

I was struggling this week to know where to go in my preaching this Sunday. Advent and Christmas are past. We celebrated Epiphany and talked about the Feast of Theophany last week. And, even though Easter comes early this year, Lent is still two and a half weeks away. I do want to return at some point to the Gospel of Mark, but I don't want to get there too soon. It will take us through Lent and Easter quite nicely if I get the timing right. So where am I to go this morning?

The churches of God, along with many other evangelical churches recognize this Sunday as Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, as also reflected in our today's bulletin cover. I am also aware that tomorrow is a National Holiday in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. So, I've decided to begin with these.

First of all, I want to remind you that I believe in the sanctity of Human life from conception to the grave. If anything I believe in it so strongly; that is, it is so much a part of me and so obvious and self-evident to me, that the thought that I should have to preach about it to convince others seems ridiculous. I mean what part of the phrase in the beginning "God created" don't we understand? Psalm 139:13-14 settle the abortion issue for me: The psalmist says, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

I believe that what the Psalmist says is true of every unborn baby: God is knitting them together in their mothers' wombs. Now sometimes because of the fallen nature of our world, that process is aborted. For reasons we often don't fully understand there are miscarriages and stillbirths. There are also birth defects that sometimes result in infant deaths and long-term disabilities. These things do happen. But--thanks be to God--these are exceptions, not the rule. Most babies come through all the dangers of development in the womb and the trauma of birth just fine, and every one of them is a living miracle and testimony of God's grace. To destroy even one of those little miracles in process because a young mother is too afraid to give birth, because her and her boyfriend are embarrassed to have anyone know that they are pregnant, because a baby will be inconvenient and cramp a chosen lifestyle, because

raising a child is too costly and too much responsibility, is a crime against God no matter what our Supreme Court says about it. Just because that baby doesn't yet have a name or birth certificate doesn't mean that he or she is not a real human being. It is God who gives them life and it is not up to man or even up to woman to destroy that life.

What if a pregnant woman planning to have an abortion doesn't make it to the abortion clinic in time? Suppose the baby comes early and is born alive at 29 or 30 weeks? Can she put it to death then and be judged innocent? Hardly. Only the most twisted of human beings would try to justify the crime then. But it seems self-evident to me that that baby is just as alive and just as human and every bit as sacred inside her mother's womb as she is once she is born. Nothing else makes any sense. Life is sacred at it's beginning.

Regarding Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s campaign for Civil Rights in America, I spent nearly two hours on the Internet trying to discover his position on abortion and found nothing. I searched on pro-life websites and on pro-choice ones as well. Some on both sides of the issue claim that Dr. King's principles support their position, but I could find nothing in Dr. King's own words. There's a good reason for that of course. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, and Roe vs. Wade was not heard by the Supreme Court until 1973. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s issue was not abortion; it was to bring equal rights to Black people. He pretty much kept his focus there, which one of the reasons his ideas prevailed.

But his niece Dr. Alveda King is another story. She recently told a meeting of Priests for Life, that the killing of a quarter of the black population of the US has not been from the lynch mobs of her childhood days, but from abortionists, "who plant their killing centres in minority neighbourhoods and prey upon women who think they have no hope." "The great irony," she said, "is that abortion has done what the Klan only dreamed of."

Dr. King pointed out that the killing of the unborn in the US, which has taken the lives of well over 42 million American children, is overwhelmingly concentrated in the African-American community. "In the last forty-plus years," Dr. King said, "15 million black people

have been denied their most basic civil right, the right to life. Roughly one quarter of the black population is now missing. Dr. King said, "It's time that we remember the sacrifices of men like my father and my uncle who worked and died so that our children could live." "It's time to stop killing the future and keep their dream alive."

The younger and female Dr. King celebrates and defends the sanctity of life of the unborn. She believes this is a logical application of the principles her uncle lived and died for. **The life of children, born and to be born, is sacred.**

It also seems clear to me this morning that life is sacred at its end. The Psalmist says in Psalm 71:18, "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come." Isaiah 46:4 records the Lord's answer to that prayer: "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you."

