

“The Need for Both Law & Grace in Protecting the Unborn”

Exodus 20:13

January 24, 2021 (Sanctity of Human Life Sunday)

Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service

Pastor Nicoletti

WHY ARE CHRISTIANS SO PASSIONATE ABOUT PROTECTING THE UNBORN?

It is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday.

We have heard a report on the work of CareNet.

And as we think about this topic, it might be good to begin with a question: Why are Christians so passionate about protecting the unborn?

For most of you the answer is obvious, but for others, it is maybe worth reviewing.

Often in the political sphere, the question is answered in negative ways. Pro-life advocates want to control women’s bodies. Pro-life advocates are against choice and autonomy for women. Pro-life advocates are indifferent to the struggles that an unplanned pregnancy can bring to a woman. And we could go on.

The answer that Christians give is different, and despite how complex this issue can be, their answer is fairly straightforward. The Scriptures, the historic teaching of the Church, and modern biology all tell us that an unborn embryo or fetus is a human life.

Which makes abortion the unjust taking of a human life. It makes abortion then an act of murder – and the murder of the most vulnerable.

The Scriptures assure us that every human life is precious, for every human being is made in the image of God.

Many writers have talked about this in many different ways.

One of the more powerful presentations I have read is by a midwife named Nora Calhoun, who wrote an article for *First Things* titled “Learning from Bodies.”

I’m actually going to read the entire article for you. I do apologize to a few of you – I read this same article at a prayer meeting about five and a half years ago. But I thought it worth returning to tonight.

Calhoun begins:

The baby in my arms lacks the majority of his brain. He was born just fifteen minutes before this moment, and he is likely to die before another fifteen minutes pass. He has taken no first breath and will give no first cry. He cannot see. He cannot hear. He does not feel the warm weight of my hand as it rests on his chest and belly. I quietly weep and pray

as the last gift of oxygen his mother's body gave him dwindles and his rosy newborn glow fades to gray. His soul gently slips out of his body, and his life ends.

Ability is not what makes death significant. At birth this baby had capacities below that of a healthy fetus at ten weeks. Holding his body, living and then dead, proves to me that it doesn't matter how early the human heart beats, how early it is possible to feel pain, or when the senses develop. No ability or strength confers human status—not being viable or sentient or undamaged or wanted. Being of human descent is enough; you cannot earn or forfeit your humanity. If this baby's death does not matter, no death matters.

I have not always seen this so clearly. A gut repugnance and horror of abortion, which I felt from the time I first heard of it as a nine-year-old, kept me from ever being fully pro-choice. But even after my conversion to Christianity at eighteen, I didn't want to express full opposition to the opinions of almost everyone I knew, my family, teachers, and friends. I wanted to avoid the taboo of "judgmentalism," widely imputed to those who oppose abortion, and to maintain credibility among the feminist friends I cherished.

I might eventually have reasoned my way into truths about life, death, and human dignity—perhaps, given the right information and friends and graces, but probably not. A jumble of allegiances, caricatures, arguments, and fears dictated my opinions. But bodies speak a different language; they teach in different terms. The images and touch memories of the small body of that severely damaged baby boy whom I held as he died only minutes after being born could not be explained away, caricatured, ignored, or debated.

The flushed, grunting woman whose face I cradle in my hands is pushing out her baby. She has rocked and groaned her way through sixteen intense hours, and now the baby's head is crowning. She had stood and swayed while I massaged her back, squatted while I supported her weight, sweated while I wiped her brow, hummed and sighed while I whispered encouragement. Her hair is wild, her eyes half shut, her attention completely inward. Now she reaches down to touch her baby's emerging head, and with a shout of surrender and welcome she releases him to the midwife's waiting hands. As she gathers her son in her arms, she croons, "My baby, my baby, oh my baby!" She is exultant.

Her body tells a bold truth: Women don't need to be rescued; they are strong far beyond society's imagining. They don't need to be protected from the children conceived within their bodies; they don't need doctors to violate their wombs in order to "save" them from the "burden" within. Women are not so weak that they can handle the rigors of motherhood only if the conditions are perfect, the correct products purchased, careers neatly arranged, the approval of those in power secured. Women are not so fragile that they can delight in their children only when their own needs and desires are entirely satisfied.

