abortion-supreme-court>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I’m grateful for my Monday Bible Study friend Stan Vonog who helped me to understand this. In Waetjen’s words, “Separation is the space between “us and them.”  It is the space that we establish within us between the social, political, cultural and religious truths we embrace as our identity and the actualities of otherness that we reject.  Separation splits the world into two opposed structures of reality and engenders consequences in the lives of human beings and in the structures of society that are injurious, crushing and destructive.” Herman Waetjen, “The Realities of Separation. How Deeply It Is Embedded in Our Psychic Structure!” University of Redlands, 8 October 2018. <https://www.redlands.edu/study/schools-and-centers/gst/sfts-alumni/continue-your-education/hermans-hermeneutics/the-realities-of-separation-how-deeply-it-is-embedded-in-our-psychic-structure/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life (Acts 11).” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew Myers Boulton, “A Brief Theology of Abortion,” *SALT*, 10 May 2022. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2022/5/5/a-brief-theology-of-abortion> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For instance, “When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, 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…” (Ex. 21:22). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Matt calls this, “the intimate arena of belief and disbelief, particularly when the questions before us are genuinely complex and mysterious.” Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. “A Prayer Attributed to St. Francis,” Prayer 62 *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (NY: Random House, 2021) 33-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)