I have made the statement on numerous occasions, usually at the funerals of the saints, that Christians are in the world for two reasons: to show the world how to live and to show the world how to die, which recognizes one very important fact: As long as we live we are under the direction and in the service of the Lord and are serving His purposes. Our lives are sacred. And, yes, aging ultimately brings with it a portfolio of sufferings and all manner of indignities. But, even then our lives are fulfilling God's plan, often stretching the character and faith of those around us, as well as our own.

Just this past Monday I was ministered unto by someone who is old and dying. Her name is Jean Neely, a distant relative of mine through marriage. I had only met her once before in my life and then only briefly, but because the family knows I'm a pastor and takes some comfort in the fact that we share the same last name, they called and asked me if I would pay Jean a visit. I was told that Jean's cancer has spread to her liver and that there is not much more the doctors can do. By answering that call, I figured I would be entering into a very sad and difficult ministry. In fact, I was surprised by what I found when I entered Jean's apartment. Physically, I could see that Jean has been through the rigors of

cancer and its treatment. Her abdomen is extended from the growth of her tumor. Her hair is thinned from radiation and/or chemotherapy. That much I recognized and expected, but what took me off guard was Jean Neely's joy. This cousin of mine knows the Lord as her savior and is radiant with His love. She is sensing His call to come home to be with Him and she is ready to go. There is not a hint of bitterness, no disappointment--just gratitude for the life she has lived, gratitude for those who have shown her kindness, gratitude for the love of her family. When I offered that I was prepared to share Communion with her, her face lit up like I was about to give her the most magnificent banquet available to man, which of course, it is. I was so blessed by Jean's faith and by her testimony in the midst of her suffering. Her life, ravaged by cancer and difficult as it is, is of great value. It is the pulpit from which she proclaims the peace of God that surpasses all human understanding. Life is sacred at it's beginning and life is sacred--perhaps even more sacred--at its end. **Life is sacred from beginning to end.**

Now the question that remains to be answered this morning is the question of application. How does the sanctity of human life impinge upon our lives? That is, how does it or should it effect the way we live? Some of the implications are already obvious. We should be ready to speak for those who have little or no voices of their own. Christians ought to be on the front lines of defending the right to life of the unborn and on the front lines of advocating that proper care and respect be extended to the elderly and to the dying. It seems to me that we could and should do a lot more in both those areas. But that's not all.

In point of fact, all men and women have been created in the image of God and for His pleasure and for His glory. And, every single one of them, no matter how marred His image in them has become, requires us to walk on Holy Ground in their presence. Red, brown, yellow, black, and white; all are precious in His sight. Every who is a person no matter how small. Every person is a person for whom Christ died and every person has the potential to be born again and to become a child of God. I am reminded here of the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:21-22: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says

to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." **All people matter to God, and we should treat them accordingly.**

The final application I want to make this morning has to do with the way we view and treat ourselves. Several weeks ago Louann had an excellent message for the children. She talked with them about the people God loves and cares for. And then she asked them who God's beloved children might be. She held a mirror in front of each of their faces and invited them to see someone special in God's eyes. That exercise applies just as much to every person in this congregation this morning as it does to the children. We are all precious in His sight. And, I wonder what difference it would make if every morning when we washed our faces and viewed our faces in the mirror, we would say to ourselves something like this. "I am a child of God, His beloved. He loves me so much that He gave His Son Jesus to die for me. Whatever evil I have done, I am forgiven by His blood. He loves me and will be with me every moment of this day. My body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit so I must treat it with the greatest of care and respect. These hands are for His service, this voice is for His glory. I am alive by His appointment. I am forgiven by His grace. He has promised that He will work in every circumstance in my life to make me just like Jesus. And when I die I will live with Him forever."

Sanctity of human life begins with understanding and accepting the sacredness of our own lives and then doing unto others as we would have them do unto us.

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Sermon for January 20, 2008

The Sanctity of Life

Psalm 139:1-18

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