

IN SUPPORT OF THE RIGHT TO CHOICE

Sermon © April 9, 1989 by Rev. Peter T. Richardson
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Worship room, First Parish Unitarian, Kennebunk, ME, Nov. 12, 1989. Photo by E.M.R.

At least three members of our church are in Washington this morning in response to a call to show our President and our Congress and most importantly our Supreme Court, that the statistics which indicate two thirds of our population supports the right of women to the choice of abortion do not refer to phantoms, but real live people. It is predicted that this demonstration will be the largest pro-choice rally in history.

It is terribly important that we speak out now, for this month the Supreme Court is hearing a case that has come to it from Missouri and is considering the question, "whether Roe v. Wade should be overruled." As you recall, in 1973, the Roe v. Wade decision of the Supreme Court declared that abortion is constitutional and legal. It overturned laws of varying degrees of severity in the states that had outlawed abortions.

We could this year go back to pre 1973 conditions, where women could be declared criminals for exercising control over their own bodies, where doctors and counselors could be tried as criminals for performing abortions or criminal conspirators for even giving advice. We could begin seeing on the nightly news gruesome stories of desperate and panicked women dying in alleys and back rooms at the hands of abortionists who were untrained or exploitive. We could see a sharp rise of teenage suicides. We could see moneyed and privileged women quietly slipping off to Scandinavia for their abortions, avoiding reporters at airports. We could see many more thousands of children resented by their mothers and absent fathers, condemned to lives of poverty, neglect, and frozen opportunity. We know there will be abortions whether they are legal or not but do we want the vast increase in social pain and suffering, the countless individuals condemned to pay the terrible price of regressive legislation? The quality of the lives of all of us will be effected if we allow this to come to pass.

First, I will line out some basic considerations surrounding abortion itself. What is it and what are the spiritual and moral issues surrounding abortion that make it so important to us? Then I will ask four questions which I feel are basic for our social policy as a nation.

When military people abort a mission they mean they have reached a point of crisis where they believe the costs (risks) of continuing outweigh the possible benefits that could be realized. They fall back to their starting place, and take a new look at their position. Will they try again, perhaps with better planning and timing? Will they decide to take a new direction with the resources and the situation they face?

To abort a fetus is directly analogous. To prosper, a new life needs the best conditions we can give it. First of all the prospective mother must be prepared and willing. Women are not machines for bearing babies! They must freely desire with their whole being to nourish the new life, first physically, then emotionally. By the time the baby is born they must deeply desire to enter into a long term relationship with and commitment to their child. From the moment of conception they must be able to provide the nurture the embryo requires. Proper diet, medical care and monitoring, emotional-chemical wellbeing and a realistic and deeply felt sense that this is the right time, are essential for the mother, if the child is to be born without disadvantage from the start. A would-be mother must be concerned with the situation the baby would face after birth, the resources, environment and nurture that would insure its prospects for growing into its full human potential. If the woman profoundly doubts that these conditions are possible at a time when she has somehow become pregnant, she must grapple with all the factors in her situation and decide what she will do. She may decide to abort the mission.

Abortion is not a new idea. It has been practiced in the many branches of human culture from the beginnings of history. Indeed abortion is the social form of what we call a miscarriage in its purely physical form. A miscarriage occurs when the woman's body for some reason is not able to sustain a healthy pregnancy. There is a certain wisdom in the body which causes most miscarriages, and sometimes weaknesses in the body as well. When a woman decides to abort she has simply applied her mind and her capacity for moral responsibility and choice, the social-spiritual component of our humanity, to what is already present in the subconscious choices of her body.

There are some who assert that God forbids women from exercising their mental and moral powers when they are pregnant. There are some prohibitions in Roman Catholic canon law, and considerable precedent in some Evangelical and Fundamentalist oral traditions but precious little evidence in any of the world's scriptures and mainstream traditions. For example, there are nowhere in the world's religions, including Christianity, traditions of sacramental rites of burial for the fetuses of miscarriages. In other words purely physical life, without the social-spiritual component, is not considered anywhere to be a death. There is loss, and profound and lingering emptiness, but not a death.

