

Sanctity of Human Life Sunday

Note: The following sermon was preached by The Very Rev. Michael Guernsey at Holy Cross Cathedral in Loganville, GA.

Introduction

All human life is created by God, for God, and in God's image. All human life—regardless of gender, skin color, nationality, health or sickness or disability—all human life is created by God, for God, and in God's image. This is why this congregation over the past few years in commemoration of Sanctity of Human Life Sunday has talked about important life-related issues.

For example, recently we focused on the importance of adoption—not in the abstract, but recognizing that there are some here who have been adopted and quite a few here who are adoptive parents. Sanctity of Human Life leads us to care deeply about adoption—not so parents can have children, but so children can have parents. Sanctity of human life leads us to care about adoption.

This is also why in a previous year we focused on Foster Care and a new family reunification ministry we are launching here—COVID has delayed the start because we haven't been able yet to get our team trained, but we're working on it. Sanctity of human life leads us to care deeply about parents and children in the foster care system.

The sanctity of human life leads us to care about racial injustice, and racial reconciliation, about wise and lasting poverty alleviation, and about ending abuse. Believing that all human life is created by God, for God, and in God's image has led us at Holy Cross in recent years to fully fund the building of multiple homes for poor widows and their children in East Africa, providing food in Jesus's name for refugees in the Middle East as well as for teachers in East Africa, and giving tens of thousands of dollars to ministry in our local community helping those in need. Believing that all human life is created by God, for God, and carries the dignity of being made in God's image leads us to put love into action in all of these ways.

And, yes, the sanctity of human life leads us to care about abortion. A topic that when I mentioned that I was preaching on it this week, I was met multiple times by people smiling awkwardly at me—"Good luck!" The Bible tells us that God made each and every one of us in his image. It tells us that God knew us before he even created us—made us in his image in our mother's womb. Psalm 139, "You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven together... In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." God knows us and intimately forms us when our life which was so fragile and vulnerable began in the womb.

Throughout the Bible we see that God has a special concern for the vulnerable and oppressed. With over 63 million children killed in our country through legalized abortion, this is one of the most vulnerable populations we have. In fact, this process of ending the lives of the most vulnerable has been specifically used to target minority populations. In NYC more black children are killed in abortions than are born alive. God has a special concern for the vulnerable and oppressed (including unborn children), so the Church needs to have that concern as well.

Now, there are complicated ethical questions about how to live out the sanctity of human life—it has end-of-life implications, capital punishment implications, military intervention implications, public policy implications. Those are all important, but that's not what we're going to focus on this morning. Rather, I want us to think specifically as Christians about concerns/objections that are common in our society. And try to do that with grace and understanding. In a congregation this size we can safely assume that there are multiple people who have personally had or encouraged others to have abortions. This is not an abstract theoretical conversation. This is deeply personal and hits close to home for many.

So, as Christians, or as people here curious about what Christians believe, let's think together about this topic and the concerns in our culture over abortion from a Christian/biblical perspective.

I don't go around having conversations about abortion often, but these are specific things that people in my life have expressed in relation to our Christian conviction that life should be protected—and that life begins in the womb.

Concern #1:

It's not really a person – Clump of cells.

Different people make this claim in different ways, but essentially the point is that the child isn't really a human being until some later point. When that point is debated, but the basic idea is that the child isn't really a human being yet.

The Bible teaches us that God is intimately forming us in the womb. He already knows us and everything about us. He gives us our own heartbeat, DNA, genetic traits, fingernails, reproductive organs. We don't become alive later—but he makes us and forms us personally in the womb.

And one of the most concerning things I see regularly—in the news, in TV shows—is that people who say the child is not really a child immediately apparently without realizing it begin to believe it is a child if the mother wants to keep him/her. If mom and dad want to give birth, then it's a baby. If not, then it's just a clump of cells and not really a person. But the only thing that changed was the view of the parents—nothing with the child herself. But Mom and Dad's opinion of us isn't what gives us our value and personhood. It's the opinion of God, and his act in creating us.

I saw this recently in a news article from a source that is very pro-abortion, "Mother and unborn baby" died in an accident. The only thing that changed was whether the mother intended to give birth or not.

I remember a few years ago when the singer Beyonce was pregnant, how excited people who are so adamant that unborn children are not people were happily talking about Beyonce's unborn children. The only thing that changed was the famous parent's intention to give birth.

Honestly, it has to be one way or the other—either the child in the womb is a child and therefore must be protected, or they're not and it doesn't matter. Or to use the older phrase that abortion should be "safe, legal, and rare." If it's not actually a human person, why should we care if it's rare?

But, the child in the womb is a child—made in the image of God. Their dignity comes from the God who made them, not the parents' desire or

opinion. And the same is true for you! Your dignity and value does not come from others' opinions, but from God who made you.

This is part of why it's so wonderful that our local Pregnancy Resource Center—the director is a member here—has a new mobile medical bus with an ultrasound on it. The bus is amazing—some of us got to tour it last Sunday—and it gives women and men the chance to see the baby. These tiny vulnerable humans should be protected.

