

“Nurture and Nature” by Rev. Bryan S. Breault
 State Street Church, UCC - May 8, 2022

2 Timothy 1: 1-7

I chose the reading from by Paul about remembering the faith of Timothy’s mother and his grandmother while recollecting a surprising medical truth. When a baby girl is born, she already has the each of the eggs she will ever have inside her tiny body. Hence, each of us in a developmental but very literal manner was nurtured in the womb of our maternal grandmother.

One week ago, today I stood right there and thanked my mother for fulfilling the vow she and my father made at my baptism, to raise me in a loving faith community. It was a sincere and spontaneous moment. *I know* how special it can be to celebrate Mother’s Day with your mom in church. It’s not a Christian holy day but I remember how part of being in that loving faith community involved remembering and honoring mothers each May. For many of us it is a day to cherish, or remember, our own mothers and to receive such love from our children. And that is a blessing.

However, I also acknowledge friends who are estranged from their own mothers. Or whose relationship is complicated, or who are the survivors of abuse or who need to negotiate a parent’s mental illness. I’ve walked with parents through the unthinkable trauma of losing a child, both suddenly and slowly. And I personally know firsthand, the monthly rhythmic anxiety and heartache that striving and longing for parenthood can bring. In my case being young and perfectly healthy and enduring medical terms like “unexplained infertility.”

And I’ve known couples, and women all-alone, who made the tortuous decision to end a pregnancy. I, personally, don’t know of anyone who did so indifferently or casually. And many bear emotional scars. Know that you are the beloved of God. And I pray if you have lived with any of those realities, that today you can cast your remembrance and appreciation on *someone* who helped nurture you towards wholeness.

So, Mother’s Day can be joyful, festive, and beautiful, and it can be triggering and painful.

After writing today’s service on Monday, I woke up Tuesday morning to the news that the Supreme Court was wresting, not with their votes, but with the standard writing of the opinion on how to shape and present the news of their decision, in this case to overturn half a century of precedent. - I was dumbstruck. I remembered the confirmation hearings of the most recent justices. Dodging questions about Roe V. Wade or simply stating their acknowledgment of its precedent as law. I mean, I live with someone whose job includes writing about and enlightening us on those very proceedings.

After my *disbelief*, I got angry. And I could hear the words of authors I’d read decades ago like Audrey Lourde, and it came upon me that the realities of such a ruling will affect the poor, and

women of color more harshly as they face a choice of an illegal and potentially deadly backroom abortion, or, bringing a child into the world that she knows she cannot feed or support.

Next, I felt embarrassed as I realized that I, as a Christian leader, could easily be associated with scurrilous religious arguments that portray people advocating for reproductive rights as satanic murderers. Often so-called Christian groups with no apparent interest in helping feed, clothe, educate, or nurture the babies they are demanding, or to alleviate the conditions that contribute to uninvited pregnancy in the first place. Blaming women for getting pregnant with no mention of the men's involvement or responsibility. Then, since I'm sharing this emotional journey, I got a little angry at Jesus for telling me I am called to love these people. "You're sending me into a fight with a hand tied behind my back."

This gave way to a feeling of hopelessness as I looked at all the issues facing us; from climate change to the rise of authoritarianism or even fascism; to outright violent insurrection; to the systematic dismantling of voting rights; to gerrymandering; to legislating against the normalization of LGBTQ people; to an unprovoked military invasion in Europe. It's all happening right now. The apostle Paul writes, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning, as in the pains of childbirth, right up to the present time" Romans 8:22

I simmered in this stew for days.

And then it came to me. The issues are complex and layered, but our call is to stand as best we can for individual freedom, and to resist control and domination. We must answer to our own conscience, to our faith, and to those that come after us. We cannot decide we've just had enough and let this latest desecration of freedom fade into the cacophony of outrageous issues we face.

So, my little piece here, in this time and place is to outline clearly how one can be a person of faith, a Christian, and support a women's right to make her own decisions about her body and her destiny. No, not just how those two things can co-exist, but how, for me, it is faith itself that requires me to stand for a woman's right to self-determination. Shout out to friend and colleague Rev. Jack Davidson, a former Pilgrim Lodge staff member, for helping me work this out.