It seems to me that those who claim to know the exact intentions of God, place themselves in a unique position as intermediaries. Do they receive special revelations which are kept from us? The burden of proof for their assertions must rest with them. Nowhere am I aware that God intends that human beings not use all their human faculties. Why do we have minds and the capacity for moral choice, if we are not supposed to exercise them? If nature produces miscarriages why is human nature forbidden from ever producing abortions?

The so-called pro-life people assert that they are merely protecting the claims of life against murder. The premise of their argument is that the fetus is human life, a human baby, from the moment of conception. They further assert that God has intended this fertilized egg in "His" plan. The fetus does not gradually become human, but rather is human from the first moment. This idea places God as the guarantor of biological determinism, that from the moment of conception the woman is taken over and becomes the vehicle of her biological destiny. From the moment of conception the pregnancy becomes a sacred process. This is proposed sometimes regardless of the circumstances of conception whether by rape or incest or outside a mutual and loving consent or outside of marriage. Many pro-lifers even go on to say that if health issues arise where only the life of one can be saved, either the mother or the fetus, that the fetus should be saved first.

Contrary to the argument for biological determinism is the pro-choice position which adds to biology, the social and spiritual dimension. Biology alone is not sacred. There must be relationship or at least the capacity for relationship when the fetus reaches "viability." The most basic question is not whether or not the fetus is life. Of course it is life. It is continuous with all of life from the first stirrings of the most simple life forms in the primal ooze! There is an unbroken continuity of all life, back through all the mothers of life to the very first replication of a single cell life form. The question is not whether or not there is life, but whether or not a human person has come into being, capable of social and spiritual existence.

In response to this question is a wide range of religious opinion and no consensus. Thomas Aquinas believed that human life comes into being at the time of "animation," when the embryo first moves in the womb. He believed this occurred at 40 days for males and 80 days for females. Some of us believe that there is an order of being. That the woman takes precedence over a partially formed, mostly potential, unborn life form. An acorn is not an oak tree! But with optimum conditions it has the potentiality for becoming one. So too an unborn baby is on the way to becoming human, a social and spiritual being, but is not yet there. Where is the point of passage? In the Roe v. Wade decision it is somewhere in the third trimester but even there the unborn is not defined as a person. In some branches of culture this point is passed well after birth when the infant is accepted into the society, baptized, blessed, or named. How would you answer this question?

I ask you advisedly, because there is no universal practice to guide us. And I know of no Divine handwriting out in universe to guide us. In such a situation of entire pluralism, we have to provide for as wide a range of choice as possible. My preference is that it be

somewhere between viability and birth. But who am I to say? I am not the one to give birth. I have given my commitment to two children, well before the time of their birth. But I did not carry them nor did I physically nourish them and have the calcium drain out of my teeth and bones to feed them. It is one thing to have feelings and opinions on abortion in general, or even to have society-wide guidelines and expectations, and to have circles of support and comfort, but it is quite another matter to decide the fate of another person. A woman must be the arbiter of her own body and wellbeing. And when she does freely choose to give birth to the life within her, what a profound bond is formed for their lives together!

What then is life? In Webster's Third International, life is "animated" and of course in turn, animate means "possessing life." Is the crystalline form of a virus, life or non-life? You might as well toss a coin. We can, I feel, claim that there is a great continuous and interdependent web of life on this globe, of which we are a part. And the fetus is a part of this web but only dependent, not yet fully interdependent.

What is human life? The author of the *Epistle of James* wrote, "...you do not know about tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." This is about as good a definition of our human life as I can find. The word, life, seems to derive from the Sanskrit, meaning glue, implying a combining of body and soul. At the heart of human life, it seems, there is a vagueness, but we must be spiritual beings to come into our humanity. Again, in the *Gospel of John* we find these words of Jesus. "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Our humanity is weightless and is not confined to physical substance. This is a characteristic of life, that there is no way to measure when it begins and when it ends. There are no invoices for anyone to sign, there is no way of weighing-in or weighing-out. Whatever else we can say of human life, we can know that at some point, we know not when, the spirit emerges and begins to grow, and our journey as persons begins. Before that the right to choice belongs with our mothers. After that it resides within our deepest selves.

