

GOD OF THE LIVING: THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

Roe v. Wade is probably the most controversial decision the U. S. Supreme Court has made in recent history. It is now 43 years since the ruling which legalized abortion was issued and our country is still deeply divided on the subject. The argument divides not only the world of legal opinion, but also the world of medical ethics, politics and religion. It even divides the visible church, with theologically liberal churches often coming down on the pro-choice side, and theologically conservative churches on the pro-life side. Since as Lutherans, we believe that God's Word is the ultimate authority on matters of faith and morality, I would like to consider the issue of abortion this morning in terms of what the Scriptures have to say about it. I would like to propose three basic questions: One, how does God view the infant in the mother's womb? Two, how do we conform our views to God's view? And three, what should our response be?

First of all, how does God look upon the foetus in the mother's womb? Is the foetus pre-human as well as prenatal? Does the foetus acquire human life only after he or she is delivered out of womb at the moment of birth? Or does his or her life begin before birth? If so, when? At conception? After the first trimester? The second? While these and related questions continue to be debated legally, medically, politically and theologically, God's word in the Scriptures seems clear. Isaiah says of God, *"The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name."* (Isaiah 49:1) If God called Isaiah when he was still in his mother's womb and even gave him his name, it would seem that in His eyes, Isaiah was a living person. God said to Jeremiah: *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; And before you were born, I consecrated you."* (Jeremiah 1:5) If God knew Jeremiah and consecrated him before he was born, it would seem that in God's eyes Jeremiah was a living person. Now it's important to understand that when God says "I knew you," He doesn't just mean that He was simply aware of Jeremiah's existence; it meant that He had already entered into a loving, caring, active relationship with Jeremiah before he was born. By this I think we can safely say that as far as God is concerned, a person's life and personhood begins in the womb. That when a man and a woman participate in God's life-creating work, they are, in the most fundamental sense of the word, pro-creating. All human lives come about as part of God's plan to create and redeem those he longs to call his children. Parents are given a share in this creative activity of God, which begins when a child is conceived and continues throughout his life. In David's words:

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.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be. (Psalm 139:13-16)

And so God's answer to all the questions raised above is that life begins when God brings into existence and enters into a relationship with a child in the womb of his mother. Life, in other words, begins at conception. David even testifies to this fact in his despair over his sin with Bathsheba when he prays: "*Surely I was sinful at birth; sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*" (Psalm 51:5)

The second question is: How do we conform our view of the unborn child to God's view? First of all, let's be honest enough to admit that our view of those we love is not always what God—or even we—would have it be. Consider, for example, our children. As much as we love them they can be—and often are—a trial. Many a mother has been brought near despair of her "terrible two-er." A screaming, bawling child is not loveable, yet the mother must care for the child. A rebellious, in-your-face teenage son or a narcissistic daughter can try not only our patience, but our love. I remember seeing a picture in the newspaper of a father standing on his lawn by a table with a pile of books on it. He had put up a sign which said: "*Encyclopedia Britannica for sale. Have a teenage son who already knows it all.*" Many a parent has struggled with the dilemma of loving and hating their son or daughter at the same time.

The Scriptures offer us an interesting insight in regard to this conundrum. The Hebrew word used in the *Old Testament* to refer to God's love for mankind is *chesed*. *Chesed*—is usually translated "lovingkindness" or "unfailing love." The Psalmist writes; "*Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.*" (Psalm 32:10) In the *New Testament* it is expressed by the word *grace*: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith.*" (Ephesians 2:8) *Chesed*, however, also carries with it a dimension of meaning which rarely if ever comes through in translation. *To have chesed for someone meant to continue in a loving relationship with them even when you didn't necessarily want to.* Now I ask you! Does that not perfectly describe the conflicted feelings that we as parents sometimes have—or have had—toward a problem child? We love them and we will continue to love them, but Boy! Life would be a lot easier without them! And if we can feel that way about our children, how do you think God feels about us? To be sure He is our Father and He loves us and he will continue to love us, but don't ever think that it's because we're loveable. He loves us in spite the fact that we are distinctly unlovable. He loves us in spite of what we are. And do. And think. And say. It makes His love for us all the more unfathomable.

When we as individuals or as a society forget about God's *chesed*—his abiding love for us in spite of our sins—a terrible thing happens: *we become blind to his blessings*. Instead of viewing the unborn child as a divine creation and a bringer of hope and promise, we start to view him as a burden, a threat to our plans and purposes and our chances for self-fulfillment. Not as someONE but as someTHING that will sap our energy, deplete our resources and hinder our careers. That view is a trap and it is a trap into which much of society has fallen. The vast majority of abortions are abortions of convenience—obtained because "the time isn't right" or "a child would get in the way of my job" or other such reasons. Suffice it to say that they are occasions when we honor OUR plans over God's plans, our worldly comfort over God's divine blessing. But God's divine blessings are always better than our plans.

Finally: how should we as Christians respond to the present situation? What actions—if any—can we take to bring about a sea-change in how people view unborn children? Not being a lawyer, I have no idea about whether Roe v. Wade could ever be reversed. I suppose that if an overwhelming majority of the citizenry came to understand and see

clearly what abortion really is and what it does, there might be a reversal. Someone once said that if wombs had windows, *Roe v. Wade* would be overturned overnight. But wombs don't have windows, and as long as people refuse to consider what God is doing in the womb and what abortion does to the unborn child, I doubt that there will be any groundswell of public opinion against *Roe v. Wade*.

But the legal question isn't really the most important question anyway. Even if *Roe v. Wade* were reversed, some women—probably fewer than now, but some—would still seek and find doctors who would provide abortions. That has always been the case and would continue to be the case. In fact it is precisely this argument which has been advanced to justify legal abortions. That whatever one thinks about them, at least if they are legal they can be done safely. Safely for the mother, of course; not for the unborn child. But however appealing this argument may be it boils down to something like: "People are going to do it anyway so we might as well make it legal." But of course there are many things that people do and have always done—things like stealing, lying and murdering—which we don't therefore legalize just because people are going to do them anyway. Right is right and wrong is wrong and it should be upon that principle that laws are written and enforced.

This brings us to an important point: God has set limits to human freedom. Paul wrote, "...as we have opportunity let us do good to all men." (*Gal. 6:10*) We know that we ought to serve the well-being of our neighbors as much as we can. But we are also forbidden to engage in certain activities, as when, for example, we are instructed by the 5th Commandment not to commit murder. The problem is that there are occasions in life when it seems that serving the greater good of our neighbors justifies the use of a forbidden means to achieve it. We are indeed charged to do all the good we can for as many people as we can, but this means all the good we can morally do within the limits set by God's law. We are not, even if our motives are praiseworthy, to do evil that good may come of it. That means that some good and desirable ends may not be achievable because the means to those ends are forbidden. It may also mean on some occasions that a good end must be achieved more slowly and less directly in order to remain within the limits set by God's will. To say it once again: right is right and wrong is wrong and we have to remember that.

Only through prayer and confidence in the authority and power of God's Word can we as individuals or a society conform our view of unborn children to God's view. The only thing that will bring about a willingness to welcome all children into the world and regard them as blessings rather than burdens is a change of people's hearts. And only God can change a human heart. And God *will* change hardened hearts into compassionate hearts, but only through repentance. Only when people honestly examine the contents of their hearts and see them as the cauldrons of sin that they are by nature—only then they can repent and pray: "*Create in me a clean heart O God.*" (*Psalms 51*)

And with clean hearts we will once again clearly see the blessings of God for what they are. Amen.