

Homily – We Shall Overcome

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Today, I want to begin by reading you a letter that many of us received yesterday from our Bishop, Lucinda. She writes,

Dear Beloved in Christ, My heart is heavy as I write to you that we have learned officially of the decision of the United States Supreme Court to overturn the landmark decision of Roe vs. Wade. While this news was not unexpected, it is nonetheless confirmation that reproductive rights for women have undergone a serious attack. This decision takes our country back fifty years in our struggle for equality and for a woman's right to have control over her own body. These are rights my mother's generation fought for, and rights that I hoped my daughter and granddaughters would have been able to expect. This news from the Supreme Court, while intended to render women powerless over their own bodies, will only serve to re-commit us all to advocate for the equality under the law that we already have with God.

The Presiding Bishop's office issued a well-crafted and informative statement about The Episcopal Church's position on reproductive rights, quoting among other legislative actions of The Episcopal Church, a resolution of the 1994 General Convention opposing any "executive or judicial action to abridge the right of a woman to reach an informed decision...or that would limit the access of a woman to safe means of acting on her decision." (1994-A054). To read the Presiding Bishop's entire statement, please [see the other side of your handout.]

Over my years in ordained ministry, I have had numerous conversations with young women who cautiously asked about our Episcopal Church's stance on abortion. These have not been theoretical conversations, and while not always stated, I felt the person was weighing a difficult choice about pregnancy either for herself or for someone dear to her. In these

encounters, it has mattered deeply to each woman that our church is pastoral, caring and compassionate when it comes to difficult decisions regarding a woman's life, especially during her reproductive years. We have shown that we are a church that understands the dilemmas of making hard choices, and we respectfully companion each woman in her journey. We know that women often make difficult decisions about their bodies, their reproductive rights, their families, and these decisions are theological, psychological, biological and sociological. These choices are personal, complex in nature, and made with more care than the SCOTUS decision to overturn Roe v Wade.

I hope that we will continue to be a safe place where people who face tough personal challenges find a pastoral heart. No matter where you may be politically on this and other issues, we must respect decisions of conscience and provide solace and comfort for those who face them.

I ask you to pray for women everywhere, advocate for justice, and show the face of a fiercely loving God who knows our hearts and our deepest struggles.

Faithfully, Lucinda.

We are a branch of the Jesus movement that grieves today. Not all Christians are reacting in this way, so we have a responsibility to make sure that others know they have not been abandoned by Jesus or by the Church, at least not by this part of the church. We are blessed to live in a state in which reproductive healthcare should continue into the foreseeable future. This is not true in other states in which trigger laws went into effect on Friday with the declaration by the Supreme Court. I wonder how we will be called to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus with women who need our help? I am one who continues to believe that the Holy Spirit is leading us into the future, though sometimes it feels like a dance with two steps forward and one step back, two steps forward and one step back, though this last week feels

like two or three steps back. However, we will move forward again, though I don't know how long it will take. One of the things that will help us in our forward movement is to do a moral inventory of things we do or believe that get in the way of the movement. It is easier to point to others, but we only have control over ourselves. On Friday I want to have a rally or vigil up at the courthouse in SLO. The predominant emotion and language was of anger. This is very understandable because anger is a normal and even healthy response when one has been wronged or violated. However, anger is also a full contact emotion because it activates our nervous systems and can hijack our thoughts and behaviors.

A little while ago we heard a reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians. In general, Paul's letters are written to help both individuals and groups move forward in their spiritual journeys. Today we heard a long list of problematic behaviors and emotions that are produced by our egos or our selfishness. Note that Paul uses the word flesh, however every time you hear or read the word flesh in Paul's letters then you can substitute the word ego. It is not the flesh or the body that leads us astray and away from the spirit. Instead, it is the ego or selfishness that leads us astray. "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the [ego]. For what the [ego] desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the [ego]; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the [ego] are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these." Did you notice anger is included in this list. As I said earlier, anger is a normal healthy response when one has been wronged or violated. It can be a motivator for change. But, unmanaged anger can become a health risk and even a danger to others. In her book, "Atlas of the Heart" Brené Brown writes that anger is often a secondary indicator emotion that

conceals emotions that are hard to recognize or name. Of the eighty-seven emotions reviewed in Brené Brown's book, twenty of them are related to anger. And, I want to spend the rest of this sermon using Brown's book to look at two of these negative emotions that come from the ego – contempt and self-righteousness. Until we recognize, own, and manage these two ego-based emotions we are not going to effectively move forward in the difficult work we have on reproductive healthcare.