How can a judge, or a legislator or a president know when our humanity begins, when we become persons, the earliest moments of spiritual growth? Any definition must be arbitrary. And our society is pluralistic on this issue. All of us must exercise extreme caution that no one view of life coerce the conscience of others. Legal, economic, administrative and social harassment of women over the issue of the right to choice is not going to change convictions, but there is a great potential for increasing exponentially the level of pain and suffering and anguish in a society which already has a full agenda.

Since the political moment is upon us and we must as a caring religious community relate to the issue of abortion let me leave you with four questions which, it seems to me, are most fundamental.

First, we must ask, "Does the state exist for the individual or does the individual exist for the state?" Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Stalinist Russia and despotisms throughout history, strictly forbid abortions because women's bodies existed to serve the state. Our

Declaration of Independence spells out the purpose of all governments, to insure our rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” To exercise these rights as social-spiritual beings, we must be free from government interference, to test our wings, to become responsible arbiters of moral choice. Liberty empowers us and coercion debilitates and enslaves. Women’s bodies belong to them and the choice of motherhood is theirs alone.

Second, we ask, “Does the state exist for the family or does the family exist for the state?” We live in a time when the family is feeling doubts as to its own worth. It is essential that the state protect the individual from any rape, incest, abuse that exists in families. But the state has no business forcing women to form families against their will nor interfering in the covenant and commitments of husband and wife as to their desire for bringing children into the world. The family is strengthened through the free exercise of its unique powers and responsibilities. (There are of course non-heterosexual families with equal rights. An exception to the above rule is the role of the state to regulate the size of families in order to match the size of the population to the available resources to sustain a viable standard of living for all.)

And third, “Is the state needed to set social policies to insure the wellbeing and integrity of society?” My answer to this is yes. One of the most disturbing aspects of the present abortion controversy is the seeming impatience of elements of our government to remove the support system from people who need it most, young women in their teens, and many thousands of people who live in poverty. Cutting off Medicaid to fund abortions, trying to forbid any counseling agencies which receive government funds from mentioning the word, abortion, and the multitude of repressive measures that will become possible if Roe v. Wade is overturned or even weakened, are distressing. Already between 33 and 40 percent of children in the United States live in households below the poverty level. I need not line out the many social consequences as these children mature to become adults. Our government should be working in the opposite direction, not advocating the removal of even more support from those who need all the counseling and medical help they can reach for. It would be wantonly socially irresponsible to overturn Roe v. Wade. We need to overturn poverty, abuse, and hopelessness, not increase them.

And fourth, “Do men and women stand in equality before any answers to these three questions?” Are men deciding at least in part what women in their own privacy should be deciding for themselves? Are we forcing women into roles in their families that they (and often their husbands) are not willing that they assume? Is the state, and the predominance of men with their perspectives running the state, deciding what is best for women, or through official social policies, worsening the condition of women? I believe this is exactly the issue. And to redress the grievance of inequality, women need a special acknowledgement of their rights and protections for their equality. The Roe v. Wade decision, which has been the law of the land since 1973, is one important step towards this goal. To reverse it would be a disaster that could take decades to heal and restore.

Some of us remember the painful stories before 1973. If you do not remember, find the current issue of the Village Voice (p.27). There is a photograph from a police file of a woman who tried to abort herself with a photograph from a police file of a woman who tried to abort herself with a coat hanger. She was successful, for not only did the life within her cease but she died an awful death. Those arrogant enough to assert God's will is only known through them, could they also want this? Those who exploit the issue of abortion for political gain, could they really wish this? For those in high places of hypocrisy and professed public virtue, could they desire this? In our pluralistic society, we need tolerance and compassion. No one group has a monopoly for dreaming of a better world, a better life for all. We must not drive our neighbors to despair, suffering and hopelessness. We must empower all to choose the best life they can envision. The right to that choice, belongs to each and every one.