

The Church and Abortion

Galatians 6; Luke 10

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on July 3, 2022

I, like many of you I suspect, have spent time over these last few days trying to get my head around the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe vs Wade*, the consequences of which have already evolved since the initial ruling and appear ripe to expand over the coming months and years. I feel grief at the continued deterioration of our country's public character. What kind of people can say they care so much that every unborn baby have a right to life while we demonstrably care so little about creating the conditions and infrastructure necessary for those same children and their mothers to flourish once those children have actually been born? How is it that we are fundamentally incapable of having a public conversation about anything with compassion and kindness? And this in particular—of all things(!)—women and children, we choose instead to take an issue so deeply personal, so often so deeply painful, and turn it into an impersonal and unnuanced shouting match.

As I hope you have heard me say before, we need to be conscious of how we're using the word "we." In the case of abortion, disentangling our Christian "we" from our American one can make a valuable difference, which is I don't have a lot to say about what we as Americans should think or do about any of this this morning. As a priest—well, actually, as a Christian—my primary interest and responsibility is not in what we Americans think and do, but on what we Christians think and do. Which is to say, a problem we get into as Christians when talking about abortion is that use the language of America instead of the language of the Church.

American politics has divided this issue into two sides called pro-choice and pro-life. But both sides actually share something in common which is at odds with the teaching of the church, which is this: that both pro-choice and pro-life advocates assume that the woman is alone; that she is singularly responsible for both herself and any child she might carry. They consider the woman in isolation. We get into the same trouble by having the entire argument within the logic of rights language. Pro-choice advocates are concerned with the rights of women. And pro-life advocates are concerned with the rights of unborn children. When you're using rights language, it's easy to hold those you're considering at an arm's length. It's just another way isolating individuals, not to mention the irony that this approach makes women and children out to be enemies of one another—while more often than not its mostly white men like me who stand on the sidelines telling both sides what they can and can't do.

The Church disagrees with this approach for one reason, and that reason is baptism. Because of baptism, the Church is not a community made up of isolated individuals. It is a community made up of people who have been baptized into one body, the body of Christ. The Church is a community of mutual dependence. This is symbolized each week in the receiving of Eucharist, where each body partakes of one bread, but is perhaps most relevantly evident every time we baptize a child, as we did five times just last week. As you'll remember, after parents and godparents have made vows to bring up the child in the Christian faith and life, the priest turns to the wider congregation and asks *Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?* And together we say *We will*. This is the church telling parents that we are going to help you raise your children; that they will never be alone in the often-difficult vocation of parenting; that the Church is its own kind of family, where biological distinctions are blurred by spiritual bonds. The Church is a family that has a responsibility to care for one another.

But that responsibility does not stop there. The crazy thing about baptism, is that it makes you part of a family that not only promises to love and care for other members of that family. It makes you part of a family that promises to love and care for everyone. Anytime anyone is baptized, the entire congregation renews their own baptismal vows by reciting the Baptismal Covenant. Two of those questions are relevant here: The priest asks, *Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?* And: *Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?* We respond to each: *I will, with God's help*. We're called as the Church not only to care for our own Christian brothers and sisters, but also for

our enemies. We're called to care especially for victims of injustice and violence. We're called especially to care for the vulnerable.

One of the things I always tell children we are preparing for baptism, when they're old enough to have a bit of a conversation, is that if they ever get lost in a foreign land, or if they happen to tumble into a time-machine and get lost in a different era of history, if they're scared, they should look for a Church. Because that is a place that has promised to help you, no matter who you are. That's true not just for children. And that's true not just for the baptized. It's true for everyone. One of the main reasons that Christianity spread like wildfire through the ancient world was because it was a sociological phenomenon that the world had never seen before. Christians quickly gained a strange reputation for being people, for reasons no one could comprehend, that cared for everyone without qualification, people that respected the dignity of every human person, whether they were slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female. St. Paul says in our reading from Galatians: *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.* It's really as simple as that. The Church's destiny is to be the hands and feet of the body of Christ in the world. And what the hands and feet of Jesus did was bear the burdens of the world.

Why do women have abortions? Of course there are many reasons. But most common among them, we know, are two: One, fear about being able to meet the financial and/or physical demands that having a child inevitably brings; or two, fear that having the child will force them to lose relationships that are valuable to them. Both of these reasons, at their core, are different versions of the fear of being alone. In virtually every case I know about, the women who have decided to have an abortion do not think what they are doing is utilizing their free choice. They chose to have an abortion because they believed they had no choice. Because they felt alone.

The Church is meant to be a community where no one ever has to be alone. A community open to all, without qualification. A community that bears one another burdens. The Church is a community that makes common cause to raise children together, in this case especially children that do not belong to you biologically. A community that seeks to serve Christ in each and every person, to love our neighbors as ourselves. A community that strives for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Here's the hard part. Here's what the abortion conversation requires us to ask ourselves: Are we really such a community? Let's even take the worldwide capital "C" Church out of it for a second. Are we—St. Mark's Episcopal Church of Austin, Texas—are we that kind of community? Do we really mean it when we promise, every time a child is baptized here, that we will help you raise your children? What if that means more than just smiling politely while a toddler screams his way to the narthex? What if it means more than volunteering in Godly Play? (Which, don't get me wrong, is not a bad start.) What if it means, well, what if it means actually raising someone else's child?

In a post-Roe world, these questions are not exactly theoretical. A leading headline two days ago read: Who Will Help Care for Texas' Post-Roe Babies? Whatever your politics on this issue, whether you're pro-choice or pro-life, America has made a decision about abortion. And whatever you think about the people who made that decision or the mechanisms that made that decision possible, the practical consequences of this decision are real and they are right on our door step. Whether members of the Church lament or rejoice this decision matters a lot less than how the members of the Church choose to respond. There are a lot of people—perhaps you are one of them—that are feeling very alone right now. There are women wondering if others actually respect their dignity at all. There are and will be people lonely and afraid, people who will need love and support. People that are going to need the kind of community the Church promises to be. People who will need to be reminded of their belovedness before God through our words and actions, through the body of Christ.

Unfortunately, the Church, broadly speaking, does not have a great reputation in the abortion conversation in this country. But that's because our principle mode of engagement is that we have simply joined the shouting match. Instead of joining the shouting match, what if we entered the fray ourselves? What if we rolled up our sleeves and got busy doing the work of justice and peace, raising children, of standing up for the dignity of persons, of loving our neighbors as ourselves? Who will help care for Texas' post-Roe babies? Who will care for those who feel

alone with the one of the most difficult choices they've ever had to make? The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Maybe the Church? Maybe us? Maybe what we have right here is exactly what the world needs right now, would we be so brave to live in to the promises we have already made.

Amen.