



HOLLYWOOD
United Methodist Church
the **heart** of hollywood

TOUGH QUESTIONS: BEING PRO-CHOICE AND PRO-LIFE?

Sunday, April 6, 2008

Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor

Scripture: Luke 24:13-35

This October it happens. Not sure I am ready for it, but it is coming, no matter what. My 30th high school reunion. Do I really want to go see all those middle aged people? I still feel 17; am I really in my 40s? I even joined classmates.com to see if I can recognize names and remember faces. Larry Santamaria – where are you?

Being serious for a moment, deep down I wonder: my core, my essence hasn't changed in thirty years. Has theirs?

Today's gospel lesson talks about how we recognize the essence of the risen Christ. This story of the walk to Emmaus is found only in the gospel of Luke, and is in our lectionary only once every three years.

It's evening on the first Easter Sunday. Two people who are grieving the death of Jesus are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus. One is named Cleophas. The other is never named; it could be Cleophas' wife, or it could be a friend or fellow disciple. At some point along the walk, a stranger joins them. They are heartbroken over what has happened, and can't stop talking about the events of the day. This stranger walking with them seems to be the only person who's been in Jerusalem and doesn't know what's going on. He asks what has happened, and they tell him the story of the crucifixion, and mention that there had been a rumor that angels had appeared at the tomb and said that Christ had risen.

The stranger then tells them all about how Jesus' death and resurrection had been foretold by the prophets, and asks them why they are so slow of heart to believe.

When Cleophas and his companion reach Emmaus, they entreat Jesus to come in and stay with them, for it is almost nightfall. He does, and when they sit down and break bread together they and the others in the house recognize the stranger in their midst as the risen Christ.

SLIDE – CARVAGGIO PAINTING OF EMMAUS

This is rumored to be JK Rowling's favorite painting, by Caravaggio in the mid-17th century, of Jesus breaking bread in Emmaus.

Cleopas and his companion were suffering. They were upset, grieving, inconsolable. They thought that their dreams and hopes for a better life, for the deliverance of others who were suffering had died with Jesus' crucifixion. This passage from Luke reminds us that even in the midst of heartbreak and difficulty, of pain and sorrow and confusion, Christ walks with us -- even if we don't recognize him.

As we approach our second topic in our sermon series, being pro choice and pro life, this is an important point to keep in mind: even when we don't recognize him; even when we consider him a stranger among us, Christ is present with us.

I've clung to that truth heavily in preparing this sermon. In 22 years of ordained ministry, this is the first time I have ever preached on the issues surrounding abortion. Probably true for many of my colleagues, too. It's not something that we mainline Protestants preach about with any regularity. And let's be frank: it's not a warm and fuzzy topic with universal appeal. I'm certain what I preach today is a different sermon today than I would have preached 10 or 20 years ago. That's due in part because the medical technologies and realities have changed and are constantly changing, but that's not all. I have changed in age and perspective and experiences; while I graduated high school 30 years ago, Roe v. Wade was decided only 35 years ago. Of the issues in this sermon series, I find this the toughest to articulate. So let me draw three large brushstrokes for us: what we know, what we believe, and what we need to be doing – all the while remembering that Christ walks with us throughout all the circumstances of our lives.

First, what we know. Let me be clear: as people of faith, we are all pro-life. If we believe that we are loved by God, created by God, and that God is the source of all life, then we are pro-life. Period.

Second, it is a fallacy to say that because we are pro-life, we cannot be pro-choice. I know that's not an option we are given by pollsters and the media. But here in this community of faith we understand that some issues aren't either-or, and this is a prime example. Being pro-choice is not necessarily to be pro-abortion. It's to recognize that the decision, the choice between potential life and existing life belongs between a woman, her doctor and her God, and that right must be protected by law. That's all.

Third, the Bible is silent on abortion. Psalm 139 talks about how God knew us when we were in our mother's womb. This is a psalm about the expansiveness of God's love and poetically speaks of how there is no place where we are apart from God's presence....even when we are on our own Emmaus journeys.

Fourth, this is not something we hear about on the news on any sort of a regular basis. Which might beg the question: why are we talking about it at all? Think about it. When do we hear about abortion? When there is a Supreme Court vacancy, when there has been an act of violence against a clinic or doctor, or: when it's election time.

Guess what time it is.

We need to be prepared – all of us – to help articulate our faith and beliefs so that we can mitigate the polarization of the faith community and bring forth options for healing.

That moves us into the second broad brushstroke: what we believe. The Social Principles of the UMC say:

“The beginning of life and the ending of life are the God-given boundaries of human existence. While individuals have always had some degree of control over when they would die, they now have the awesome power to determine when and even whether new individuals will be born. Our belief in the sanctity of the unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion. But we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother, for whom devastating damage may result from an unacceptable pregnancy. In continuity with past Christian teaching, we recognize the tragic conflicts of life that may justify abortion, and in such cases support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures. We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection.

We call all Christians to a searching and prayerful inquiry into the sorts of conditions that may warrant abortion. We call for the Church to provide nurturing ministries to those who give birth. Governmental laws and regulations do not provide all the guidance required by the informed Christian conscience. Therefore, a decision concerning abortion should be made only after thoughtful and prayerful consideration by the parties involved, with medical, pastoral and other appropriate counsel.”

