

“Sanctity of Human Life: Learning from the Past for the Future”
January 22, 2023 – Sanctity of Human Life Sunday
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pastor Nicoletti

Introduction

It has been our custom, the last few years, on Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, to not only hear a report about the work of CareNet, and pray on this topic, but to consider it in our evening sermon as well.

And as I prepared for tonight ... I was struck by how many ways we might address this topic with all that has happened in last year.

We might talk about what has changed with the Dobbs decision, in a post-Roe America. We might consider what the church is called to, in a post-Roe culture. We might engage in the questions circulating the pro-life movement now about what kind of social policies Christians should support in a post-Roe world. We might talk about the role of faithful political engagement leading up to this decision, and what it should look like going forward. There is so much we could talk about, and each of those aspects of things could, I think, be both interesting and beneficial.

Each one of those topics takes as a starting point how much has changed in the past year. And, indeed, a lot truly has changed.

And yet ... here in Washington State ... much remains the same. Abortion was legal in Washington state before Roe v. Wade, and on the essential question of abortion access, the overturning of Roe has had no real effect. If anything, it has only strengthened the resolve of pro-abortion-rights advocates in our state to work to try to even more firmly secure abortion access going forward. In a 2022 poll in Washington state 61% of those polled said they believed that abortion should be mostly legal, while only 34% said they thought it should be mostly illegal. [<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/04/upshot/polling-abortion-states.html>]

And realizing that can be a discouragement. For so long overturning Roe was front and center in pro-life discussions. And that overturning has had real implications for many parts of our country. But to reach that event that has been so anticipated ... and then see nothing really change where we live ... that can be discouraging.

Because it reinforces the fact that we have a long-haul ahead of us. While the Lord can do anything, it is unlikely that the legal status of abortion will change in Washington any time soon. We might not have articulated it ... but some of us imagined a decisive political victory in the Supreme Court that would bring a victory on this issue. Instead, we still have quite a ways to go.

And recognizing that can lead to discouragement.

And as I reflected on that, I wondered where we should look to counter that discouragement – where we should look for encouragement. Who can help encourage us in the calling we have ahead?

And one answer to that question, I soon realized, was the early church.

We live in a world that is increasingly post-Christian. Many aspects of Christian belief and ethics still shape and serve as the foundation for much modern, secular thought, but that is eroding more and more over time. Gradually, bit by bit, our culture is de-Christianizing itself. And sometimes a helpful way for us to better understand ourselves in a post-Christian world, is to look back at what it was like to be a Christian in a pre-Christian world.

The comparison, of course, has its limitations. But it is helpful. It is helpful in part because it reminds us that we are not facing challenges that are new to God's people. Others have gone before us and dealt with such things. And it is helpful also because our brothers and sisters in the early church triumphed spiritually over the pagan world around them. The Lord brought them success. And while we do not pretend to know the plans or the intentions of the Lord, his work in and through the early church is a reminder of what he might do through us and through our children and even their children.

With that in mind, I want to look to the early church and observe five things.

The early church reminds us that as we face these challenges advocating for the unborn:

- We shouldn't be surprised
- We should be strange
- We should be hopeful
- We should be persevering
- And we should be sacrificially compassionate

We will only be able to scratch the surface of the early church's handling of this issue, and of each of these dimensions to it. But I hope it will still be a help for us.

The Apostle Paul wrote: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

The Lord gives us other Christians, not just in the present, but throughout history, whom we can benefit from by imitating, because they faithfully imitated Christ. Our hope tonight is to find some things to imitate in the early church as they defended the unborn and the newly born.

And as I discuss this, I'll especially be drawing from the work of church historian O.M. Bakke, and his book *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*.

Don't be Surprised

The first thing we learn, as we look to the early church, is that we should not be surprised by dehumanization of the unborn and the newly born in the un-believing world.

Because sometimes we can feel surprised. On one level we may get kind of used to our culture's view on the issue of abortion and the unborn – both nationally and more locally. But at other times it might strike us, and may we find ourselves asking: How is this an issue? How is this a debate? Sure, there are complexities – sure there are at times serious difficulties in people's lives ... but how can people look at an ultrasound ... or today even a 3D ultrasound ... and see an unborn baby ... and say that it's not really a baby after all ... that it is not yet a person ... that it's not yet a human being ... that it can be simply discarded at will? Those of us who feel so strongly on this issue might find ourselves wondering how people could be so blind.

And at that point it may be helpful to remember that such blindness is not new ... and it is not unique to our particular culture. In fact such views dominated the Western world before the spread of the Christian gospel. And at that time, they went even further ... and involved even more willful blindness.