Birth is a momentous occasion, a radical change in state. In the moment a child separates from his mother's body, a profound physical and personal unity ends. We do not need to be afraid of acknowledging and even proclaiming the unity of a mother and her unborn baby. Insisting on the autonomy of the unborn requires a willful blindness to the physical reality and lived experience of pregnancy and birth. But more than that, it capitulates to the idolatry of autonomy, both as the primary criterion of personhood and the elusive prize worth killing for.

These truths became undeniable to me after being with many, many women as they gave birth. Certain turns of phrase common at my intensely secular, feminist university suddenly sounded discordant. Ways of thinking about gender that I had previously

accepted unquestioningly began to seem, basically, silly. Birth, experienced over and over, asserted itself as the fundamental truth, and those ideas that did not conform to this living reality stopped having power over me.

At the same time, as I began to attend births regularly, I also began to spend time with the elderly and dying. That also changed me.

She is ninety-eight, an amputee from diabetes, senile. We speak quietly together, and though there is no logical thread to the conversation, it follows the rhythms and intonations of an intimate discussion: “I just want . . . this . . . just lying here like a bagel . . . not anymore.” To the emotion I hear behind her words, I reply, “I know, you’re so tired. It’s all right. You can rest soon.” She hates her adult diaper and constantly plucks at its waistband. She is small, frail, worried, dying. We hold hands. I stroke her hair and give her sips of water from a straw. She gets her pain medications and drifts off into a nap.

As the body and mind deteriorate, the dying are not less themselves. Dementia steals the faculties for expressing the self—language, memory, personality—but the self remains, albeit largely inaccessible to others. The experience of actually being with the demented and dying is one of watching someone move farther and farther away, out of earshot and eventually out of sight. It’s wrong to think, “Because I cannot access something, it does not exist.” Being with someone who is near death undermines such nonsense.

If people are as much themselves when there is no chance of further accomplishment, activity, or self-expression, then the fact that the unborn may grow up to great accomplishment, activity, or self-expression is irrelevant. That a precious child with Down syndrome may some day compete in the Special Olympics is irrelevant. Another precious child with a different genetic abnormality will spend all his days in a state that most of us will inhabit only at the end of our lives, if ever: incapable of communication, incontinent, compromised in language, memory, intellect, and personality. The compassion we show to the dying is not earned by the things they “used to be” any more than it should be earned by the things that the unborn might become. We will all end up in a state of total incapacity and inaccessibility, some for a long time and some only briefly.

I have now spent a lot of time with other people’s bodies—very old bodies and very new bodies, severely disabled, sick, or just plain worn-out bodies, bodies in labor, bodies that are well and strong, and the bodies left behind by death. Looking back, I realize that changing my mind about abortion was actually one of the least significant steps toward becoming truly pro-life. There are things that can be learned—can be said—only in the language of bodies. There is a specific wisdom to be gained through the experience of being with actual people: their actual pregnancies, illnesses, births, and deaths. And many of the lessons that bodies teach can barely be translated into words.

We stand to gain so much by learning those lessons. Having a big family, or living with our grandparents, or working in hospice, or being a doula or doctor or what have you, is not necessarily everyone’s calling—but the corporal works of mercy are open to us all. We need to draw on the experience of spending our time and energy on the care of other people’s bodies. If we confine ourselves to ideas that are best suited to legislation, picket signs, and the combox, we will lose the richest vocabulary of human dignity, one better expressed in embraces and diaper changes than in words. If we let bodies speak to us in their own language, by being present to them and offering the gifts of touch and physical care, we can learn what is truly at stake and why it matters.

Nora Calhoun conveys for us that human life, by its very nature, is precious.

Vulnerable human life is especially worthy of our care and protection.

The next question for us to consider is: When it comes to the unborn, what does that protection look like for us?

Printed in the bulletin is the sixth commandment: “You shall not murder.”

It’s there not because I want to use it to drive home the heinousness of abortion – though it is a heinous act.

It’s there because I want to consider in a holistic way what this commandment calls us to, and what it means for our role in protecting the unborn.

The Westminster Catechisms are a good place to start.

The Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechism each go through the ten commandments, and discuss what the commandment forbids for us, and what it requires of us.

The Larger Catechism is more detailed, but the Shorter might get to the point in a more focused way.

There we read this:

“The sixth commandment require[s] all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, and the life of others.” And “The sixth commandment forbid[s] the taking away of our own life, or the life of our neighbor unjustly, or whatsoever tend[s] thereunto.”