In the early 90s, one candidate for national office included in his platform that he wanted to make abortion safe, legal and rare. After the election, the safe and legal portions got responsive attention as needed; but the rare portion was never addressed.

And we know that it has not been addressed by us as the mainline church. Diana Butler Bass from Drew wrote last year: “For the most part, we have given in to slogans and untenable philosophies. We do not bear transformative witness of hospitality to the ‘least of these’ or prophetically challenge the disordered ‘relations of power’ that plague our lives, churches, and society.”¹

We Protestants have abdicated the issue, in many ways. We’ve either been so narrowly prochoice that we have dehumanized the decision for both the existing life and the potential life, rendering the process without ethical consequence; or, we have said, de

facto, caring for women who are in crisis with their pregnancy isn't our responsibility. Someone else will need to handle that.

Jim Wallis, author of *God's Politics*, which we read as a congregation last year, has a new book called *The Great Awakening*. In it, he asks the right question: "how do we actually prevent unwanted pregnancies, protect unborn lives, support low-income women, offer compassionate alternatives to abortion, make adoption much more accessible and affordable, carefully fashion reasonable restrictions, and thus dramatically reduce the shamefully high abortion rate in America?"²

Wallis tells the story of a woman he met whose daughter was graduating from Harvard. He teaches part time there, so he was glad of the connection and told the woman she should be proud of her daughter. She replied: "I was a low income woman at the time I got pregnant and if I hadn't gotten food stamps and health care, I would have aborted my daughter. And now she's graduating from Harvard. Tears ran down both their faces. I want you to tell people that if they want to prevent abortions, they need to support low income women like me."³

That moves us into the third brushstroke: what we can do. We can lead the church and the community into creating what Martin Luther King Jr., who we remembered on Friday on the 40th anniversary of his death, called "the beloved community".

The reality is that there are women – and there are men – and there are children -- in our midst who need the beloved community; who need to know that the risen Christ has not left them to walk their journey alone, but walks with them throughout all kinds of crises. That's why we sent a team to Mississippi. That's why we offer food and fellowship at PATH. That's why we put the red ribbons on the tower, to offer God's inclusive love and grace to all who need hope. We are called to walk with others on their journey bearing the essence of Christ in our compassion, in our outreach, in our sharing of the good news.

Just as it is not enough for those in the so-called pro life camp to only care about what happens in utero, and not worry about what happens after birth, asking: will the child have enough to eat, and a place to live, and health insurance; it is not enough for us to care only about children after they are born. We need to care about women who have issues with pregnancy – perceived or projected – and support ways to help them make the choices that are best for them.

In practical terms:

--many folks in this congregation (relative to most congregations of our size) have adopted children, or raised foster kids. Let's give an amen for that great gift. How many of us can also step up and take in or adopt a child? Or, if that's not meant to be in your life: can you be a mentor to a foster child who has no parents?

--about 80 years ago, the David and Margaret home in La Verne was founded by Methodists as an orphanage. It has now grown to be a foster family agency with many

programs. But they need mentors and volunteers. There are other agencies closer, too. Is making the connection with such an agency something we as a church can do? And we must also use the gift that we have of citizenship in this country to speak out for policies and programs that help.

--in the early part of this decade, I was part of an effort in this county to create the Safe Surrender Program, whereby women who gave birth to children they just couldn't keep could relinquish them to any emergency room or fire station within 72 hours of birth. No questions asked. This program, which I guarantee you is the one thing that my son James is proudest of his mother being part of, has now spread statewide. It began as an effort to keep women from abandoning their babies in parking lots and dumpsters. We can continue to share information about this program. You will see bumper stickers on the backs of county trucks, and decals in every emergency room. But there's still more outreach to be done.

--we can advocate for continued health education in our schools that offer a full range of information on pregnancy prevention and are not just abstinence only. We have a treasure in our congregation in Ric Loya, who has consistently been one of the best advocates in our state for comprehensive health education and having students have access to good information.

--we can advocate for increased child nutrition and child welfare laws, making sure all children have access to food and are kept safe.

In closing, theologian Stanley Hauerwas from Duke Divinity School puts it like this: "It may be that issues such as abortion are finally not susceptible to an intellectual 'solution.'

I do not mean to suggest that we cease trying to formulate the problem in the most responsible manner possible, but rather that our best recourse may be to watch how good men and women handle the tragic alternatives we often confront in abortion situations...

For no amount of ethical reflection will ever change the basic fact that tragedy is a reality of our lives. A point is reached where we must have the wisdom to cease ethical reflection and affirm that certain issues indicate a reality more profound than the ethical." ⁴

The risen Christ is made known in the breaking of the bread. As we gather around the table, let us see the essence of Christ in each person present, and pray for guidance as we create the beloved community: not simply a reunion with those we have loved in the past, but an inclusive gathering of all God's children.

Amen.

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¹ Diana Butler Bass, "Beyond the Stale Rituals of Abortion Politics," *God's Politics* blog entry, January 22, 2007, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2007/01/diana-butler-bass-beyond-stale-rituals.html>

² Jim Walls, *The Great Awakening*, New York: HarperCollins, 2008, p. 195.

³ *Ibid*, p. 189.

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, quoted in *Religion and Ethics: Ethical Issues*. Transcript of BBC broadcast posted at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/ethics/abortion/religion/religion.shtml>, July 20, 2006.