We start with Jesus and his followers, who held women in high esteem, put them in leadership roles, and respected them in a time when that was essentially unprecedented.

-Healing The bleeding woman who could find no medical care. – Mark 5:21-43

-Standing up for the woman about to be stoned to death for her supposed sex life. – John 8:1-11

-Comforting the woman at the well ostracized as a promiscuous foreigner. – John 4:4-26

-Admonishing the men who were chastising Mary for washing his feet with oil. – John 12:3

-Curing the woman in need of healing on a sabbath, which was against the law. Luke 13:10-17

-Using images of women to help us understand God: a woman baking bread, Matthew 13
Or a woman searching for a lost coin, Luke 15

And - Jesus affirming people scorned and abandoned for their non-binary gender identities.
Matthew 19:12

Even when perilous, Jesus responded with healing, solidarity, empowerment, and being an ally. So, when religious leaders & politicians misappropriate Christianity to justify anti-abortion laws for their own personal gain, it's clear they aren't following the Jesus of scripture. Jesus of Nazareth always supported and affirmed women & the poor, the oppressed, and sexual outcasts – and he stood *against* persecution by men of privilege and power and against unjust domination systems.

As for passages about being formed in our mother's womb and being called by name, those are beautiful poetic passages often misconstrued to justify the political ideologies of "Life at Conception"... Yes. All life is indeed sacred to God, even life that ends before it is born through miscarriage or medical procedure. God grieves all life lost. But wrestling with choosing to give birth, or adopt, or not carrying a fetus to term is an individual struggle replete with nuances of each situation.

Ending pregnancy is not new – going back 3 to 5,000 years in the Hebrew scripture, the Book of Numbers, chapter 5, gives priests instructions for how to perform safe abortions. In fairness and transparency that passage is not what I consider pro-women or even pro-choice.

But if Christ trusts females, trans, and non-binary people with freewill and bodily autonomy, how dare we legislate away that sacred self-determination.

I do appreciate and understand a rational plea for the sanctity of life. If you are a Christian who interprets scripture differently than I do, I affirm and honor that choice, but study after study shows the most effective approach to preventing abortion is to invest in sex education, livable wages, educational opportunities, accessible healthcare, and robust community resources. Justice making. Scripture has a lot to say about equity for the poor, but nothing that equates terminating a pregnancy to murder.

I've just spent three and half years working with the Presbyterian church. Hear this from a statement approved by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church in 2018:

“Personally choosing not to have an abortion or use birth control is religious freedom. Making that choice for someone else, on the basis of one’s own religious principles is religious oppression.”

And, once religious views are accepted as a legitimate foundation for controlling others, it is not long before contraception again becomes illegal. It stems from a self-hatred of a fundamental right of existence. Intimacy is sacred. And if you need scriptural evidence that God delights in the sharing of two adults read the Song of Songs.

Who decided the church should determine the bounds of civil marriage in the first place? Not Jesus. No, the church did, as a theocracy, because if you control a people's sexual expression, you control them completely. And if this sounds ridiculous to you, keep in mind I was born in Connecticut in 1962 and birth control was illegal in Connecticut until 1965. And how complete is that circle? Contraception is forbidden, and abortion is prohibited. It shows an attitude that sexual expression is reviled and controlled. And that is about conventional heterosexual sexual expression. Never mind anything consensual that is outside the guardrails of societal norms. I'm a Christian, and that means human, and I will **not** let shame be my overseer.

On this Mother's Day we stand with mothers everywhere, and with those women who choose not to be mothers. Ever, or at a particular point in their life.

If you have terminated a pregnancy, know that you are the beloved of God and you are not alone.

If you are a medical professional who provides abortion care, know that you are the beloved of God and you are not alone.

And if you are someone who feels morally obligated to speak against abortion as a personal choice, then earnestly make your case with passion and know that you are the beloved of God and you are not alone.

If you are someone scared about the potential reversal in constitutional law concerning reproductive rights, know that you are the beloved of God and you are not alone.

Your fear is valid. Your anger is sacred. Your grief is real. Your God is with you.

I am a pro-choice Christian pastor, not despite my faith, but because of it.

Amen