

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany  
February 17, 2019  
Jeremiah 17:7-8, 10  
Psalm 1

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*The Seat of the Scoffers*

Every week preachers are presented with a set of scriptures from what is called the Revised Common Lectionary. We generally get an Old Testament passage, a psalm, a gospel reading and one from the Epistles or Letters. Most Protestant churches in the world follow roughly the same lectionary. I like knowing that, for instance, the faithful in Singapore are gathered and reflecting on the same stories that we are in Charlotte. Catholics also follow a lectionary that is substantially like ours.

In preparation for worship, my practice is to read through the prescribed offerings and see what grabs me. Something always does, and it's rarely a passage that is affirming and uplifting. This may be because I tend to be attuned to what doesn't make sense, to the pain in a passage. Inevitably, a phrase or an idea, or very often something Jesus-the-Enigma says, sticks with me like a thorn in my side or a piece of sticky tape that I can't get rid of as it adheres from one hand to the other, driving me crazy.

Last week I was a bit surprised to find that the phrase that jumped out from beautiful Psalm 1 was "the seat of the scoffers." The seat of the scoffers? Who are the scoffers? I wondered. But I didn't wonder for long because I know full well that sometimes I'm a scoffer and that many of us tend to be so inclined. We sit in the virtual balcony as observers employing cynicism or judgment or dismissal as excuses not to become engaged in what happens in a particular arena--be it a family squabble, a dispute at work or a contentious political issue. Many of us are disheartened by the fractious nature of political discourse these days and choose simply not to engage in the fracas for our own peace of mind.

The psalmist calls us out, I think, calls us down from the balcony to the floor of debate be it in the coffee shop, the kitchen, Town Meeting, the well of the House or Senate in Montpelier, or this sanctuary this morning. As people of faith we are obliged to wrestle with the thorny issues of our time just as Jesus implored the people of his time to do. No one was more engaged with the politics—the issues that affected the governance of a people—than Jesus. He routinely wrangled with the ruling Roman authorities, the high priests and the prevailing status quo. He pressed people to question their faith and to align their faith with their actions and everyday lives.

The issues that affect people in this country, this state, this town and in our families, are ones of moral, ethical and religious significance. The conversation will only be enhanced by our perspective, and our own faith deepened by our questioning. Both the prophet Jeremiah and the psalmist say that those who trust in the Lord are like “trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season and their leaves do not wither. In all they do they prosper.” (Psalm 1:3)

If you’ve been following the news of the Vermont legislature, you know that the issue that is sparking the most contentious debate these days is, once again, abortion. On hearing this, your reaction may be, “Here we go again. I know my position on this issue and needn’t really engage again.”

Well, let’s all come down from the balcony, from seat of the scoffers, let’s bring the trees of faith into this discussion and explore briefly this very sensitive and timely subject. Let’s not leave it to our poor elected officials in Montpelier to figure out by themselves. In honor of our faith, let’s not let stand back and let others assume that there is only one Christian perspective on abortion.

This isn’t easy and you will probably leave this morning confused and less sure of what you believe or think. My hope is that you go away holding the questions in one hand and God’s hand in the other.

In the past couple of weeks, I’ve read way too much, I’ve paced and walked and interjected into perfectly lovely dinners my own confusion about this issue. One book I found particularly compelling was *Trust Women* by Rebecca Todd Peters. This morning I’d like to adopt the term she uses to for the fetus which is “prenate.” There’s something jarring about the word fetus that I don’t like, and the term “prenate” seems broader, employing the sense of becoming that such an entity has.

Amy Frykholm succinctly sums Todd Peter’s position by saying, “Peters chooses the term *prenate* to name the being which is within the mother’s womb. The prenatate is neither a fully formed child, breathing the air of this world, nor a “collection of cells” with no moral status whatsoever. It is, by its very nature, fluid. It breathes fluid, it lives in fluid; it is “fragile, contingent, potential, not-yet.” As such, it has a very particular moral status—a status that is contingent on its mother. (“Two ways of being Christian and pro-choice: Is abortion only the lesser of evils, or can it be a moral good?” *Christian Century*. by Amy Frykholm October 8, 2018.)

In the interest of brevity, I’m going to risk simplifying this debate to what is probably a detrimental degree, but we have to start somewhere. And because this is a

sensitive and very personal subject that evokes deep feelings, I invite you to come into my office after worship to continue the conversation, if you like.

With Justice Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Supreme Court, the fate of Roe v. Wade which, since 1973 has allowed women the right to choose an abortion, is uncertain and many suspect that it may be significantly weakened or overturned. What may happen is that decisions about abortion will be remanded to individual states. Thus states are seeking to pass laws that codify and clarify their position on this issue.