First let's look at contempt. When someone is angry at you, you've still got traction with them, but when they display contempt, you've been dismissed. Contempt is perhaps the most corrosive force in marriage, and contemptuous communication is a strong predictor of divorce. What separates contempt from criticism is the intention to insult and psychologically abuse your partner. With your words and body language, you lob insults right into the heart of your partner's sense of self. Fueling these contemptuous actions are negative thoughts about the partner. He or she is stupid, disgusting, incompetent, a fool. We can feel and show contempt towards individuals or groups. In either instance, being on the receiving end of contempt is often painful because it's shaming and belittling. Over the past six years, contempt between political and ideological groups has been at an all-time high. When you communicate with contempt, the result can be cruel. Treating others with disrespect and mocking them with sarcasm and condescension are forms of contempt. So are hostile humor, name-calling, mimicking, and body language such as an eye rolling and sneering. In whatever form contempt is poisonous to a relationship because it conveys disgust and superiority. Contempt simply put, says, I'm better than you. And you are less than me. Millions of people organize their social lives and their news exposure along ideological lines to avoid people with opposing viewpoints.

With contempt the assumption is that your ideology is based in love, while your opponents is based in the opposite. Each side thinks it is driven by benevolence, while the other is evil and motivated by hatred, and is therefore an enemy with whom one cannot negotiate or compromise. People often say that our problem in America today is incivility or intolerance. This is incorrect. Our problem is contempt which is a noxious brew of anger and disgust. And not just contempt for other people's ideas, but also for other people. Contempt makes political compromise and progress impossible.

The solution is not that we need to disagree less, but we need to learn how to disagree better, without contempt or cruelty. It's really not far off from the approach of teaching us how to replace negative communication patterns with new skills to convey respect and appreciation. You and I have some hard work to do to recognize, own, and manage the contempt in our own hearts and minds. In Matthew 7, Jesus reminds us to focus on the log in our own eye and not the splinter in the eyes of the other. And, it is not weak to let go of contempt. Jesus endured the shame and pain of Crucifixion and did not return with violence. The Cross is not weak, it is the source of eternal strength. You and I must end the vicious cycle of contempt if we are to make any headway in reclaiming reproductive healthcare for all. We need to see ourselves truthfully and fully. Clinging to contempt makes movement forward impossible. But, when we manage our contempt it makes room for incremental change, meeting halfway, and compromise.

The second negative emotion of the ego is self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is the conviction that one's beliefs and behaviors are the most correct. It is the opposite of humility. People who exhibit self-righteousness see things as black-and-white, they tend to be close minded, inflexible, intolerant of ambiguity, and less likely to consider others opinions. Now, it is important to realize that self-righteousness

is different from righteousness. In the case of righteousness we are appropriately reacting to a true injustice, we are trying to do the right thing. However, when feeling self-righteous, we feel morally superior to the others. Moral outrage in response to injustice can be classified as righteous anger when motivated by a true concern about injustice. On the other hand when moral outrage is self-enhancing, it is self-righteous anger. Given the political climate today, it's important to understand that most moral outrage is self-enhancing and related to self-righteous anger. You and I have got to be super conscious about moral outrage and instead focus on doing the next right thing. Again, a courageous moral inventory of own head and heart will help us recognize, own, and manage moral outrage. It is not weak to let go of outrage. We need to end the vicious cycle. We need to look in the mirror.

So what do you think? This has not been a fluffy message, and it has not been a call to battle the forces of evil, in fact it has been the opposite. It has been a call to double down on our inner work, and I think this is consistent with the way of Jesus. Things are not right in our world, so God is not yet done with us. All of our future work to reclaim reproductive healthcare will be meaningless if we do not let go of the desires of the ego. Through the grace of God we can move towards the fruits of the spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Let me repeat, self-control. Especially control of our own contempt and self-righteousness. Equipped in this way, in these times of turmoil, I wonder where the Holy Spirit is leading us?