

Abortion: An Alternative Christian View

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The United Church of Christ has, for almost two decades supported a woman's right to choose a safe, legal abortion. —General Synod of the U.C.C., 1989

Ancient Witness: Exodus 21:22-25

When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Today, I'm going to address a controversial topic, and if you agree or disagree with me, that's O.K. The disclaimer is always that the words from this pulpit do not necessarily reflect the position of everybody in the congregation. This is merely my testimony as a pastor. It is my "I-statement" in the hope that it can be helpful for you to search your hearts and make your own "I-statement."

So I do this kind of sermon with the hope that we each grapple with issues and integrate our faith into every aspect of our lives.

And I am talking about abortion today first because it has been in the news. After the Dobbs decision last June, almost a year ago, when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe vs Wade*, 24 states have enacted bans on abortion. Almost all of these are total bans. Two of these states, Georgia and South Carolina, enacted so-called "heartbeat" laws that ban the termination at 6 weeks. Many women wouldn't even know that they are pregnant and would possibly be only two weeks late for their period.

The term "heartbeat" is deceptive and misleading, because at 6 weeks there is a mere cluster of cells that begin emitting electrical impulses, but there is no blood pumping, no vascular system and no heart. But using this term has been effective at influencing public opinion.

Of these 24 states, nine, including Ohio, have had their bans temporarily blocked in the courts. So there are currently 15 states where a virtual total ban is in full effect. There are other states that have partial bans, such as North Carolina, where there is a ban after 12 weeks of pregnancy. And make no mistake, the special election that will happen in August in Ohio is all about keeping this abortion ban in place.

So we are at a major crossroads for reproductive justice and for the ability of women to make decisions about their bodies. The church cannot be silent on this.

It's also important for me to preach about this because when people talk about "the Christian view" on abortion, they only talk about a conservative perspective. There's only one so-called Christian view on this that is circulating, and that's a problem. It is important for people to know that there are other Christian views, progressive and liberal, that many haven't even heard of. We cannot be silent on this. Not all Christians want to ban abortions.

Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, has been on the forefront for reproductive justice and abortion rights for years. For over five decades the U.C.C. has supported a woman's right to choose a safe, legal abortion. When the Supreme Court handed down its Roe vs. Wade decision, the General Synod affirmed "removing the legal restrictions on medical termination of pregnancy through the second trimester."

The Roe decision introduced the concept of viability—when a fetus would be able to survive outside the womb with medical assistance. In 1973 viability was about 28 weeks, now with technological advances, most ob/gyn's put it at about 24 weeks.

The idea is that "personhood" with all the rights and protections that come with that status, is something that emerges over a period of time. When it comes to the moral and ethical status of a fetus, it changes.

Much of conservative Christianity rebelled against Roe and have been trying to overturn it since the beginning. They maintain that all abortion is morally equivalent whether it is at one month or at eight months! They maintain that all abortion is murder and that personhood is established at the moment that the egg is fertilized.

Now such a black and white view might be comforting—there's no grey area, no ambiguity—but it's simply wrong. And this view does violence to women.

In our ancient witness this morning from the book of Exodus, it describes an incident where a pregnant woman intervenes in a fight between two men. She becomes injured and suffers a miscarriage as a result. The penalty is just the payment of a fine. If a human life had been taken, the penalty would have been much more severe, the death penalty. So this is an indication that the fetus had value, but it did not have the status of a person in the biblical tradition. So here's one instance where a biblical text assumes that a fetus is not a person, and the causing the fetus to die was not murder.

So one biblical view of when personhood emerges is closer to the viability argument in the Supreme Court's decision. The court also indicated that the status of a fetus isn't the only consideration. There is also the competing ethical value of the dignity, autonomy and agency of the woman—the ability to decide how her body is used. This is often completely ignored by those who would ban abortions.

I recently heard it described this way: Let's say that a child has a medical condition where it would die without a bone marrow transplant. And let's say it is discovered that you are the perfect match. And so, without a transplant from you, the child would die. Now, the

government cannot force you to donate your bone marrow. The ethical principle behind the law is the *autonomy of one's body*. It is the right to control and to make decisions about one's own body.

Under the law, this right is even extended to us after we die. That is, if we don't voluntarily agree to donate any parts of our body while we are alive, the organs cannot be harvested when we die, even if they would save multiple lives.