The bill presented to the Vermont House is H 57, the Senate's version is S 25. It neither enhances nor restricts current access to abortion in Vermont. Thus there is no limit on a prelate's gestational age when termination would become illegal. Many have been upset by this, envisioning what is euphemistically called "partial birth abortions." To clarify this, it's important to remember that federal law pre-empts state law and there is a federal law passed in 2003 and upheld in 2007 that specifically prohibits so called "Partial Birth" abortions. This is not, by the way, a medical term or procedure and is a very rare occurrence, late term abortions represent only 1.3% of all abortions in the US. When it is deemed necessary, it is because of loss of prelate viability or a threat to the mother's health.

It's crucial that in the course of any discussion about access to abortion that we not forget that medical practitioners have strict codes of ethics and practice that guide their caring for and serving their patients. There are no health care providers in Vermont that perform so called late term abortions, for instance. The context, the circumstances in which all decisions about sexual and reproductive health are made is a vital part of all ethical considerations. It allows some people to hold concurrently that abortion is terrible and yet in some circumstances the right course of action.

Other thorny issues being bandied about include the age at which a prelate can actually feel pain. As you can imagine, both those who claim it is early in development and those who believe it doesn't occur until after 24 weeks cite scientific evidence.

The question of a minor's right to confidential sexual and reproductive health services is also thrown into the mix with some states now requiring parental consent.

It's easy to get lost in the weeds of parsing gestational weeks and debating the prelate's viability. This demarcation, however, is dependent on technology, an evolving and inexact science.

In taking a bird's eye view of this discussion, two main issues have risen to the surface for me. First, the central question of the moral status of the prelate. Rebecca Todd Peters puts it this way:

“The question of the moral status of the prelate is the linchpin of our collective discomfort about abortion in the United States. If the moral status of the prelate is accepted as equivalent to a pregnant woman from the moment of conception, then justifying the killing of the prelate would be a reasonable approach to thinking about the situation of abortion. If the moral status of the prelate is equivalent to a bunch of cells, then abortion requires no more thought than does a haircut. For most Americans, however, our relationship with the prelate falls somewhere between affording it the status of a full human being and dismissing it as merely a bunch of cells.” (130)

This is the crux of the matter, isn't it. Our understanding of life and God's mysterious indwelling in each of us come into play. Where we come from and where we go after we die and the vast limits of our understanding are all brought into question. Sometimes we say that we strive to be the person God already knows us to be. But when did God know us to be? Before we were conceived? Before we were born? In some ethereal realm of existence we can only begin to imagine?

When we leapfrog over these questions and focus only on the legal aspects of a woman's right to an abortion, we neglect the difficult and very meaningful consideration of how we view life in general and our own lives in particular.

As a side note here, this is ultimately a question of life and not of birth. As the Roman Catholic Benedictine nun Joan Chittister has said, “I do not believe that just because you're opposed to abortion, that that makes you pro-life. In fact, I think in many cases, your morality is deeply lacking if all you want is a child born but not a child fed, not a child educated, not a child housed. And why would I think you don't? Because you don't want any tax money to go there. That's not pro-life. That's pro-birth. We need a much broader conversation on what the morality of pro-life is.” (Joan Chittister, transcript of interview with Bill Moyers, *The Moyers Journal*, PBS, November 12, 2004.)

Honestly, I was very surprised by the second issue that came to the forefront for me. What I have found inescapable is subjugation of women inherent in the discussion about abortion. The underlying assumption seems to be that women are not capable of making such deeply important decisions for themselves, that society must step in and direct women who, for whatever reason, are deemed unable to follow a morally acceptable path. Because reproduction is tangled with sexuality, an unexpected or

unwanted pregnancy bears shadows of unchained lust and desire. This, of course, has been true for millennia and though we may consider ourselves staunch supporters of equal rights for women, we are not, I think, aware of the insidious ways the view of women as less than men has pervaded our culture and understanding. The entrenchment of cultural ethos runs deep and is often just viewed as reality. This has been revealed to many of us as we've been awakening to the idea of white privilege. I had no idea how rooted my entire life is in white privilege until I began to peel back the layers.

Sadly—and I use this word intentionally because that's how it makes me feel—sadly, our starting point seems to be that women are not trustworthy. We can go back to the Garden of Eden to see the beginning of the fallibility of Eve. In cultural, religious and state realms, women have been perceived as needing the restrictions of ruling authorities that were historically male—to coerce their compliance in many areas. The underlying assumption has been that women cannot know what is best for their families, their children, their lives and their communities.

There are women and men here this morning who have weathered the deeply personal storm of abortion. For some it was a thunderstorm, for others a hurricane. All have been whipped and blown by the particularities of their own experiences. My guess is that whatever they decided, their engagement with God was tested. As we heard Jeremiah say this morning, “I the Lord test the mind and search the heart.” When we question how our faith works in the world we are, indeed, like trees setting down deep roots by streams of water. This is how we thrive and how the world in which we live is nourished by the fruit of our labors.

So sit not in the seat of the scoffers, come down to the streams where God's living waters flow. Stand in the muddy banks of the rivers of faith where the promise is not that all will be clear but that you will be fed, honored and cherished, a beloved child of God.

Grace and Peace.