

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(February 1, 2015)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Building Faith at Home

The Sanctity of Human Life

(Genesis 1 and more)

Study #1

Introduction: Christ over culture...

Jesus was a peasant who lived in the rural, backwater region of Judea known as Galilee. Jesus was a Jew who spent most of his time far from the power centers of Rome or even Jerusalem. Jesus lived and died two thousand years ago.

And, from a purely objective standpoint, it is fair to say that no one in history has made such an impact as Jesus of Nazareth. Christians like us all over the world and throughout the past two thousand years have met every week to worship Jesus and to spur each other on to follow His commands.

The reason, of course, is that He was more than a Jewish peasant. He was the incognito Messiah, the undercover Son of God. He performed miracles and rose from the dead, victorious, after His enemies killed Him on a Roman cross.

Because of who Jesus really was and is, He deserves our unalloyed allegiance, and we gladly give it. He is the Lord. As Lord, He also has the right to speak to the world, the broader culture, with transcendent authority.

This morning we are going to listen as the word of Christ, Scripture, speaks to the issue of the sanctity of all human life and, specifically, the theme of abortion.

About This Message

Why Speak?

Most every year for the past thirty plus years, on a Sunday in late January, around the time of year when the Supreme Court handed down its ruling in the Roe v. Wade case legalizing abortion in the United States, we here at Northwest have paused to affirm the sanctity of all human life.

I usually take a brief time to say that the very old, the infirm, the disabled, and the very young are all precious and sacred to God, and to us. We pray.

But it has been many years since I have brought a full message on these themes. You may wonder, "Why now?"

Part of the reason is my own sense that this message is long overdue. Truth be told, I think that I have allowed too much time to pass without having given clear biblical teaching on this theme. It is time.

And part of the reason to speak today is that there is, from time to time, a need to speak in church to issues being addressed in the public square. To speak "Bible" to the times. I think it's time.

This is an unusual message, and February will be a month filled with unusual messages for Northwest. If you are newer to our church, you should know that messages about abortion and homosexuality and the use of media are not typical sermon fodder.

Normally, I stand before you and open the Bible and simply let the book we are studying - Genesis, Ephesians, Proverbs - be our guide. That practice protects you from me simply riding my hobby horses and it ensures that we here are exposed to "the whole counsel of God."

But that is not what we are doing this month. This month we are considering themes.

You might wonder about the appropriateness of speaking to the issue of abortion from a church pulpit. Let me first assure you that this is not about politics.

We are not and have not interest in being a red church or a blue church. We are a Jesus church. We focus on biblical and spiritual realities. I will never politicize the pulpit.

So, this morning I am not speaking as someone with a political axe to grind or on behalf of a political party. I am speaking as a pastor who wants all of us here to understand and embrace the counsel of Scripture when it comes to an important and very emotionally charged issue.

I speak to the theme of abortion this morning because it is a subject that touches our souls. Abortion deals with the world of flesh and blood and spirit.

What to Speak

I have only given myself one Sunday to speak about abortion. That is not nearly enough time to say all that could be said on the issue.

Some of you might wish that I was bringing a four part message on abortion. Others of you might prefer that I wasn't addressing it at all.

I'm sure that I will not say some things that some of you wish I would say. I will probably say some things that some of you don't want me to say.

But here are my hopes for our time together, today. I hope to point you to what Scripture says AND I hope that what Scripture says will help you form a conviction about abortion.

It is possible that some here are not very informed on the issue. If you are not informed, I want to inform you about abortion and about what is happening with respect to abortion in our nation.

Some of you are informed and are still not sure where to land. You are on the fence. I would ask you to please listen with an open mind to what the Bible says today.

Over the next few short minutes, I'd like to help you gain biblical conviction and the courage of your conviction to pray and to act as God might direct.

For some, I'd like to point you to Jesus, the Giver of life and the One who forgives and comforts all may now live with regret.

How to Speak

Finally (if I can use that word in an introduction), I want you to know that I'm not speaking out of anger. Sadness, yes, but not anger. And I desperately want to speak with grace.

