

The Third Sunday After the Epiphany

Isaiah 41:8-10, 17-20, Psalm 42, Romans 12:16-21, St. John 2:1-11

### **A Matter of Choice**

Last May, the Philadelphia abortionist Kermit Gosnell traded away his right to appeal a conviction in the killing of three infants for a sentence of life in prison.

Gosnell operated an abortion mill in Pennsylvania and another across the state line in Delaware. Evidence showed that he had performed many abortions of fetuses past the limit of 20 weeks in one state and 24 weeks in the other. But that was far from the most heinous of his crimes.

To save time and money, rather than performing an abortion in some cases he induced labor and then terminated the life of what could no longer be called a fetus. Former employees testified that he snipped the spinal cord of the infant at the neck in what one said “amounted to a beheading.”

This man added that it was “raining fetuses” in Gosnell’s death chamber. He might have added that it was raining babies.

The 72-year-old abortionist’s decision to accept the life sentence and cheat the hangman was undoubtedly a wise one. But in agreeing to the trade-off he sentenced himself, one supposes, to hours in his cell each day pondering the injustice of it all – not so much because he was only trying to help women, as he testified, but because of the irony of his penalty.

In the case of a baby within the legal limit, 24 weeks in many cases, if Gosnell had done his killing a few seconds earlier he would have picked up \$2,500 in cash, his fee for a late-term abortion, and a vote of thanks with no legal repercussions. Tick, tick, tick . . . and now it’s murder.

This is the society we have built. One reckless baby-killer goes to prison while thousands of others, more circumspect, continue the carnage. End a life within the womb and you’re a well-paid professional and a champion of women’s rights; wait a few seconds and you’re a murderer.

“As you do not know what *is* the way of the wind,” we read in Ecclesiastes 11:5, “*or* how the bones *grow* in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything.”

There is so much man does not know, and yet he would make himself master of God’s world. The Scripture passages that refer to life in the womb do so to illustrate the Lord’s omniscience and His sovereignty. He knows all things and directs all things. Here are two more, beginning with Jeremiah 1:5:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you;” God tells His prophet. “Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.”

And now Psalm 139:15-16:

“My frame was not hidden from You,” the Psalmist tells God, “when I was made in secret . . . Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when *as yet there were* none of them.”

So the Bible’s treatment of the fetus frames for us the ongoing struggle for control between God and man. The issue is life, which is at once the most fundamental and the greatest issue. God takes the position that He, as Creator of life, is sovereign over life.

Kermit Gosnell and thousands of other abortionists disagree. So do potential mothers who choose abortion and prospective fathers who encourage and abet and sometimes force those decisions. So do legislators who enact enabling laws and judges who twist laws to make abortions more convenient.

So do millions of voters who throw their weight behind “abortion rights.” All these depose God and enthrone man as arbiter of life and death.

The right to life, then, is about more than who lives and who dies; it is about who rules. Since the Supreme Court’s horrific decision in *Roe v. Wade* 41 years ago, man has sacrificed 49 million children on the altar of his supremacy.

In the United States, 25 percent of all pregnancies end in abortion, about 1.2 million annually. And why God has not ground our nation into the dust from which He made us long before now I cannot imagine. His mercy is far beyond my comprehension.

I believe you know that Bp. Grote has instructed all pastors in our diocese to preach on the sanctity of life each year on a Sunday as near as possible to the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. I could multiply horror stories from Gosnell’s cynical and lethal practice.

I could cite more statistics. I could rail against a Supreme Court action from a few days ago that effectively strikes down an Arizona law restricting abortions after 20 weeks.

Or I could tell stories of heroes in the fight for life – of abortion survivors and their adoptive parents or of the woman who repented of her role as an executive in a Planned Parenthood clinic and became director of a pregnancy assistance center.

Instead, I want to tell you a story from my own experience that has neither horrors nor heroes. I believe it speaks to the dereliction of the American church, and especially the Protestant church, that has contributed to the killing.

