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## Choosing Life... and Living with Choices

Deuteronomy 30.15-20, Matthew 5.21-37

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 13, 2011 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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“Choose life.” This is God’s plea to Israel on the eve of her entry into the Promised Land. “I have set before you life and death... Choose life.” These are among the most powerful words in the Bible. They’ve also become the most divisive words in America. “Choose life.” Half of America hears the word “life,” and immediately identifies the plight of the unborn child. The other half of America hears the word “choose,” and zeroes in on the rights of the pregnant woman.

I’m talking about abortion. We are a nation of 300 million people. We have around 4 million live births a year. And we have a million abortions. However diverse the list of ethical issues of our time, abortion is always right at the top of it. On the whole the mainline church has come to a clear position on the question. That position is, “Let’s not talk about it.”

There are some good reasons for not talking about it. Everyone knows there are plenty of Christians who talk about nothing else, and it sometimes seems their passion around this issue has obscured their sense of love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness and self-control. So it’s a natural reaction to say, “We want the world to see our compassion and understanding, not our fanaticism and judgmentalism.” Meanwhile most of us have been close enough up to this question, if not for ourselves, then for our family or friends, that we’re not going to be too hasty to push the buttons labelled right and wrong. If every one of the million annual abortions in America is as complex and tortured as the ones we’ve been close to, then there’s a huge amount of distress, silence, and anguish going on behind our nation’s closed doors.

A typical pro-choice advocate would say, “In an ideal world there would be safe and reliable means of contraception; men and women would share responsibility for procreative choices and children’s well being; and there would be no sexual violence or abuse. Thus saving the mother’s life would be the only pretext for abortion. But this isn’t an ideal world. The damage of our flawed lives is repeatedly inflicted on the most vulnerable. Abortion is a tragic way of protecting those most vulnerable people. Ardent pro-lifers, in their relentless attention to the unborn child, often fail to see the unjust social relations within which unwelcome pregnancies arise, and so tacitly underwrite the terms of a fallen world.” It’s a strong argument, and a similar one to that used to justify war. After all, war is state-sanctioned killing to bring about a more just world. So, in this perspective, is abortion.

But wait a moment. If pro-lifers are failing to see unjust social relations, surely pro-choicers are failing to hear something. A fetus of only a few weeks may not be a fully-fledged human being, but, barring an unfortunate miscarriage, its future is only going one way. I was that fetus once. So were you. I’m rather glad I was allowed to come to term. I expect you feel the same about yourself. To take the strong pro-choice line is to close your ears to the deafening cries of the never-born, the wailing of lives begotten but never lived.

And that’s the real reason, I believe, why so many Christians have decided not to talk about abortion. Not because it’s controversial; not because they fear seeming judgmental; not because their own lives have taught them that the line between right and wrong is more fragile than they once believed: but because to talk about abortion means to open our eyes to the unjust social relations in our nation and to open our ears to Rachel weeping for her children. And we can’t bear it.

But we *have* to talk about abortion. Because seeing injustice and hearing the cries of the innocent are at the heart of discipleship and at the heart of God.

Several years ago I sat down with Brian and Clare. Clare was 15 weeks pregnant. They’d recently been told that the child she was expecting would be so severely disabled that it might survive only a few agonizing days

after birth; maybe only minutes. I asked them the two questions I always ask. “What’s the best thing that can happen?” Clare said, “That I might find peace”. “What’s the worst thing that can happen?” She said, “That I might have this child, and it might live, terribly troubled and hugely disfigured, and that my friends might come round once or twice, and then I’d be left all alone.”

So I said to Brian and Clare, “What you want is peace, and what you fear is being alone. But may I suggest that what you *need* is the church?” “Oh” said Clare, “My dad is right against abortion. He thinks people who have abortions go to hell. My mom is all for women’s rights. She thinks it should be my choice.” I replied, as gently as I could, “Can I suggest to you that we’re not really talking about campaigning for abortion or campaigning for women’s rights? I’m not sure it’s really about legislation and I don’t think it’s really about going to hell. Because all these people with their certainties, for all their self-importance, have left you all alone. Alone now, with your decision: and alone in six months time, when you might need all the help you can get. You don’t feel able to ask for real help, and you sense, probably rightly, that real help isn’t there. It’s perfectly understandable that you’re drawn to a technological solution. But the real problem is one that a termination won’t solve. You need people who won’t leave you on your own. You need a hope that knows there are things worse than physical suffering. You need people around you who will make your life beautiful even if it’s not happy. What you need is the church.”

When the conversation ended I stared into space for some time. I knew I’d broken most of the accepted conventions of pastoral counseling, but that’s not what bothered me. What bothered me was whether this couple could possibly find the congregation they needed. I saw before me two churches. On the one hand was the church represented by Clare’s father. I saw it captivated by two notions: personal assurance and righteous judgment. And on the other hand was the church of Clare’s mother. I saw it captivated by two similar notions: individual freedom and progress through legislation. Two churches: one that’s made the Bible its constitution; the other that’s made the Constitution its bible.