I'm certainly not interested in heaping a load of guilt on anyone here today.

If there is a chapter in your life titled "abortion," either as a woman who has experienced one, or as a man who has urged one, you have been through an ordeal. You are likely in pain today, even if the abortion you experienced, witnessed, or participated in occurred years ago.¹

With Jesus, your suffering can be redemptive and we here at Northwest extend love and acceptance. We offer a place for you to heal. And, if, today, something stirs within you and you would like to talk, please know that you are more than welcomed to call.

It is to the Bible that we now turn.

The first place to which we will turn is the beginning. This morning and next Sunday we will go to the Bible's beginning, first.

¹ Post-abortion psychosis (now referred to as Post Abortion Syndrome) is recognized as a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and is a recognized psychological pathology.

I am increasingly convinced that “getting it right”, biblically, requires that we pay careful attention to the starting point. If we don’t get it right at the beginning, we’ll surely go astray later.

So, to the beginning we go. Genesis 1 is a treasure that assures us that there is something unique and uniquely valuable about human life.

When We Think About People

Scripture and the Sanctity of Human Life (Genesis 1)

Trace through the progressive days of creation as they appear in Genesis 1 and you will hear, over and over again, ***“and God saw that it was good.”***

Every day brought a new ***“good.”*** Land, seas, stars, moon, plants, fish, birds, and beasts were all good.

But then, something very different happened on the second part of the sixth day of creation.

[Genesis 1:26] Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” [27] God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Different from any other creature, human beings were made in God’s image and likeness. Human beings were uniquely created. There is something precious about human life precisely because it reflects the image of the Creator in ways that the rest of creation doesn’t.

God made people to represent Him. We are His agents on the planet, put here to subdue, care for, and shepherd the plants and the animals and the world in which we and they live. We are given a charge to care for the world God has created.

[28] God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Humans are part of God’s creation *and* we are set apart from the creation. Only humans can talk with God, walk with God, rebel against God. The distinguishing mark of humanity is its creation in the image and likeness of God. The *imago dei* is part of our soul’s DNA.

Not so the animal world. The lion that hunts, kills, and eats a gazelle has no moral quandary. Animals are certainly intelligent, but they are driven by instinct.

We lie in bed at night with regrets. We wrestle with what is right and wrong. We have a moral compass that the rest of creation doesn’t have.

Scripture affirms the goodness and the value of animals. The Bible has given us a stewardship to treat animals with dignity.² It also affirms the intrinsic superiority of humans to animals.

So, Genesis 1 sets the stage for the rest of the Bible’s teaching about the nature of every person who has or will ever live.

There is something uniquely valuable about human life because people are made in God’s image. Everything else in the rest of the Bible follows from that.

That’s why, to give just one example, the sixth of the Ten Commandments God gave to Israel was, ***[Exodus 20:13] You shall not murder.***

Now, not all human killing is, by definition, murder.³ But the wanton, unprovoked, indiscriminate taking of human life is forbidden.

² While we do have the right to kill and eat animals, we do not have the right to be cruel to animals. This, I believe, should inform the way we treat animals destined for slaughter.

If that is a fair assessment of the nature and value of human life, we would also like to know when human life begins. Modern science actually has spoken clearly to this issue, but before we turn to science, we'll turn again to the Bible.

The Starting Point of Human Life

According to Scripture (Genesis 25; Judges 13; Luke 2)

Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25)

A little bit farther along in Genesis we come to the story of the birth of the twins, Jacob and Esau.

When Isaac's wife, Rebekah, was pregnant with these two, there was more than the normal amount of activity going on in her womb. The intense struggle of the twins foreshadowed the conflict the brothers would have in later years.

And we read in Genesis 25, **[22] But the CHILDREN⁴** (emphasis added) **struggled together within her.**

They were children before they were born.

Samson (Judges 13)

Or consider Samson. His mother was told to not drink wine or strong drink while she was pregnant because Samson (the *person* in the womb) was not to be exposed to alcohol. (Judges 13:4)

John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 2)

We see the same thing in the New Testament. The common word used to describe an embryo or the life in the womb is the Greek word "brephos."