My wife and I enrolled our only grandchild in a nondenominational Christian school for his high school years. The founding headmaster left after Caleb’s freshman year, and faster than you can say “mission creep” changes began to occur at Providence Classical School. In Caleb’s senior year we attended the Christmas program . . . and then I paid the acting headmaster a visit.

His name is Jon Weichbrodt; he had a son in Caleb’s class and I knew him reasonably well. I brought up two issues regarding the Christmas program, which was built around Handel’s “Messiah.” The first

concerned a recitation by the lower school children, which referred to Mary not as a virgin but rather a “young woman” who was “with child.”

I noted that on any given day in history multitudes of young women around the world have been pregnant. When a virgin becomes pregnant, the power of God has erupted in the creation.

Mr. Weichbrodt said he had not noticed this apparent substitution but agreed readily that it amounted to theological error and assured me he would take steps to ensure that it was not repeated.

My second concern involved the venue. The school occupies leased space and has no auditorium to accommodate an all-school program with parents and guests in attendance. For the Christmas program, it used space at the nearby campus of Faithbridge, a congregation of the United Methodist Church.

The UMC’s website states its support for the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, formerly the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights. The RCRC advocates for access to abortion without regard to church doctrine or moral concerns.

The UMC Book of Discipline, which I accessed on the denomination’s website, declares:

*The beginning of life and the ending of life are the God-given boundaries of human existence. While individuals have always had some degree of control over when they would die, they now have the awesome power to determine when and even whether new individuals will be born.*

*Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion. But we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother, for whom devastating damage may result from an unacceptable pregnancy. In continuity with past Christian teaching, we recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures. We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection.*

Many points could be made in response; two must be. While any denunciation of abortion as a means of birth control is welcome, it is entirely possible to conclude that potential “devastating damage” to the “well-being of the mother” could justify abortion to terminate an “unacceptable pregnancy” in countless circumstances.

The language appears to be intentionally ambiguous to allow for just such an interpretation. Further, to assert that “we cannot affirm” abortion for birth control while “we unconditionally reject it” for gender selection is to make the former case less worthy of condemnation than the latter and so to dilute the repudiation of it.

Mr. Weichbrodt and I thrashed through the usual arguments. This particular Methodist church is more conservative, he told me, than the denomination at large. And on this issue, at least, so it is.

Citing two of the three passages I have quoted, Faithbridge declares on its website:

*“We believe the life inside a mother’s womb is a living being and, therefore, we believe that the act of abortion is incongruent with God’s will (Ex. 20:13). At the same time, ours is not a message of guilt for past choices, but of grace—knowing God offers full forgiveness to anyone who repents of their (sic) sin and turns to Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:7; Col. 2:13-15).”*

*Any orthodox Christian body acknowledges that God’s grace remains on offer to all sinners, including those who commit murder. God pardons the taking of life whether within or without the womb when the sinner repents.*

In the old days, many called an act “incongruent with God’s will” a sin. Perhaps that is the meaning intended here. In any case, these are fine-sounding words -- that do not for a moment dissolve the horror of the reality that Faithbridge knowingly and willfully promotes abortion through its denomination.

Neither will it wash to say that some stipulate that no part of their giving to the church must go to promote abortion. Mr. Weichbrodt teaches one class at the school he now heads as permanent headmaster. That class is economics. He knows well that money is fungible, meaning that a dollar that may not be used for abortion is simply routed to the office supplies fund, from which a dollar is taken for abortion.

Mr. Weichbrodt said he could not identify any difference between using space in a church such as Faithbridge and in a public building such as a school or community center. Space is space. But a church is, or should be, consecrated space, and as such is indeed categorically different from a building which is not. It is the very nature of the church to be set apart for a holy purpose.