Abortion was practiced with some frequency in the ancient world, even though it carried much more risk to the mother at the time. Abortion was actually a major cause of death among women in the Greco-Roman world. We might wonder then why women would do this if the risk to them was so high, but the likely answer is that in the ancient world, it was probably, in the majority of instances, men who decided to abort a baby, not women. Roman law gave the male head of the family the right to order a female in the household to abort. And so despite its risk, it was a common practice. [Stark, 120]

An alternative to those risks though, was the practice of infanticide or the exposure of infants. Both practices, if done in the first eight or nine days after birth, were legal and socially acceptable in the Greco Roman world. And both were quite common.

While it was possible that exposed infants could be rescued by others, it would seem that they often were not. Some grim archeological finds of remains would attest to this. [Stake, 118] In addition, when they were rescued, they were often raised to be slaves or prostitutes. But still, many perished.

The motives for this practice varied, but the list can sound familiar to us today. The most common reason given was financial hardship. Another was to avoid social humiliation if the child was unintentionally conceived out of wedlock. Pessimism about the future was also a common cause, as one historian notes that some sources explain that when a bad emperor was in power, the rate of exposures would go up. Exposure was also used to select the gender of the children one would raise in their family, to limit family size in light of future inheritance plans, and to eliminate babies with physical deformities or abnormalities.

The details may be different – but it seems that many of the things that motivate people today to seek an abortion, motivated them two thousand years ago to expose their infants.

Still, despite the commonalities, we may ask: How did they justify these gruesome practices? Couldn't they see how wrong such treatment of newborns was?

Well, the justification for this was two-fold. And in both aspects it will again sound familiar to us.

First, many advanced the argument that babies in their first week of life were not really people yet. The first-century Greek philosopher Plutarch, for example, wrote that in the first week of a baby's life after birth, the child "is more like a plant than a human being." [Bakke, 30]

Second, in their social and legal system, it was up to another person – in this case the male head of household – to decide whether or not to accept the new baby into the family. There was a whole ceremony and set of rites associated with this if the head of the household did accept the baby. But if he did not, the baby was cast out. In effect, the male head of household got to decide whether or not the baby should be regarded as a person – as a human being.

Again, the parallels to modern views are striking. We too hear arguments made against observation and reason that an unborn baby is not really a person yet. And we too leave the decision of a baby's personhood up to another human being – in our case the mother – who is tasked with deciding whether the baby should be regarded as a person or not.

In all this we see that the practices, the views, and the debates of our culture over abortion are not so different from those over abortion, infanticide, and exposure in the world that first-century Greco-Roman Christians found themselves in. [For much of the above see Bakke, 28-33, 55]

As we reflect on that we may want to ask: How can someone look at a week-old baby and determine that it's not really a person – that it is more like a plant than a human being?

Well, as we mentioned this morning, the Apostle Paul reminds us that human beings have an incredibly ability to suppress things they know in their hearts. In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul says that every person knows certain truths about God ... but they suppress those truths within. And when they do, they not only make themselves blind to truths about God ... but they also make themselves blind to truths about human nature.

Paul focuses on how that plays out sexually. But it doesn't only play out in the sexual realm. It can also show when human beings try to de-humanize one another ... when human beings become look at other human beings, and whether because of their age, or their race, or their social status, declare that *those* human beings are not *really* people. Humans have been doing that, in one way or another, for millennia. As people suppress the truth about God in their hearts, they also necessarily suppress truths about other people, since those people are made in God's image. And that suppression has consequences.

We should lament when we see such unjust consequences. We should mourn. We should feel a call to action. But we should not be surprised. Because it's impossible to see human nature rightly if someone refuses to see the divine nature rightly.

That was true in the pre-Christian world. And it will be increasingly true in a post-Christian world. If we are going to have any involvement with the world at all, then we will need to grapple with it – ugly though it may be.

We should be passionate about that. But we should not be surprised to encounter the lack of comprehension in others. For it is rooted in their lack of comprehension about God.

That's the first thing the early church teaches us: That as we encounter the challenges of advocating for the unborn, we should not be surprised by the views of many in the unbelieving world around us.

Be Strange

The second thing we see from the early church is that when it comes to this issue, we should be strange to the unbelieving world.

And I don't strange weird in the superficial way many people mean it – in how we express ourselves in the surface-level aspects of life. But I mean strange in a much deeper way. I mean that we should be willing to do one thing, when the common sense of the unbelieving world around us thinks that something very different is so obviously better.

That is, after all, is how the early church was willing to act when it came to their relationship to their children and families. We see that both in their practices, and in how they explained those practices.

From some of the earliest Christian writings we have today after the New Testament, we see clear catechetical instruction against not just infanticide and exposure, but also against abortion. We see this in the *Didache*, which was probably composed around the year 100, as well as the *Epistle of Barnabas*, written around the same time. Both documents are noteworthy because they root the command against abortion and infanticide and exposure not primarily in a concern for sexual regulations, or procreation, but in sections dealing with justice and care for the weak.