Luke calls the unborn John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb "brephos." (Luke 1:41) Later, Luke describes the newborn Jesus, lying in a manger in Bethlehem, with the same word.⁵ (Luke 2:16)

And one more passage may help us see that the Bible, from start to finish, speaks of the intrinsic value and worth of human life outside of and within the womb.

The value of life in the womb (Exodus 21)

[Exodus 21:22] If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him, and he shall pay as the judges decide. [23] But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, [24] eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, [25] burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

Some have read this and have come to the conclusion that if there is a miscarriage and the fetus dies, there was really no harm done. THAT is to seriously misread the text.

A better way to understand what Moses is saying here is that if two men are fighting and in the process of the fight hurt a pregnant woman so that the child is born prematurely, yet neither mother nor child is harmed, he'll be fined.

But, if either mother or child is harmed, well, then he'll have to give life for life...

The consistent understanding of Scripture is that human life is a continuum that we can trace from infancy back into the womb.⁶ In fact, the Bible's teaching is that human life begins at conception.

³ It is not murder to kill in self-defense, to kill in the execution of a war, or to kill in accordance with law for capital crimes.

⁴ Literally, "sons."

⁵ Acts 7:1 refers to the babies killed by the Egyptian Pharaoh with the same word.

⁶ God formed Jeremiah in his mother's womb (Jeremiah 1:5) and the same word that describes that forming also was used in Genesis 2 to describe that formation of the first man, Adam.

I'm not at all arguing that, at conception, there is a fully formed personality. I am saying that if the question is, "*At what point does a 'human' form, complete with a human body and soul?*", the answer is that it is the point at which the egg of the mother is fertilized by the sperm of the father.

The *viability* of the unborn - that is, a baby's ability to survive outside the mother's womb - is currently placed between 22 and 24 weeks gestation. Humanity is intact long before that point.

The reason that both Old and New Testaments place such great value on the life in the womb is that at conception, a new entity is formed that is, in every regard, human.

That's the Bible's teaching. And, just so that we're all clear, science has unapologetically landed where Scripture has always been, agreeing that human life begins at conception.

According to science

Dr. Michelline Matthews-Roth, a principal research associate in the Department of Medicine at the Harvard Medical School, wrote in 2008, "*So, therefore, it is scientifically correct to say that an individual human life begins at conception, when egg and sperm join to form the zygote, and that this developing human always is a member of our species in all stages of its life.*"

The developing life within the womb is a wonder.

The child's heart begins to form and to beat at four weeks. There is a chambered heart by the sixth week of pregnancy.

Due to the modern marvels of crystal clear sonograms, we can watch babies smile at us at eight weeks. By this time, too, they are sucking their thumbs, responding to sound, and recoiling from pain.

There is mounting evidence that they are dreaming. All the major organs are forming and beginning to function. The baby has a fingerprint at about eight weeks.

All of this is true. It is established, scientific fact. And yet, abortions are still performed in our nation at an alarming rate.

Abortion in the United States

Facts and Figures

According to an article published in Christianity Today magazine, abortions in the United States are at their lowest rate since 1976. This finding is from the Guttmacher Institute, which is the research and policy arm of Planned Parenthood.

Actually, the rate has been slowly (and somewhat irregularly) dropping since 1980, from a high of **30** abortions per 1,000 women of child-bearing age (15-44) to a current rate of about **17** per 1,000.

All told, though, since the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, there have been roughly fifty four million abortions performed in the US.

Of those, less than 1.5% were because of pregnancy through rape or incest.

In a Guttmacher survey designed to discover why women sought an abortion, the women listed contributing factors to their decision to not carry their baby to term.

Twelve percent (12%) of women cited a concern with their own health. But the most prominent reasons included not wanting to be a single parent (48%), lack of financial resources (73%), and dramatic change to life situation (74%).⁷

So, yes, the overwhelming majority of women who seek abortions do so for what we would call "convenience."