It is a modern tragedy that much of the church has thrown out the Old Testament (despite protestations to the contrary). Israel’s law teaches separation: clean from unclean, within the camp from without the camp, sacred from mundane, the Seed of the woman from the seed of the serpent.

When God the Son came to fulfill the law He did not erase distinctions; in fact, He fortified them. In His only act of rage described in our sacred text, He cleansed the temple, purging the building His Father had designated a place of worship of those who had contaminated it with commerce.

He did not condemn commerce but the mixing of it with worship. The New Testament does nothing to roll back the holiness of God or diminish the honor He is due from His people.

Our Lord’s earliest followers had no difficulty with this rationale. The Holy Spirit guided them in hallowing God’s name: holy things in holy places for a holy people who worshipped a holy God. God the Holy Spirit does not indwell us to make us so spiritual that we no longer live out our holy purpose in this world.

To be of the church, the *ekklesia*, is to be called out from this fallen world, separated from it to make God manifest within it. Those who lose themselves in this world deny God’s purpose for His church.

In church circles, this has somehow become a disputed idea. The jawboning goes on, and as it does so do the abortions. Since I had this dialogue with Mr. Weichbrodt, the Christian school he heads announced it was selling land it had purchased for a campus and buying a tract from Faithbridge adjacent to the church's campus. The bond grows stronger.

And I wonder. For one thing, I wonder if the American church will ever confess its complicity in the carnage of abortion. Condoning it silently, we have created an environment in which church-going women and girls abort at a rate only a bit below that of the female population as a whole.

A study by the Guttmacher Institute showed that about three-quarters of those obtaining abortions in 2008 reported a religious affiliation. Most prominent were Protestants -- 37 percent -- followed by Catholics -- 28 percent. One in five abortion patients identified herself as born-again, evangelical, charismatic or fundamentalist. Of these, 75 percent were Protestant.

I wonder if the church will ever repent of its rationalizations and own up to its pretense.

On the nationalreviewonline site, Kathryn Jean Lopez used the anniversary of Roe v. Wade to slam New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo for his farcical stance. He maintains that as a professing Roman Catholic he can agree with his church's teaching on the sanctity of life while, as an elected public official, he advocates expanded availability of abortion.

"By looking away," she wrote, "we let evil happen and we are its accomplices . . . This is the battle today. This is his worldview and he's not alone. As you see, even people who profess religious belief buy in. Indifference and surrender is buy-in, too."

Why go along? Brotherhood? Unity? Shall we all join hands and unite around acts "incongruent with God's will"? Have we not a single Athanasius or Luther or Bonhoeffer who will stand and shout, "No more!"

Will we never say to those who speak of abortion out of both sides of their mouths, "Your actions speak louder than your words"? Do we hold politeness more precious than life?

I can hear you thinking: How far shall we go? Would he have me never speak to another Methodist? I know your struggle. I grapple in the same arena, even in my own family. I will say simply this:

In what are called the "culture wars," power wears pink these days. The X chromosome shouts, "Fight or flee!" The Y purrs, "Compromise and conciliation." In our day the order of the day every day is, "Make nice."

Many say we're the better for it . . . but I wonder. What would the unborn say, if they had a say? Can you hear their muffled voices? Listen now, and you'll catch their cry. No other sound competes as the silent scalpel sunders.

And I wonder about something else. I wonder what counsel a certain unwed young woman named Mary – a virgin, by the way – who was “with child” would hear from the church in our time.

It is not, of course, only the United Methodists who lend their names and prestige to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. The usual suspects, including the mainline Episcopalians and Presbyterians, have linked arms with them.

The coalition, which abstains from value judgments on abortions, could easily see in Mary an unwed mother beset with what the United Methodist Church terms an “unacceptable pregnancy” that could visit “devastating damage” on the “well-being of the mother.”

Of course, if Mary had exercised her right of choice and had an abortion . . .

One Child changed the world. Here's a value judgment I leave with you: It is good that God was born. Amen.