Both writings speak of the unborn child as a child – as a person. Both identify the unborn as God's creation. This ethical prohibition against exposure and abortion, along with a rationale based in concern for them as people, and their identity as belonging to God, emerges so early in the Christian tradition, because its foundation is so clear in the Bible itself. There we read the Scriptures speak of the unborn not as things but as people. There we read the Scriptures declare that all people bear God's image. There the prohibition against murder is extended to all. And so it should come as no surprise that the ethics and rationale we see in the *Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* shows up repeatedly in other documents of the early church as well.

But what I want to point out is that in adopting these views, the early church adopted both practices and beliefs that would have seemed strange to those around them.

In the Greco-Roman world, the legal system, the dominant philosophical schools of thought, the custom and general social expectations, stated that abortion and infanticide and exposure were all wise, responsible things to practice for the good of your household and society. They also held that an unborn or recently born baby wasn't really a person, but a thing – and that discarding it was of no real consequence.

In stark contrast to this, Christians from early on maintained that the unborn and the recently born should be protected, and cared for as full human beings – whether doing that would bring advantage or hardship on the family. And they argued that not only were newborn and unborn babies fully human, but that they bore the image of God. The same newborn baby that Plutarch described as bearing the image of a plant, the Christians described as bearing the image of almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth.

To many in the pre-Christian world, that must have seemed preposterous.

To be sure, Christians were not the only ones in the Greco Roman world who defended the unborn and newly born. But they did seem to defend them with a passion and an absolutism that other defenders lacked.

To the pagans around them, the Christians must have sounded foolish, irresponsible, strange, and maybe even downright crazy. [For much of the above see Bakke, 110-139]

Holding these positions made the first-century Christians very strange. But they held them anyway.

And we are called to follow their example.

Defending the humanity and the life of the unborn may sound increasingly foolish and bizarre to a post-Christian world. And in many ways that is a predictable consequence of our culture's increasing rejection of the Biblical basis on which the humanity of such little ones was established in the first place. But we have to be willing to have others view us as strange. We need to be willing to have the world think of us as foolish.

When babies are conceived at inconvenient times or in inconvenient ways, the world will say it is foolish not to abort. And we will have to willingly be viewed as fools.

When babies will cause social embarrassment or hardships, and the world says it is honorable to abort, we will have to face the world's shame.

When the world says that an unborn baby is not really a baby unless it's mother says so, we will have to explain that each baby bears the image of God, and only God can impart personhood. And we'll need to hold that position, even if it causes others to view us as primitive and crude.

When it comes to issues of life, we need to be willing to stand out, and look foolish, in the eyes of the culture around us. That is a second lesson we learn from the early church: we must be strange in an unbelieving world.

Be Hopeful

Third we see that we must be hopeful.

I would think that a first-century Christian would find it hard to imagine, that one day abortion, and infanticide, and exposure, would all not just become reduced, but would become illegal in the Roman world, and that the church would one day have the capacity to receive and care for all unwanted babies. And yet that is what would eventually happen in the Roman Empire.

No one in the first century could have guessed how the Lord would do that. But the Lord eventually did do that.

And so we too should be hopeful. As dark as things may look to us at times, our culture is not yet anything like that of the first-century Greco-Roman world. I think few of us could imagine really living in that world. It's true that our trajectory now may look bleak. But the fact is, we don't know the twists and turns of the future. We don't know what unexpected swings of the pendulum lie ahead. What we do know is that God is sovereign. And God cares about these things. And that should give us hope.

We may not be able to bring about radical change ourselves for the protection of the unborn. But as we do what we can do, and as we pray for these issues, we know that God is able to do as he pleases. He's transformed a whole society's view of the newly born and unborn before. Surely he can do it again.

So third, the future that we know God brought about for the early church should help us to be hopeful, as we entrust our future to God.

Be Persevering

Fourth, we see that we must be persevering. It's true, as I said, that in the Roman Empire God transformed what was acceptable and legal in the protection of the unborn and newly born. But that took time.

We've been talking about the situation faced by Christians in the late first and early second centuries – around the time that the *Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* were written. But it took some time before Roman society began to actually change. Under Septimius Severus and Antonius Caracalla, the first Roman laws criminalizing abortion were passed. It's possible that Christian writings against abortion may have played a role in inspiring those laws. But even so, they were issued in the early third century – 100 years after the Christians living at the time of the *Didache*. That's a long time.

Laws to limit or abolish exposure came even later – under Constantine and Valentinian in the mid-fourth century. That's around 250 years after those Christians who lived at the end of the first century. [For much of the above see Bakke, 127-139]

We have been frustrated that it has taken 50 years to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. But what if it takes 100 years ... or even 250 years of patient and persistent work to bring about the next change in our culture's attitude to the unborn? Are we willing to continue to work for that over the long haul

... not just for years or for decades ... but for centuries? Are we willing to take a multi-generational approach to this issue if necessary?