⁷ From a Guttmacher Institute study, the most recent cited is from 2004. I am assuming that the statistics haven't changed much, as they didn't substantially change from 2007 to 2004.

Now, if you are the one being inconvenienced, inconvenience is not a terribly “minor” thing, especially when that inconvenience is a pregnancy that will last for nine months, and will be followed by raising a child for a couple of decades.

However, the primary issue at hand is whether or not the life in the womb of the mother is a human being. If it is, then inconvenience ceases to be the end-all trump card. And the life in the womb is, for certain, a human being.

Still, at this point in our nation’s story, abortion is a sad, hard fact of life. And given what we do know about life in the womb, *these* facts don’t figure.

Facts that Don’t Figure

Animal and human rights...

All fifty states have strict laws protecting animals from abuse by human beings. Those are good laws and they should be on the books. Yet, in every one of the fifty states, despite some restrictions, abortion of a human being is legal.

Yes, it’s human, but...

Mary Elizabeth Williams, writing in the January 23, 2013 issue of Salon magazine, said this - “...I know that throughout my own pregnancies, I never wavered for a moment in the belief that I was carrying a human life inside of me. I believe that’s what a fetus is: a human life. AND THAT DOESN’T MAKE ME ONE IOTA LESS SOLIDLY PRO-CHOICE (emphasis added).”

Fetal homicide...

In the thirty eight states that have fetal homicide laws, a pregnant woman driving to an abortion clinic may safely abort her unborn child. But if she is hit by a drunk driver and her unborn baby dies, the driver will be charged with manslaughter.

Ultrasound’s clarity...

You may have seen the television commercial for General Electric’s new ultrasound system showing a pregnant woman and her husband marveling at an amazingly clear picture of their unborn baby’s features. The commercial features Roberta Flack’s song “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” playing in the background.

The announcer says: “When you see your baby for the first time on the new GE 4D Ultrasound System, it really is a miracle.” And yet, except for some states where there are restrictions, that baby could be legally aborted.

Protecting, unless...

Washington Post columnist George Will wrote a piece in which he told the story of a Baltimore court that, in effect, took custody of a fetus by placing a pregnant drug abuser under court jurisdiction to prevent her from jeopardizing the health of her fetus - unless she wanted to exercise her right to an abortion.⁸

Patients, but...

Today, physicians treat fetuses as patients. They give medicine and administer drugs and , perform blood transfusions and even surgeries *in utero*. But the babies can still be aborted.

Dallas area pastor, Matt Chandler, says of this unbelievable inconsistency with respect to life in the womb, “*This is insanity!*”

What word would you choose to state the thinking about abortion in 2015 America? Crazy-making? Confused?⁹

⁸ Jewish World Review Oct. 28, 2002 / 22 Mar-Cheshvan, 5763

⁹ Some are not confused. When addressing the subject of fetal stem cell research, which requires the destruction/killing of human embryos Dr. Matthews-Roth (whom I quoted earlier) says this, “We know from embryology that a new life begins with the formation of the zygote, the cell formed from the union of egg and sperm in fertilization -- this is scientific fact, not religious doctrine. What makes us human is not our looks or mental attributes, but the human chromosomes and genes

To speak with resounding authority into such confusion we would expect to find and we would love to find an explicit prohibition of abortion in the Bible. It's not there.

Abortion and Scripture

Other ancient cultures did explicitly ban abortion.¹⁰ But to our surprise there is no verse to which we can turn that says, *"Thou shalt not perform or have an abortion."*

Extra biblical Jewish and Christian writings explicitly banned abortion.¹¹ But not the Bible - and I think that there is a reason why.

Taken in its parts and as a whole, the Bible views human life as a gift from God. Psalm 139 includes a beautiful description of God's work of crafting, shaping, and molding the life in the womb. Human life begins in the womb at the point of conception.

The Bible is also clear that all human life is uniquely valuable because all people are made in the image and likeness of God. To wantonly take human life is murder, and murder is explicitly condemned.

