

(8th Sunday after Pentecost)
Genesis 2:4-7
"Life Choices"

A minefield can be a dangerous place to walk through. You have to tread carefully, or one misstep and well, you know.

For this reason, most pastors I know will not touch the topic of "abortion" especially from the pulpit. It is too emotionally and theologically explosive. That is why over these past 34 years of ministry, I have never once mentioned abortion from the pulpit. Yet, here I am.

Why? For one, it has been a question brought up in conversations with people of faith, who like you, have asked what we as Presbyterians believe on this issue.

Secondly, as a nation, we are once again caught up in the ongoing, fiery debate over the "reproductive freedom" around a woman's right to choose the appropriate health care needs for her own body including family planning.

As you might be aware, nine states have passed what are referred to as "heartbeat" laws. Alabama passed a law making it illegal for a woman to "abort" her pregnancy, even if she has been raped or impregnated by incest. And a felony for any medical provider who assists the woman.

Then there is the controversy over "birth control". Some groups and businesses, like Hobby Lobby, want to make birth control illegal for everyone based on their own religious beliefs.

As you may know, this all goes back to the 1973 Supreme Court Case, Roe v. Wade, that ruled in favor of a woman's right to make choices for her own body and health based on the First and Fourteenth Amendments.

Americans have been taken up sides ever since, dividing into two camps labeled - "Pro-Life" and "Pro-Choice". People of great faith, and deep moral and ethical convictions, including Presbyterians like yourselves, might find yourselves in either one of those camps.

Before I venture further into this complex and emotional subject, let's take a look at the word: "Abort".

What does it mean to abort something? According to Merriam Webster, the word "abort" means: "bring to a premature end because of a problem or fault."

The root of the word "abort" is from the "Latin 'abortus', past participle of 'aboriri' 'to miscarry, be aborted, fail, disappear, pass away.'" References to it show up as early as 1570. (Online Etymology)

We tend to understand the word "abort" to simply mean ending a pregnancy. Yet, at its very root, "abort" means "to bring to a premature end because of a problem or a fault", including to "miscarry".

Any life ended prematurely is deeply painful and very emotional for those women making this choice. And that is an important thing to understand in this difficult discussion.

In my 34 years of ministry, I have on two occasions sat beside, listen to and prayed with couples as they struggled and agonized over the choices they were facing about an unexpected pregnancy and the woman's health. In the one situation, her pregnancy was aborted naturally, ending in a miscarriage.

As a minister, I have listened to the deeply emotional pain and grief of women and couples who were unable to conceive. Some have eventually chosen to adopt. Others have chosen not to adopt. Perhaps you or someone you know has had to make similar choices?

As you know this topic is complex and deeply emotional for many. Some choices women and couples make are very sad and painful, other choices bring great joy and happiness.

Whatever the choice made, it is important for us to remember that Jesus always leads with compassion, mercy, grace and forgiveness, not shame or guilt. He did so reaching out to offer life and healing, not judgement and condemnation.

So back to my question about God. We profess God to be the "Creator" of all life. In Genesis 1, God says, "Let 'us' create humankind in 'our' own image." In the other creation story, God forms "A-dam" (of the earth), and breathes the sacred breath of life into humankind. We profess the belief that "ALL" life is "sacred" reflecting the Divine Image of the Creator.

When does life begin? Some biblical scholars and traditions believe life when we take our first "breath". Others believe it begins at conception. The Presbyterian Church holds both beliefs in tension with each other.

Neither belief is right or wrong. We do believe that God is the Creator of Life and with us in our first breath and our last one.

So let me ask you, what do you think it means to be "Pro-Life" and "Pro-Choice"?

It would be safe to say, when we think of those two terms we think of people who are "Pro-Life" as against abortion and those who are "Pro-Choice" as in favor of it.

And that is the problem with placing simple labels on complex issues like "abortion". Perhaps the discussion on abortion and when life begins should not be viewed as an "either/or" but a "both/and" way of seeing it?

Can one be "Pro-Life" and "Pro-Choice" at the same time? Let me push you a bit more as followers of Jesus, is "God both 'Pro-Life' and 'Pro-Choice'?"