And as I stared out at these two churches, they looked so alike to me. They were both obsessed with the nation state and they were both preoccupied with the individual. And they’d both made the church invisible. On the one hand they’d assumed America was their church, and they’d gone to battle to win America, with the weapons of campaigns and lobbying and government and legislation. On the other hand they saw Christianity as largely a vehicle for personal fulfillment and individual choice. So the church became little more than a pawn in a personal or political game. But meanwhile both churches had failed Brian and Clare, because they’d both left them alone. Alone in the defining crisis of their lives. Clare’s mother’s church had proudly secured their right to choose, but had then left them alone with an impossible and agonizing choice. And Clare’s father’s church had sternly demanded they uphold life – but when the time came for supporting that life, it was nowhere to be seen. These two young parents were all alone. What they needed was the church.

And that’s why the church can’t agree to say, “Let’s not talk about it.” Because that becomes yet another way of leaving people all alone to make a choice, and all alone to face the life that results from that choice.

What kind of a church might we need to become if we were going to be a people who could talk about abortion? I’m going to make three suggestions, each of them inspired by Jesus’ language in today’s gospel.

Number one: You have heard that it was said, “Live a flawless, irreproachable life, and don’t make terrible mistakes.” But Jesus says to you, “Life isn’t about never making mistakes. It’s about what you do when you’ve made them. Life isn’t about not having regrets. It’s about what you turn your regrets into. Christianity isn’t about effortless perfection. It’s about costly forgiveness. If you’re floating along pretending you’re living a flawless existence, you’re living a lie and you’re living in fear, because one day the truth is going to bring you crashing to the ground. Come down from that lofty place right now, and get in the dust where the mistakes are happening and the regrets are being felt, and meet the true redemption and the painful reconciliation that the gospel’s all about.”

Why do we have abortions? One big reason is that we're ashamed. We're desperate to maintain the outward appearance that everything is impeccable and respectable, long after the train of truth has left the station. And let's not pretend that we as the church don't collude with that. Is ours a community where the unexpected, unwelcome and inexplicable pregnancy is greeted with gentleness, understanding, and a little mischievous joy? Or do we replicate precisely the judgment and self-righteous condemnation that lead to secrets and lies and furtive solutions to avoid public shame? Have you ever made a terrible mistake? If it resulted in public humiliation, no doubt you have compassion on others like you. If no one ever found out, does that not make you have even more compassion for others less lucky than you?

Number two: You have heard that it was said, "Make enough money, get enough qualifications, invest wisely, so you can always be independent." But Jesus says to you, "That's not the gospel. That's an insurance policy in case the gospel turns out not to be true. The gospel is, 'bear ye one another's burdens.' The gospel is that we find a strength in one another we could never discover left to ourselves. Independence is a myth exposed by the threat of sickness and failure and the certainty of death. The reality of life is about dependence, about working out who and what to be dependent upon. The heart of life is friendship and companionship, with one another and with God; those are the foundations that survive long after the qualifications, investments and money become useless."

Why do we have abortions? Because we feel abandoned. We don't feel we have the emotional support or the money or security to meet all our commitments or give a child a chance in life without destroying our own. And let's not pretend that we as the church don't collude with that. Do we challenge, not just with our words but with our lives, the unjust social relations within which many unsought pregnancies arise? Do we genuinely welcome the unexpected and untimely stranger with open arms? Do people see us and say, "If you have friends, you don't need financial independence"? Really?

Number three: You have heard that it was said, "Have a perfect body, a trophy spouse, and may all your offspring be poster children." But Jesus says to you, "The body that matters is my body, not yours. I know how broken you are inside, even if you keep up a tidy appearance outside. We're all disabled, it's just that in some of us it's harder for a stranger to see it. One day you'll be given a new body to share with me forever, but for now you'll find joy as much in learning to inhabit your limitations as in transcending them." Discipleship lies not in proudly saying, "My body is not broken," but in finding people to whom you can truly say, "My body is broken... for you."

Why do we have abortions? One reason is we fear that a disabled life is less than a full life. We don't trust that God will shine through the holes in our minds and bodies. We're so concerned to abolish suffering that we would rather end life than watch a life in distress. But when we look at Jesus on the cross we see that the body of Christ *is* a disabled body. If we're going to call ourselves the body of Christ we have to realize that the church is a disabled body too.

Here are the false laws of perfect bodies, material independence, and flawless lives. These are among the idols that lead us away from becoming the forgiving, companionable, disabled body of Christ. Is it surprising that, in the face of this smokescreen of shame, we discover our unwanted pregnancies and find our refuge, not in the church but in the clinic? Can we deny that there is more forgiveness, more companionship, and more acceptance of brokenness in the clinic than in the church? Lord, have mercy upon us.

Now we realize, once and for all, why we say "Let's not talk about abortion." How can we demand legislation, how can we call for personal responsibility, how can we expect a sacrificial choice, unless we embody the slow redemption of costly mistakes, unless we exhibit the mutual interdependence of generous friends, unless we display the transparent grace of broken-open lives? Until, that is, we become what we were saved to be – the church? We don't want to talk about abortion because we might have to become the church.

That's the choice that matters most. That's the life Jesus calls us to. Brothers and sisters, choose life. Choose God's life. Choose to become Christ's church.