The Catechism gives us here a holistic sense of calling to protect and preserve life – not only to refrain from taking it, but to consider how we are called to promote and preserve the life of others.

The Larger Catechism takes that and goes into more detail – including even our calling to protect our own lives through being careful about how much we eat, how much we drink, and how much sleep we get. We won’t read the Larger Catechism in detail, but the point it helps us see is that the principle here in the shorter catechism is to be applied in all sorts of ways.

Tonight, I want to reflect on what that holistic calling looks like for us when it comes to protecting the unborn. And I want to do that by considering it from two angles: the role of the law and the role of grace.

THE LAW & PROTECTING THE UNBORN

First, the role of the law in protecting the unborn.

And here I actually don't primarily mean the moral law of God – as important as that is – but the civil law, the laws of the civil authorities – the laws enforced by the state in our land.

And with that, I want to give a brief defense of the political activism of Christians in this area.

Some of you may be shocked to hear that such political activism needs to be defended. But among younger generations of evangelicals, political activism against abortion is sometimes looked down upon.

One of the chief purposes of the civil law is to protect the powerless against the powerful. And the pro-life appeal to the law is exactly along those lines. Many of the same people who hesitate to advocate for the outlawing of elective abortions are the same who in many other areas of life believe that the law should be used to protect those who are vulnerable and in need – but the pro-life appeal to the law is exactly that.

If the unborn are human beings, deserving dignity and the support and protection of others, then elective abortion should be illegal.

Abortion should be illegal in order to protect the life of the unborn.

Abortion should be illegal in order to spare people from the temptation to seek an abortion when they are desperate.

Abortion should be illegal to prevent others from being able to put pressure on a woman to have an abortion.

In these ways and more, the civil law is a valid, and important arena for Christians to seek to protect the unborn.

That said ... whatever might be achieved at a national level, or in other states, realism keeps us from having high hopes that the law regarding elective abortions will change much any time soon here in Washington State.

While the legal process is one area that Christians should be active on this topic, a legal focus alone is not sufficient for us.

It can be tempting for Christians to think that because they have voted pro-life, they have done their duty – they can check that box. But such a vote is often more of a symbolic act in our state than it is something that will really change the situation here on the ground.

Which leads us to consider the second dimension of protecting the unborn: The role of grace.

GRACE & PROTECTING THE UNBORN

There is a lot that we could say about the role of grace and mercy in protecting the unborn.

We could talk about ministries like CareNet, and how we could support them, or serve in the work that they are doing. That is important, which is why we have heard about the work of that ministry together this evening.

We could talk also about adoption, or foster care, or other ways that Christians can care for children whose parents are not able to care for them.

Christians should support and serve in ministries like CareNet, and they should seriously consider if the Lord may be calling them to serve children in need through foster care or other means.

But tonight I want to focus on something even more basic. I want to focus on how the grace of God in the gospel should shape the kind of people we are, the kind of parents we are, and the kind of congregation we are, in relation to this issue.

And to do that, I want to consider Luke 15:11-32:

¹¹ [Jesus] said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Jesus tells us that the father here in this parable is a picture of our heavenly Father. This is what our God is like. He embraces sinners. And he embraces sinners far worse than this prodigal son.

He embraced tax collectors, who used their power to plunder their neighbors, and he embraced prostitutes, who were despised by the people.

He embraced and restored David, a man guilty of adultery and murder.

He embraced and called Paul as an apostle – a man who had persecuted the church and assisted in the murder of God’s people.

Our God is a God who forgives and embraces sinners.

And that means at least four things when it comes to grace, abortion, and the unborn.

First, it means that if you have taken part in abortion – if you have had one, if you’ve encouraged someone to have one, if you have in some role performed one – then the grace described by Jesus in this parable is available to you.

If you turn to God and you confess your sin, and you seek him in humility, he will not only forgive you, he will not only receive you, he will embrace you.

That is the God we serve in Jesus Christ. That is how our God receives sinners.

If abortion is part of your story, then believe that grace again tonight. And if you haven’t talked to anyone about your story, I encourage you to share your story with someone here, and especially to seek assistance in processing that experience with someone at CareNet.

The first thing this parable means regarding the grace of God is that the father of the prodigal son shows us how God will receive those who seek his grace after an abortion.

The second thing this parable means for us is that if we are the people of God, then the father in this parable is also a picture of what we should be like.