God always chooses life, yes. Yet, in Genesis, God chooses to prematurely abort human life, causing the great flood to destroy all living things save for Noah, his family and some of the animals. Why would the God of Life choose to "abort" human life?

Friends, if anyone tells you abortion is a simple cut-n-dried Biblical topic, they haven't really been reading and studying the whole of Scriptures.

In Jesus tradition, Jewish scholars have long held that life begins not at conception, but at first breath, as when God breathed life into Adam.

The Coalition for Reproductive Justice shares this thought on the Jewish tradition which is held by some in the Christian tradition, like we who are Presbyterian: "the guiding principles on abortion...a woman's life, her pain, and her concerns take precedence over those of the fetus; existing life is always sacred and dates precedence over a potential life; and a woman has the personal freedom to apply the principles of her tradition unfettered by the legal imposition of moral standards other than her own."

All faith traditions believe that all lives are sacred. Yet, all recognize that at times, difficult, painful and necessary choices are made to end a pregnancy prematurely.

As a follower of Jesus, I want you to know that I am both "Pro-Life" and "Pro-Choice". The same is so for the Presbyterian Church (USA)

As Presbyterians, we believe abortion should be safe, rare, and legal. We believe it is a woman's right to make choices for her own health.

To choose to "abort" a life is a moral, ethical, difficult and painful decision. As Presbyterians we believe that this choice must never be made lightly, carelessly, or thoughtlessly, but prayerfully, trusting God is with us in whatever choice is made.

As Presbyterians, we also advocate for women's health care and reproductive rights, including family planning.

(<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/.../soci.../abortion-issues/>)

As Presbyterians, we have wonderful sexual education curriculum, that teaches sexual intercourse should be in a loving, faithful, caring and mutually respectful relationship between two people, and yes, marriage being the primary one. That said, we also teach about birth control knowing that sexual development begins earlier and young people are waiting longer to get married because of education, debt, and careers. I have helped teach this curriculum in two previous congregations. (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/.../8-covenant-of-life-an...>)

For me, being "Pro-Life" means honoring the difficult, painful, and necessary choices women of all ages must make about their health and well-being, including the use of birth control and in rare situations, ending their pregnancy without fear of punishment.

Being "Pro-Life" means we respect and support those who, because of health issues or rape or incest or other personal reasons make the difficult, painful choices, some of which we ourselves would not choose to make. It means we do not punish them for their choices.

For me, being "Pro-Life" is about honoring the sacredness of all life in every human being that breathes.

For me, being "Pro-Life" means teaching our youth about responsible sex education including about birth control, and talking about this in our homes and church.

For me, being "Pro-Life" is about honoring and supporting and accepting our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters as God's own too.

It means honoring the dignity of people with disabilities (and that includes our state representatives), removing any barriers that prevent them from full participation in their work, school and church.

For me, being "Pro-Life" means I am in favor of common-sense gun control, because too many people, including babies and little children, have had their beating hearts stopped by bullets.

For me, being "Pro-Life" means working to end food scarcity in our schools, homes and communities. It means we are to not only feed the hungry, but work to change policies that cause hunger to begin with.

For me, being "Pro-Life" means addressing the issues of poverty, homelessness in our communities, nations, and in our churches.

For me, being "Pro-Life" means ALL people deserve access to medical, dental, and optical care.

For me, being "Pro-Life" means ending the death penalty. It means reforming our nation's prison system that has become a pipeline for young black men and people of color at a much higher rate of incarceration than whites.

Being "Pro-Life" means treating asylum seekers and their families with dignity, reuniting families and not caging children, and housing them in squalor.

Being "Pro-Life" is about honoring and respecting all of life, and not just simply saying you are against a woman ending her pregnancy for whatever reason she chooses, and then not caring about that mother, child or family after the birth.

The Bible does not mention abortion. What our sacred faith story tells us about the God in whose image all humankind is created, whose sacred breath we breathed at our birth, is that God is for us, with us, in us, loving us, what ever choices we make, healing us in our pain and sorrow, forgiving us, and calling us always to new life.

In that way, as followers of Jesus, God is calling us to love and support the life-giving, life-affirming and at times, difficult and painful decisions we all have made to end a pregnancy, a relationship, a marriage, a career, a hope, a dream remembering that nothing in life or in death will ever separate us from God in Christ Jesus.

Amen.