

We have been reading through the letter to the Ephesians over the past few weeks. We have learned that it was written by Paul or a close associate of Paul's and it was written to a group of diverse Christians living in and around the port city of Ephesus. Today we move into the 4th chapter.

I'm going to be using this Scripture to reflect on an experience I had this week spending time outside a facility which gets a lot of attention in our culture. This past Wednesday I accepted an invitation to stand outside of a clinic where abortions are performed.

In the sermon today, I am going to reflect on this experience and trust that these words of Scripture have something to say to us. Abortion is certainly a hot button issue and one that many pastors and church leaders try to avoid and with good reason. I know that we here at Allison Creek have a diverse set of opinions on this subject.

One of my first observations is that one's opinion on abortion does not fall into neat categories. By that, I mean I meet some people who describe themselves as very liberal in many ways but when it comes to abortion they find themselves taking what is considered a more conservative or pro-life position. They feel embarrassed to share their pro-life position with their liberal friends.

At the same time, I find people who are staunch defenders of what is considered a pro-life abortion position who are very outspoken in support of the death penalty and do not see this as a contradiction.

So, to help guide this conversation I am going to invite us into the 4th chapter of the letter to the Ephesians.

Letarshia reads Ephesians 4:1-16

Let me briefly describe the scene I witnessed on Wednesday at the clinic. The clinic is a non-descript brick office building in a quiet office park near Independence Blvd in Charlotte. There is no sign on the road and no one would suspect that it was a medical facility upon seeing it. I will call it an abortion clinic for simplicity and clarity, but I am not trying to make any judgements by the term.

What I discovered is that the space in front of an abortion clinic is a space claimed as territory by different groups with opposing agendas. One group refers to themselves as pro-life and one group refers to themselves as pro-choice. I will use these terms since these are the terms that they both use to self-describe. Again, I am not trying to make any statements by these terms.

This particular clinic has about 75 feet of road frontage including the driveway into the parking lot of the clinic. On one side of the driveway are people holding signs to direct clients into the parking lot. They represent the pro-choice group that is trying to be sure that the people arriving are not harassed.

On the other side of the driveway are people self-described as pro-life who are holding leaflets and trying to get clients to stop and talk to them.

Parked on the road in front of the pro-life group was a large RV unit. This RV unit is set up by a local crisis pregnancy center that hopes to persuade women to reconsider the decision to have an abortion. The RV contains a lab technician who provides a free ultrasound and information about the pregnancy.

There are city ordinances set up to keep the peace. The pro-life group must remain on or behind the side walk. This group also sets up a sound system that cannot exceed a certain decibel level which the pro-choice group monitors. On Saturdays, the police set up barricades because the groups are a lot larger.

I engaged in a conversation with Mary Belle, not her real name, who is a rising high school senior who is planning to attend Liberty University after graduation. Lisa is white, and she was wearing a T-shirt that said, "Cities 4 Life" which I discovered was a national pro-life organization.

I shared with Mary Belle that I'm comfortable living in the gray areas of life and believe that God speaks to us in those places. After our conversation, she consulted with an adult in her group and later brought me a piece of notebook paper listing several biblical verses which she said speak to issues as being black and white.

I engaged in a conversation with Lisa, also not her real name, who was also white. In fact, all the people on both sides of the sidewalk were white except for one Latina woman who appeared to live stream the morning's event in Spanish. Lisa told me that she finds Christians to be rather judgmental and considers herself an atheist.

I was told that several in the pro-choice group were not involved in a Christian church except for one. I say that not to be judgmental but to state what I was told.

My most engaging conversation occurred with Alphonso. Alphonso is a large black man who serves as one of the 2 security guards on site. Alphonso asked me what I thought of this scene. I asked him to share his perspective on it all. He seemed appreciative to be asked.

He said that the pro-life people don't do everything that they promise and abandon many of the women that they take into their care. Alphonso told me of two women that had come to the clinic with very different stories. One was a woman who was facing medical issues and could die if she gave birth to her third child. The second was a woman who was 31 years old who already had 8 children and was pregnant with twins.

So, what can these words to the Ephesians say to all of this? There are 3 main points in this passage of Scripture. The first is that Christ is central. The second is the importance of unity in the church. And the third is the importance of spiritual growth or sanctification for believers.