We are, after all, to love as he loves – we are to love others as he has loved us – and so we must be a community that embraces those who have abortion as a part of their story. Neither we nor they must doubt that the blood of Christ is able to cleanse them. And neither we nor they should ever doubt that they have a place here in the family of God.

But our imitation of God in this parable should not stop there, actually. It goes further.

Because third, this parable gives us a picture of how we, as the Church, should embrace outsiders who come to us with a need connected to an unplanned pregnancy. And here, we need to think seriously about our attitude towards those who have made mistakes.

We are called, as the people of God, to be a people who will embrace those who are struggling in sin or brokenness.

That means we need to be a place that is concerned with embracing women with unplanned pregnancies, embracing pregnant couples with financial needs (even if those needs are of their own

making), and embracing single parents who come to be a part of our fellowship. And embracing means that when people in those situations come to us, we not only connect them with good outside ministries, like CareNet (though we very well may do that), we not only work to help them financially (though we very well may do that too), but we also seek know them, to enter into a relationship with them, and to care for them in the midst of their struggles – not in a condescending way, but as people who embrace others just as we ourselves have been embraced by Christ.

As one CareNet spokesperson has put it, we need to be ready to embrace those dealing with unplanned, unexpected, or unexpectedly complicated pregnancies in such a way that “the local abortion clinic never looks like a more compassionate alternative to the local church.” [CareNet]

That’s how we need to follow the example of our loving heavenly Father when it comes to outsiders.

But even more than that, it is how we need to care for those closest to us. It’s how we need to care for our insiders.

According to Care Net’s research, nearly four out of ten women who had abortions were attending church once a month or more at the time of their first abortion.

The problem isn’t just outside the church. It’s also in the church.

And when it comes to our covenant children, the implications of that can be distressing. Because, what does it say about the Church if, when a covenant child falls into sin, and becomes unexpectedly pregnant, or unexpectedly gets someone pregnant – what does it say about the Church if that covenant child would be tempted to choose abortion instead of coming to their Christian parents or their Christian church for help?

It would seem to say that rightly or wrongly, they believe that the pain and devastation of abortion is still better than the shame, anger, or condemnation they would experience at home or at their church.

We can talk about grace here – we can talk about mercy. But if our covenant children do not feel that they can come to their parents or come to someone here at our church and say “I’m pregnant, and I need help” or “I got someone pregnant, and we need help” – if they cannot do that, then they at least do not believe that we are a community of grace; they do not believe that we are a people who mirror the grace of God that is pictured in the father of the prodigal son.

How do we tend to talk about the sins of others ... and how does that shape our children’s perception of how they will be viewed if their sin becomes known to us? Do we show our children mercy in the little things of life that teaches them that they can come to us if there is ever a big need for mercy?

Civil law gets a lot of attention in most discussions on protecting the unborn – and of course it should.

But for us, today, in our state, right now, it is mercy that will be far more consequential in how we protect the unborn:

Mercy that welcomes those who have sinned and made mistakes, responding not with judgment, but with grace – not with suspicion, but with loving embrace.

Mercy that embraces those who have participated in abortion in the past, and that never doubts that the same blood that cleanses us, also cleanses them.

Mercy that tells the single man or woman among us that if they come to an unplanned pregnancy, they will find more mercy and compassion here than they will find at an abortion clinic.

Mercy that tells the women and men here that if they have a need, they will not be judged for it, but we will seek to provide for them with joy, from our abundance.

Mercy that is so much a part of our everyday relationships that just as much as our covenant children know what we believe about the law of God, to at least the same extent, they also know the mercy and grace that we practice, and they do not doubt that whatever they may do, whatever mistakes they may make, whatever plans they may derail, whatever embarrassments they may cause, when they come to us, we – their nuclear family and their church family – will not hesitate to embrace them, and to love them, and to call them our own.

We are called to protect the unborn with the law when possible. But we are called to protect the unborn with the gospel always.

And so, let us be a congregation that lives the gospel, and so blesses people made in God's image: men, women, children, and those not yet born.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Calhoun, Nora. "Learning from Bodies." *First Things*. August, 2014.

<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/08/learning-from-bodies>

Care Net. "How Christians Can Stop Funding the Abortion Industry." April 26, 2018. <https://www.care-net.org/abundant-life-blog/how-christians-can-stop-funding-the-abortion-industry>