This analogy says that the use of a woman's uterus to save a life is no different from the use of her bone marrow. It must be completely up to her; no one can compel her and it must be offered voluntarily. And this would be true even if a zygote or embryo were considered to be a person! Which it is not.

So refusing to allow your body to be used to save a life of a person is not murder, under the law. And this does not need to be justified by the one refusing; no reasons need to be given. It is simply up to the individual to make the decision.

Now, does a zygote (fertilized egg) have value? Yes, of course. Does an embryo have value? Yes, of course. Does it have the same value as a fully developed fetus that can survive outside the womb? No. Plus there is the competing value of the autonomy of the woman. And when it comes to weighing these values and deciding whether to terminate a pregnancy of an embryo or a fetus that is not viable, this should be entirely up to the woman.

By the way, almost all abortions, 87%, are of a fetus that is 12 weeks old or less. Only 1% are of a fetus that is 21 weeks (still not viable) or older.

That great liberal preacher, William Sloane Coffin, wrote some years ago, "Many thoughtful religious people are, in effect, anti-abortion and pro-choice." And "banning abortions would reduce only legal abortions, not significantly the total number of abortions."

Recent data seem to bear this out. Research done by the Guttmacher Institute shows that countries with the most restrictive abortion laws have the higher rates of abortion. And the mortality rate of the women is also much higher. So banning abortion only seems to increase the death and suffering of women. The fact is that of the 56 million abortions that occur each year, 50 million happen in developing countries. And in developed countries such as the U.S., where abortions have been safe and legal, the rate of abortion has been going down steadily. The report concludes: "Highly restrictive laws do not eliminate the practice of abortion, but make those that do occur more likely to be unsafe."

So if we really want to reduce abortion, we don't ban them! Rather there are proven methods to actually reduce abortion. In countries such as Switzerland and the Netherlands they have the *lowest abortion rates in the world*, and they also have abortion freely available on demand. But they also have 1.) contraception that is available and free to all, and 2.) extensive public sex education about birth control and family planning. In these countries, teen-age pregnancy rates are 9 times lower than the U.S.

A 2012 study found that when women got no-cost birth control in the U.S., the number of unplanned pregnancies and abortions fell by up to 78%. So we have evidence-based ways of drastically reducing abortion, but what do some states do? They also restrict access to contraception and restrict funding to abstinence-only education, which has been shown not to lower unplanned pregnancy rates at all.

It's almost as if so-called pro-life politicians aren't interested in decreasing the number of abortions at all. Because if they truly are, they would implement every evidence-based, proven approach such as free access to contraceptives, comprehensive sex education, affordable childcare for all, maternity leave and more fully funded nutrition and food stamp programs. All these make the choice of not terminating a pregnancy easier or avoiding the pregnancy in the first place.

How is it, then, the the same people who advocate for a ban on abortions also support defunding education and childcare, defunding healthcare for children and mothers, defunding food programs for the poor? Not only do these actions cause harm and death to actual children, but they incentivize desperate women to terminate their pregnancies. And there is no consideration of the anguish of the unwanted pregnancy and the harm to an unwanted child.

Look, I know that there are those true believers who not only oppose all abortions, but also oppose war, hunger and poverty that is responsible for the death of millions of children. My problem with those folks is that they do not acknowledge other legitimate ethical positions about terminating unwanted pregnancies. Their conviction that an embryo or even a fertilized egg is a "person" is a religious view, and they seek to enforce their deeply held religious view upon everyone, creating a theocracy.

But there are others, it seems to me, for whom banning abortion is an easy way to seem "pure," a false morality that costs nothing, that is akin to a false patriotism of merely hugging a flag.

And worse yet, some politicians simply manipulate this issue and "fire up their base" to acquire power to pursue a larger agenda that does not protect lives—those who are poor or who lack healthcare—in order to enrich a very few. And by the way, how can one profess to love the unborn while denying global warming?

The Rev. William Barber, leader of the Poor People's Campaign, calls out the hypocrisy, "The same politicians that claim they are for life fight living wages, and want to cut food stamps, and don't want people to have health insurance." He says, "There's a lie going on somewhere."

In any case, it is vital that progressive churches now stand up, as they did 50 years ago, and speak up for the rights not just for defenseless fetuses that can survive outside the womb, but also for the reproductive justice for women and for their control of their own bodies. May we defend the rights of the poor, the oppressed, the widow, the orphaned and the immigrants among us. And may we proclaim that the love of God is not exclusively for embryos but more importantly this is shared among all persons who are living.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)