In this passage of Scripture, Paul affirms that there is one Lord and there is one God and Father of all. That means, God is the God of the women and girls who come into the clinic who feel as though they have no other options than abortion. This includes the 11-year-old girl who came into this clinic last week after being raped by her father.

God is the God of the people advocating a pro-life position who do so out of a sense of a faithful Christian calling. This includes my friend who celebrates her 10-year-old daughter whom she adopted and who graduated from our church preschool.

And God is the God of the people advocating for a pro-choice position who may feel shunned by the church. This includes my friend who finds Christians to be nothing but hypocritical.

God is the God and loving parent of all regardless of whether the individual acknowledges God and God is the loving parent especially of the poor and most vulnerable.

In the United States, about half of the women who decide to obtain an abortion fall under the Federal Poverty Level. About 88% of the abortions performed around the world are in developing or economically poorer countries. 90% of the abortions performed in the United States are to non-white women. In other words, the most likely women to obtain an abortion are poor women of color.

The second major point in this passage is the importance of the unity of the church. That means that the church should welcome people who are strong advocates of a pro-life position and the church should welcome people who are strong advocates of a pro-choice position.

People who feel strongly that abortion is wrong should never feel shunned in a Christian church that may describe itself as more progressive. No Christian should feel ashamed of being pro-life.

In the same way, those that describe themselves as pro-choice should be welcomed with open arms into the church as well. I do not know anyone who is pro-abortion and wince when I hear someone described that way.

I do know folks who worry that outlawing abortion or making access more difficult will lead to greater death and pain as poor women turn to unsafe abortion practices.

Unfortunately, I meet many young adults who feel that there is no place for them in a Christian church because they believe that Christians are judgmental and exclusive to people like them who may consider themselves liberal or progressive.

The third point which rises from this passage of Scripture from Ephesians is that believers must grow in their faith and not be stagnant. The churchy word to describe this is sanctification.

To me, to grow in our faith as Christians around the issue of abortion is to journey into the complexity of the situation and address the factors that lead to the 600,000 abortions that were performed in the United States last year. That number is half of what it was 25 years ago, but it is still a mark of our broken and sinful world.

Growing in our faith means finding ways to link together those that are pro-choice and pro-life to find solutions that lead to quality health care, education, opportunities, and affirmation for all people regardless of their income level, where they live, or the color of their skin. In my opinion, focusing on poor women at the end of the line at the clinic is way too late.

I think abortion clinics are a result of our sinful and broken world. But the condemnation lies upon all of us for creating an unjust society that leads to so many poor women and women of color feeling as though they have no other options.

That is why we here at Allison Creek must be stirred by a passion to create a more just and loving world. It is our responsibility to share the message to all that there is one Lord and one God and Father of all.

I conclude with a message I received this week from someone who saw on social media that I was planning to preach this sermon. This person used to work at a pregnancy crisis center that was operated by a pro-life organization. This person shared these words with me and I was given permission to share them today:

“Most of all I learned that no one ‘wants’ an abortion. I’ll never forget the affluent professional woman who told me she had gotten pregnant by a married colleague and had to abort. She told me she thought she would suffer every day of her life and probably burn in hell. I couldn’t speak for the first, but I assured her I didn’t think my good God would condemn her to the second.

I am always aware when anyone speaks on this emotionally fraught subject that there are women in the pews who have gone through an abortion and kept it secret. I have a friend who told me that she got pregnant due to an extramarital affair. She aborted but was so sure God would punish her by giving her a future horribly deformed child.

Although they only had one child, after reconciling with her husband she convinced him that she wanted a tubal ligation. It was years before she shared her secret with him.

I guess I feel so horrified that the ‘church’ has heaped this condemnation on women making the best choice they know how. At our center every woman knew she could return to our pregnancy crisis center if she chose abortion for counsel and support. Many did.

When I left the center after many years as a staff member I couldn’t reconcile myself to the fact that the same Christians who supported ministries like the one I was part of also seemed to feel that God didn’t seem nearly as concerned with the needs of children outside the womb especially if they were poor, brown, living in a 3rd world country, sitting on death row, or were undocumented and sitting in cages.”

The writer of Ephesians proclaims that the same God is the God and Father of us all.

May we as Christians follow the will of God and express love and seek to create a more just world for all. AMEN.

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-Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Guttmacher Institute

-Given: August 5, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)