

Heeding Nicodemus' Admonition

Sabbath for Reproductive Justice
First Congregational Church, UCC, South Portland
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John 7:37, 40-52

This weekend congregations throughout Maine are observing a Sabbath for Reproductive Justice. It's a *sabbath* observance because not all people of faith worship on Sunday. It's a *sabbath for reproductive justice* because of an ethical mandate, shared across traditions, to pursue justice and compassion in all things, including reproductive health and reproductive rights.

Reproductive justice presses us to make social, economic, medical, and legal conditions right so that people can freely decide whether and when to become parents and so that all families can have sufficient resources to raise children in health, safety, and dignity. Reproductive justice requires protecting persons' moral freedom to become parents as well as protecting their moral freedom not to bring new life into the world. In an ideal world, birthing and parenting would be freely elected and never coerced. Families would have generous support from their communities. Alas, that's not yet our social world, so our work is cut out for us.

No faith tradition is monolithic when it comes to these matters. The Roman Catholic hierarchy strongly opposes abortion, yet Pope Francis encourages President Biden to receive communion as a faithful Catholic even though Biden supports elective abortion. Within Judaism an organization called "Rabbis for Repro" notes that Jewish "tradition not only *permits* the termination of pregnancy, but even *requires* it when the life of the pregnant person is at stake. [Abortion is] a part of our lives," they observe, and "one in four people who can get pregnant will terminate a pregnancy by the age of 45." These religious leaders work and pray for the day, they say, when "our communities [will] be places where anyone who has, or may ever, terminate a pregnancy feels loved and welcomed."

Back in the early 1980's, not long after I joined the faculty of Bangor Theological Seminary, I heard the senior pastor of the Hammond Street Congregational Church in Bangor preach on abortion. That was a first for me. Days before her sermon, Ansley Throckmorton confided in a few of us that, frankly, she was anxious -- nervous about speaking on this topic, worried about potential conflict, and fearful about placing burdens on those facing problem pregnancies. In her sermon Ansley talked about the reasons the UCC supported reproductive freedom, and then she explained her determination, as a pastor, to offer women and couples support and care rather than judgment. What happened when she preached that sermon, you ask? To her relief, the congregation expressed overwhelming gratitude. Not everyone agreed with her moral assessment of abortion, but people appreciated how her sermon gave them permission to talk about these concerns *inside the church* rather than only out in the parking lot.

We had been challenged, as theologian Nel Morton put it, to be the kind of faith community that “hears one another into speech.”

“Hearing one another into speech” was Nicodemus’ hope for the Sanhedrin council of elders. In John’s gospel, Nicodemus reminds his Sanhedrin colleagues – the elders, the legal experts, and the theologians of the day – that the law requires that a person be heard *before* being judged. What a novel concept! Rather than rushing to judgment, isn’t it wise to slow down, listen with care and respect to those most affected by an issue, and learn to see from that other person’s perspective?

This morning, I speak from my own experience as a volunteer chaplain at Planned Parenthood’s health center in Portland. Without naming names or breaking confidences, I want to share a few things I’ve learned from women who’ve received abortions and shared some of their story with me.

From them I’ve learned something about the Who. There are not two groups of women: women of faith and women who have abortions. Most women electing to terminate a pregnancy are religiously affiliated. I’ve listened to and prayed with Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish women, with Muslim and Buddhist women, and, yes, with conservative evangelical women. Some confided in me that they had never expected to find a Christian minister *inside* Planned Parenthood. Maybe outside the clinic, protesting, but not inside the clinic, offering care and support.

From these women I’ve learned something else about the Who. There are not two groups of women: women who love children and women who have abortions. Only one group of women exists. Women terminate their pregnancies for the same reason that under other circumstances they carry their pregnancies to term and give birth: *because of love* and because of their high regard for the value of new life. Love sometimes requires that we say “no” rather than “yes” to life. That’s a difficult truth, not always easy to tell.

I’ve learned something about the Why. Women raising one or more children sometimes decide that it’s best not to bring another child into the world. Other women, not yet mothers but wishing to become mothers in the future, decide that now is not the right time. Such moments can give rise to a complicated grief that mixes loss, sadness, and regret with the relief of knowing it was the right thing to do, given the givens.

I’ve learned something about the How. Not every abortion decision is an agonizing one. What I’ve witnessed is that by the time women arrive at the clinic, they stand confident in the rightness of their decision to end their pregnancy. If they’re struggling, they’re struggling about their *life circumstances*: a shaky marriage; scarce resources of money, time, and energy; any number of health challenges; or impossibly conflicting demands of family, work, and life. Day in and day out, women everywhere, but especially in marginalized communities, are pressed to make these decisions as best they can, in far less than optimal circumstances. As conscientious moral agents, they’re doing heavy lifting.

I've learned something else about the How. Sometimes women *do* struggle with their moral decision. When they do, it's not because they've made a bad decision, but because they're wrestling with the shaming, guilt-producing messages received from family, community, and church. A young Catholic woman whispered to me, "Tell me, chaplain, will I go to hell?" "You're Catholic, right?" I asked her, and then I offered this: "One of the things I most admire about your faith tradition," I told her, "is the central place it gives to the moral conscience in the life of faith. Whenever a person makes a prayerful and informed decision, the Catholic moral tradition affirms that they should follow their conscience *even if* their decision may go against the official teaching of the church." When she heard my response, she brightened up and put her shoulders back.

Our Reform theological tradition has shifted within the last fifty years, away from viewing abortion as shameful to regarding abortion as a responsible moral option. Yes, the discovery of pregnancy is often good news and occasion for joy -- but not always. Bringing new life into the world is often the right thing to do -- but not always. Because this is so, we humans bear the moral responsibility, at times exhilarating and at times burdensome, to make the most principled decision possible.

The question for us is this: how can we best support women? How might we honor their moral wisdom, their moral courage, about these matters? For generations women have struggled, against incredible odds, to exercise their procreative power wisely. Often they've had to take great risks, including risks to their health and lives, to avoid unwanted or problem pregnancies. Too often, they've had to stand alone. Too often, they've been castigated as sinners, but the truth of the matter is that they've been the sinned against -- judged rather than listened to, honored, and supported, as we all need to be, in making tough decisions.

On this Sabbath for Reproductive Justice, I'm mindful of women and their partners everywhere who, prayerfully and conscientiously, approach these tender matters about pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting with great care and deliberation. They deserve our respect and gratitude.

Today I'm mindful of the moral courage with which women face infertility, difficult pregnancies, miscarriage, still birth, the placement of a child for adoption, the adopting of a child, and taking on foster care. I'm mindful, too, of the women and couples who've freely chosen voluntary childlessness. They deserve our respect and gratitude.

Today I'm mindful of health care providers who provide care and support with competence and compassion, often under difficult circumstances. They deserve our respect and gratitude.

Today I'm mindful of legislators, jurists, and advocates who promote just laws -- and work tirelessly for just social conditions -- that allow the free exercise of moral conscience in deciding whether and when to bring new life into the world. They deserve our respect and gratitude.

Today I'm mindful of – and grateful for -- the power of faith, the abiding love of God, the gift of moral freedom, and the call to be a community in which we lovingly, respectfully pledge to “hear one another into speech.” We ask God’s blessing as we continue this journey toward greater justice and compassion in all things.