

A Most Personal Decision
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There are few decisions more personal or profound 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 that 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 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.

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.

"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 whom I'll call 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.

Women have unique authority and insight into this issue, as even the writers of the Bible understood. The Hebrew word “rachamim” means compassion, or when used as a verb in prayer, the noun turns into the supplication “have mercy.” It’s derived etymologically from the word for the most intimate organ of the human body, the womb or uterus, which is “rechem.” That’s where we all begin. Siblings who have shared a womb naturally know brotherly and sisterly affection for each other. A mother feels *rachamim* for her offspring. And these biological differences mean that women may actually learn and show compassion in ways that are different from their male counterparts.

As evidence, In the 1960s, two famous psychologists decided to explore how children grow from infancy to adulthood and evolve into ethically responsible human beings. Harvard’s Lawrence Kohlberg developed a theory of moral stages, studying his subjects by posing hypothetical dilemmas, for example, suppose that Heinz can’t afford the drug his dying wife needs to treat her cancer, should he steal the medicine from the pharmacy? Kohlberg was interested in how people would rationalize their decision one way or the other. The highest form of moral reasoning, he believed, was based on universal principles of conduct that could be applied across the board, to every time and culture. Kohlberg’s friend and colleague at Harvard Carol Gilligan, in contrast, also studied moral development,

but rather than posing hypotheticals about Heinz and his dying wife she interviewed women who had actually had abortions. She found that women tended to think of the question not in terms of what's right or wrong for everyone, everywhere, but in very concrete and specific terms about their decision might affect the matrix of relationships of which they were a part: relationships with their partner, their ability to care for their other children, relationships with work and school that kept their families afloat. There it is again, that word "matrix," derived from the late Middle English for "womb." Professor Gilligan claimed that women had what she called an "ethic of care," not lower or less than Kohlberg's highest moral stage of universal rules of conduct but one more interpersonal, more familiar and perhaps more organically grounded in the complexities of living.

Abortion is not a moral abstraction. It is close up and personal. One in four America women have an abortion by the time they reach the age of forty-five, according to the Guttmacher Institute. For some it's a relatively easy choice. For others it's wrenching. Yet we hardly ever see these women's faces or know their names. When I asked my wife how many women she knew who had terminated a pregnancy, she could list them on one hand and, though most of them were close, she rarely knew the full backstory. Even in the 21st century, the decision to end a pregnancy remains surrounded by stigma and a veil of silence. So instead of listening to women's voices, we debate imponderables. When does life begin? When does an embryo become a person? Is there an unwritten right to privacy or a right to life between the lines somewhere in the Constitution? The arguments can be theological, legal, or medical, but often miss the human dimension. Yet I think the tone of our national conversation might change if we heard more of those first-person accounts. I'm grateful to Mary McPhail Gray and Fanda Bender for being willing to share their own narratives this morning which are unique yet representative, like that of one member of our Taos congregation who wishes to remain anonymous:

I was a 26 year old RN living on the west coast, and scheduled for graduate school in the fall. I became pregnant and the father of the baby, who I wanted to marry, said he didn't want to have a relationship with the baby. He also stated that he would move away if I continued the pregnancy. He contributed money for an

abortion, was willing to drive me there, and that was all. Having studied developmental psychology and knowing what a child needed, I didn't understand how I as a single mother could give this child what it needed and deserved. Although it was not what I wanted, I had the abortion. I then went to graduate school and became a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner, taking care of children. I also started a support group for single women parents in the city where I lived. I never had a child, and the decision still haunts me.

Many Americans are equally torn. Over the decades, a solid majority have favored upholding the Supreme Court's guidelines in Roe v. Wade. Many would like to see some regulations such as exist in other Western countries, where women have wide discretion to make their own decision up until sixteen or eighteen weeks of pregnancy. Few want to ban abortion altogether.

One member of our congregation wrote to tell me that when she was twenty-one, single and pregnant, her inner guide told her to carry the child to term. She could neither in good conscience abort nor give the child up for adoption. But this was shortly after Roe v. Wade, and knowing that the choice was hers, not imposed by some outside authority, made all the difference in helping her to feel at peace and empowered by her decision.

I decline to judge or dictate to others, but 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.