Think of our reading from 1 Corinthians 12 about the various gifts that God gives to each of us. God has plans for these tiny children and gifts he wants to give them for the church and the world. Think of how many gifts God had prepared for children to have, what blessings they were supposed to be to the world and to the church, but they never made it to their first birthday and never got to share them with the world.

One concern is that the child is not really yet a person—and therefore has no rights and doesn't need to be protected. But we know that we receive our value and dignity from God who made us, not from the opinions of our parents or doctors.

Concern #2:

It should be a personal choice.

Personal choice is very important. Our country rightly values personal autonomy—within certain necessary limits.

I know we often talk past each other on this, but because we know that the child in the womb is a real human child, then there's another person involved who deserves personal autonomy too. The child needs to be protected. Abortion is not in the same category as getting a tattoo or making food or medicine choices. There's a child in there who needs protecting. And ending her life cannot be viewed as an acceptable personal choice.

In a recent Atlanta newspaper article, I found this quote—talking about sports leagues struggling to remain active during pandemic surges: “Vaccines can't save leagues that operate in a country where behavior that risks other people's health is considered a personal choice.”¹

Let that sink in.

They were advocating for removing personal choice when that choice puts other people's health at risk. This is precisely what biblical Christians are saying about abortion—sometimes personal choices have to be limited when it's going to end someone else's life. Personal choice is really important. But, because the child is a human child made in God's image, her body and her dignity need to be protected.

Recently in Decatur people were concerned about cutting down too many trees (a valid concern). One person then said of the trees, "They have souls too." (No, they don't.) We live in a society that's becoming more concerned about trees than children. But these children must be protected. That requires great sacrifice, but it's essential that we do that.

So the second concern is that abortion should be a personal choice. But we know that there are certain choices one should not make.

Concern #3:

There are so many other problems in society. (Usually followed by, "why don't you care about those?")

Fair enough—but we do care about those too. Christians have led the way throughout history in medical care, poverty alleviation, education, freeing the oppressed. We do care about those too.

Some of us have made sacrifices and loved until it almost broke us and given up more than you will ever know to address some of the implications of our stance on Life—precisely because we believe this. This is not an abstraction to us.

There are many problems in society—and some of us bear the scars of giving everything we have to do our part in Jesus's name. But just because there are other problems cannot be the reason we ignore this problem.

Concern #4:

You don't understand my situation.

You're right—I don't understand your situation, and I wouldn't pretend that I do. There is so much hurt and pain in this world. People do awful and evil things. And I will never know what it's like to be you.

And so, without judgement, we're ready to help. This is why godly Christians are ready to help. We care about you, about your child, about your future. And we are ready and willing to help—knowing that you may be in extremely awful circumstances with no apparent way out. We cannot undo your circumstances, but in Jesus's name we're ready to walk with you and help.

So, no, I don't understand your situation. But we're ready and willing to get messy with you in it.

Application

I've offered reflection on 4 concerns I hear, and now briefly I offer 4 practical ways for us to live out a pro-life stance here together.

One, Learn new ways of speaking. Instead of calling the child a "fetus," say "child" or "baby." Not angrily or critically, just use the better word. When my wife was pregnant her first OBGYN wouldn't call our son a "baby" but only called him "a pregnancy." Lovingly correct people when you hear it used incorrectly—in contexts when that's appropriate. Instead of saying "I'm going to be a grandparent" when your daughter gets pregnant, realize that you already are now that she's pregnant and speak accordingly. Learn new ways of speaking.

Talk with children—girls *and* boys about abortion and what to do in the situation of an unintended pregnancy. Honestly think about how you would respond if your son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter, brother or sister informed you about an unexpected pregnancy. One of the most significant influences on abortion is the baby's father—either encouraging the pregnant mother to have an abortion or not to have one. Our boys and girls, men and women need to know they will be loved and supported. And you and I need to be ready to do that.

Give love and support and grace to courageous women. With all of the cultural messages that women get about unexpected pregnancies, especially women who are not in stable long-term marriages—any woman who chooses life is being deeply courageous and needs to be loved and supported as such. When you see a woman who is pregnant and single; or when you see an unmarried couple choosing life; or when you see a man who is stepping up and taking responsibility—love and encourage them.

There is no place for judgment. Good and godly choices should be celebrated and supported in love.

Lastly, Love and support parents with young children at church—*especially* when it's a lone parent with the child. You don't know their situation. You don't know what's going on. But parents who faithfully bring their children—biological, adopted, foster care—should be cared for lovingly. As we learn to naturally love and care for families with young children, we become more of a safe place for the difficult situations. Learn to love and support parents with young children.

Conclusion

Friends, as Christians who believe the Bible, we must honor and value human life—made by God, for God, and in God's image. We need to learn to think Christianly about this important topic. And we need to embrace in faith the Lord who showed the dignity and sanctify of human life by becoming one of us in Jesus, who paid the ultimate price for us by dying on the cross, and who rose victorious over Sin and Death that we might be saved. God shows that human life is loved, valued, and filled with dignity. He made us, became one of us, and welcomes us into his family when we turn to him in faith.

So, as the church, let us be people who love and care for the vulnerable. Let us be people who sacrifice greatly for the good of those in need. And let us be people who, filled with love and compassion, value Life, as we follow and serve the Lord and Giver of Life.

Amen.