Again, we know that God could change our culture's heart in a moment. Maybe he will. But often he chooses to do that work over the course of a few centuries. We need to be ready to be faithful whatever path he has planned for us.

And so the fourth thing we see from the early church is that we need to be ready – as individuals and as the Church – to be patient and persevering as we work for the protection of the unborn.

Be Sacrificially Compassionate

Fifth and finally, what we learn from the early church is that we are called to be sacrificially compassionate. And we are called to that both when it comes to the children threatened by abortion, and the men and women effected by abortion.

First, we see the early church's sacrificial compassion towards babies threatened by their cultures low and de-humanized view of them. Augustine, writing in the early fifth century about baptism, gives an offhand example of how some babies came into the church and the Christian community in his day. He writes that sometimes "those whom their parents cruelly exposed are taken up to be raised by persons of any sort, at times by consecrated virgins, and are presented by them for baptism. [...] They do nothing else in this case but what is written in the gospel when the Lord asked who had been a neighbor to that man who was wounded by robbers and left half dead in the road, for he was told, *The one who showed mercy to him.*" [Augustine, Letter 98]

Augustine's way of putting it is a little odd, but the point he'd making is that it is a known practice that Christians of all kinds – whether a married couple or a single celibate person – might show up at the church seeking baptism for an exposed baby they had rescued and that they intended to raise. Augustine says that the people who do this are simply fulfilling the example Jesus set out in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Note again that Augustine is not making an apologetic for how holy Christians are or giving directions about what he thinks Christians *should* do. The Christian rescue of exposed infants is a background fact that he simply assumes here. And his assumption is likely not abstract or theoretical, since Augustine himself was a bishop. The implication seems to be that he himself has performed such baptisms in his pastoral duties.

For Christians to take such children into their homes is compassion ... but it's not easy compassion. It's costly compassion. It's sacrificial compassion. But it's the kind of compassion and love we are called to as Christians.

Christians in the ancient world did it. And Augustine seems to assume that any Christian who takes the teachings of Jesus would be willing to do it as well.

What then does that look like today, for you? Maybe it does mean an openness to foster care or adoption. That is, of course, an amazing ministry that some here have carried out. It's worth prayerfully considering. But if you are not called to that, there are other ways to serve as well.

Among them is the opportunity to volunteer and to give financially to ministries like CareNet – ministries that not only provide information for women struggling with questions about abortion, but that also help support and provide for them so that they are able to care for their children after they are born.

I urge you to ask yourself: How might the Lord be calling you to sacrificial compassion – to service, or to giving, or to something else – in order to help those babies that are at risk.

That's one form of sacrificial service God's people are called to.

Another form of sacrificial service we are called to is towards men and women who are wrestling with abortion, or have been effected by abortion.

Some of the early controversies in the Church centered around the question, as one author has put it, of whether the Church would be a school for saints or a hospital for sinners. Now ... ideally it should be both. But here my focus is especially on the second aspect of our calling. Jesus is the Great Physician. And his Church is called to be a hospital for sinners.

We need to point men and women to Jesus when they are considering abortion. We need to be the hands and feet of Jesus when they are unsure how they can care for their child. And we need to share the Lord's grace and mercy with them if they are grieving a past abortion.

You may be called on to do that in a direct personal relationship here in our congregation. Or you may be called to support ministries like that which CareNet and others carry out. But whatever form it takes, part of our calling, as Christ's Body, is to show sacrificial compassion to men and women wrestling with or recovering from abortion, and to point them, ultimately, to Jesus.

Whether it's service to help the unborn, or ministries to help men and women who are hurting ... whether it's in a personal relationship, or in volunteering with or giving to a ministry ... or whether it's in some other way, how is the Lord calling you to carry out sacrificial compassion to those in need in this area?

Conclusion

As we consider all this, we need to keep in mind that the early Church is not a golden age for us to look back on with nostalgia. But it does give us a window to observe our brothers and sisters in Christ who faced a situation that is more and more like the direction our post-Christian culture seems to be heading.

And so let's learn from them.

Let's not be surprised when the unbelieving culture around us denies the humanity of the unborn or even the recently born.

Let's be willing to be strange in a culture that devalues human life.

Let's be hopeful in what the Lord can do, even when we feel small and weak.

Let's be persevering, when there is no obvious end in sight for this mission.

And let's engage in sacrificial compassion towards those hurt or threatened by abortion.

That is what our brothers and sister did, who came before us.

Let us imitate them, just as they imitated Christ.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Augustine. *Letters 1-99*. The Works of Saint Augustine Translated for the 21st Century. Translated by Roland Teske. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001.

Bakke, O. M. *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*. Translated by Brian McNeil. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005.

Starke, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 1996.