A Most Intimate Decision

There are few decisions more intimate or more personal than the choice to bring new life into the world. And there are few issues more polarizing or hotly disputed in our time than the question of who can decide when a pregnancy should be ended.

Pro-choice and pro-life are labels the media employ to highlight the conflict. But if we look more closely, we can discern that there are competing philosophies involved. Because there exist not only differences of opinion around when life and personhood begin, with all the associated legal and medical conundrums, but differing interpretations of what it means to be a person of faith, a person of conscience and moral conviction.

Among theologians and religious ethicists, there are two schools of thought. One is typified by the love of rules. Moral dilemmas are to be resolved by reference to a legal code, a confessor’s manual, a canon of church doctrine, or a scriptural directive. Those governed by the love of rules look to these regulations not as guidelines or broad maxims of conduct, but as timeless edicts where not only the spirit but the letter of law must be strictly obeyed. They regard morality in dualistic terms. Actions may be right or wrong, good or bad. But they are impatient with ambiguity. They see their world as a battleground between forces of light and darkness, regarding as the worst apostates those who perceive a universe with shades of grey.

Now in contrast to those governed by the love of rules, others are guided by the rule of love. They consider ethics to be situational, always dependent on context and circumstance. Rule books can be helpful starting points, but determining what a moral response might be in any given instance demands asking “what is the kind, compassionate, and considerate thing to do in this particular frame of reference?” The only sure touchstone is love—not in the sense of mere sentiment or emotion, but as an active concern for the well-being of others whose lives are affected by our choices. Those guided by the rule of love understand that life is complicated, like chess. There is no one right move in chess, and no single gambit that can be applied to help us find it. But moves can be better or worse, depending. And in life, a given course of action may be more or less moral, more or less justifiable, more or less intelligent and responsible depending on a host of human variables far more complex than the layout of pieces on any chessboard.

“Situation ethics” sounds new-fangled, but actually it’s very old. Jesus, for example, had little use for moral codes or systems. Indeed, he challenged many of the “do’s and don’ts” of his time. Rather his teaching method was almost always the case study, inviting his listeners to consider the instance of a man who had fallen among thieves, or the example of a prodigal son, or the issue of what constitutes a fair day’s wage. He told stories, he raised questions. He said nothing that we know of about abortion, or contraception, or homosexuality, or any of the other hot-button topics that the modern Pharisees of sexual purity have made their own. But if Jesus had any moral standard that could be applied to every situation, it was the standard of mutuality – to care for others as oneself. To be mindful of the relations that sustain and amplify the possibilities for life not just for some but for everyone.

And these are the principles that guide me when I think about abortion. Not in black-or-white terms, but in terms of who is making the decision and why. Their unique problems and the incomparable trade-offs involved. I think about actual couples like Judy and Roy, who came to me as their pastor, faced as they were with the hard decision of whether to have another child.

Both were musicians and artists. She was a writer. He played keyboards. But like most creative types, they subsisted on a shoestring. Roy was close to the age for Social Security when his wife Judy, who was in her 40s, unexpectedly became pregnant. They already had grown children and were supporting a daughter in college even as they worried about their son serving overseas with the army in Iraq.

As a dad myself, I could identify with the father who shared real-life worries: Would he live long enough or have energy to care for an infant through the teenage years? Judy’s anxieties I could only guess at: older women run higher risks of miscarriage, birth defects and other complications. Yet I could sense the two were genuinely torn. They loved babies, yet they had already raised their kids and were getting on in years.

I don’t think they were coming to me for advice, or to tell them what to do. Instead, they wanted me to listen and understand. They wanted a safe space where they could talk through their mixed feelings and ambivalence. They faced a quandary. They wanted me to respect and support them wherever they finally came down.

Ultimately the couple determined to end the pregnancy, a choice I thought about when I conducted the funeral for Judy a couple of years later, after a brief battle with cancer resulted in her early death.

For me it was a reminder that life is unpredictable, messy and uncertain, and that the decision to bear a child is complicated, affected as it is by age, health, finances, the strength of the marriage and the enormous responsibilities that accompany the joy of parenthood. No one is in a better situation to balance those concerns, or determine whether to carry a pregnancy to term than those most closely involved.

Yet there are many who differ, who would call people like Roy and Judy criminals, who believe that abortion is always wrong, for everyone, in every circumstance. Of course not everyone who has qualms about abortion falls into this category. Taking life—even a potential life—should give us pause, should make us feel unsettled and unsure. Many Americans, perhaps the majority, are rightly in the “muddled middle” on this issue. Yet there are a minority who are adamant, who are all too sure of their own correctness. And these absolutists, these legalists are determined to impose their strictures on others at gunpoint if necessary. There have been eight assassinations of abortion providers in the last twenty-five years, plus forty-one bombings and almost two hundred attacks of arson aimed at women’s health clinics in recent decades, followed this past Friday by three murders and multiple injuries inflicted by a gunman at a clinic in Colorado. These are not “culture wars.” These are shooting wars, intended to terrorize and carried out by extremists who are inflamed by rhetoric that has become part of the political mainstream but that incites the fringe to violence.

This current disinformation campaign against Planned Parenthood, including Carly Fiorina’s unfounded assertion of watching video tapes that simply don’t exist, has spawned predictable waves of vandalism at facilities in New Hampshire, California, Washington State and Louisiana, now too in Colorado Springs. Incendiary language, like an ad from Ted Cruz that likens abortion to a “genocidal holocaust” incites vigilantes like Robert Lewis Dear. From the street to the statehouse, the tactics vary, but the strategy is the same, to make decisions like Roy and Judy’s increasingly risky and costly, scarey and impractical, until not only abortion but also contraception and birth control are prohibited and punishable offenses.

This is not a dialogue or conversation, unfortunately. It is a fight, one our side is currently losing, but in which we cannot allow ourselves to be intimidated. Instead, we must stand with our sisters, our daughters, our partners, with every victim of rape and incest, with every woman who struggles with what to do when faced with an unintended pregnancy and who is not just a womb for the incubation of the fertilized ovum, but is a moral agent and decision-maker.

This is why I have joined with other clergy and faith leaders in the New Mexico Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, believing that “the decision to have an abortion is deeply personal and should be left to a woman, her family, and her doctor in consultation with her faith.”

The statewide coalition includes Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Quakers, Jews, and Unitarian Universalists like me. We recognize that questions about when human life begins and when the developing embryo acquires the qualities of personality are not only biological but also theological in nature and that in matters of faith and doctrine no consensus exists. Americans are not of one mind on this subject, which is why the law must allow room for people to act on their own deep sense of what is right and best for them.

Yet while I decline to judge or dictate to others, there are certain truths and moral precepts I do affirm. I believe in religious liberty and the sanctity of conscience, which means that people may follow the teachings of their own church regarding family planning and birth control, but should not try to impose those religious teachings on others through the means of civil law. I believe that every child should be a wanted child and that no youngster should be condemned to live in poverty or neglect. I believe that parents should be honored for the work they do, and that sometimes the decision not to parent (as for Roy and Judy) may be wise and profoundly ethical.

I believe that when women are empowered to follow their hearts and shape their dreams and control their own lives, everyone gains. Families flourish. Children thrive. Relationships grow healthy. Love wins.