Given this understanding (a "worldview") a prohibition of abortion isn't needed. It is prohibited in the prohibition against murder. It is prohibited because of what human life is.^{12,13}

which we have in our cells from the zygote stage throughout our life. We should not condone killing a member of our species, even for a good reason."

¹⁰ Abortion was practiced in ancient Egypt, India, Cambodia, and Japan. Assyrian law (and Assyrian was surely one of the most violent cultures ever) proscribed death by torture in cases of induced abortion if a woman had an abortion against her husband's wishes. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 139, #556.

¹¹ Philo, Josephus, the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Apocalypse of Peter all condemned abortion.

¹² A categorical syllogism about abortion, from a Bible perspective:

Human beings are made in God's image.

Abortion murders human beings.

The murder of human beings is forbidden.

Therefore, abortion is forbidden.

To which we say, so what? As in, now what?

We are disciples of Jesus living in a land where abortions - and dozens of other Bible prohibited practices - take place every day. What are we to do about abortion?

I would like to broadly suggest two actions. First, pray.

So What?

Pray

By praying we are giving credence to the idea that we really are least in control of what matters to us most. By praying we are asking God to do what only He can do.

We can pray for women to choose life, for the continuing decline of abortions, and for the eventual outlawing of abortion in our nation.

We can prayerfully allow what we know about abortion to inform the actions we take as we engage with our culture, how we vote, and what we say when we are in discussions with friends and family.

We can pray and we can love.

Love

We love babies

Babies inside and outside the womb are precious to God and to us. One of the things we are saying when we oppose abortion is that we love babies.

¹³ In Jeremiah, chapter 19, the prophet represents God as saying, of the Jews' practice of sacrificing children by burning with fire to the false gods of Canaan that such things never *[19:5] "entered [His] mind."* Isn't it conceivable that God didn't explicitly prohibit abortion because it would have never entered His mind that His people would practice it?

A myth you may have heard is that abortion is performed to ensure that every baby is a wanted baby. The truth is that the list of couples waiting to adopt is hopelessly long. Every baby IS a wanted baby.

The love of babies could lead to becoming champions of adoption and fostering, as if has for some of you here.

We love women who find themselves in tough pregnancies

We could express our love to women who find themselves in challenging pregnancies.

There are crisis pregnancy centers that offer training and that need volunteers to support and counsel pregnant women.

These places also need supplies like blankets, diapers, cribs, baby clothes and more. You may know women who could benefit from your support.

What a beautiful vision it would be if women across our city could identify that it was Christians who helped them through their pregnancy with open hearts and open checkbooks and open homes.

What a wonderful vision that our church and other churches would become beacons of hope for women and their unborn children.

We love women and men who have been touched by the trauma of abortion and are seeking healing and forgiveness from God

We also can show love by the way we come alongside those who have experienced the trauma of abortion.

Love doesn't just shake a fist at the darkness. Love shines a light in the darkness and helps. Love points women and boyfriends and husbands and doctors who have been wounded by abortions to the cross of Christ where they can find forgiveness and healing.

There is no sin that is so terrible that the grace of God cannot cover it. There is no sin with more power than the cross of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

When it comes to abortion, the Bible is quite clear. And, frankly, so is science. Because it is so clear, it is not inconceivable to me that Roe v Wade will one day, maybe even soon, be overturned.

Much progress has been made in recent years through education, through the tireless work of many, and through prayer.

God often brings about cultural change when His people love and pray for the sake of the world He loves.

You and I recently observed Martin Luther King Day, a day on which we remember the civil rights movement, when some people fought valiantly for the rights of marginalized black citizens.

If you are white, as I am, wouldn't you love to know that your grandparents or great-grandparents stood against racism and bigotry in their day, in the day of Jim Crow? Wouldn't it be great to know that they were on the right side of the story when the battle was raging?

When abortion is finally seen to be what it really is - whether that is next year, ten years from now, or in eternity - don't you want to be found by your children and grandchildren and by your God to have been on the side of life?

God will not prompt everyone to get involved in the same way or to the same extent. But we can all prayerfully consider possible actions we can take. We can all love and we can all pray.

[Matthew 5:16] "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."