

# 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – June 29/30, 2019 – Reflection

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“Brothers and sisters: For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love.”

(St. Paul to the Galatians)

The insistence on freedom is never from the center of public discourse and policy. We've grown used to the trumpeting of rights and freedoms across every facet of society. So many groups who claim, sometimes rightly, to have suffered injustice and persecution, now raise their voices to demand freedom, equality, civil rights, respect, and even remuneration ... Women's Rights; Tenants' Rights; Reproductive Rights; Prisoners' Rights; Gay Rights; Trans Rights; Black Lives Matter; Gun Rights; Immigration Rights; Religious Freedom; Freedom of the Press; Freedom of Speech; Freedom to Protest.

Over the couple of years, the look of the United States Supreme Court has changed as justices have retired or passed away, and new justices of a more conservative bent have been appointed to this highest tribunal in the land. The balance has shifted, and there is hope in some quarters, fear in others, that the court might revisit earlier decisions, decisions that would greatly change what is now the law of the land in several areas of freedom and rights. Some say that the court will soon

have to consider the constitutionality of several state's laws that are currently being passed all over the country to greatly restrict access to reproductive services and abortion. Some fear, while others hope that this attention by the highest court will result in the overturning of the landmark Roe v. Wade decision of the early 1970's that resulted in the legalizing of abortion throughout our country during any of the three trimesters of pregnancy. Anticipating such a possibility, legislatures from other states like New York and California and Massachusetts are rushing to get laws passed that would safeguard women's rights over their own bodies, over their own reproductive systems without outside interference from government or Big Brother.

Culture wars over this issue have been going on for decades: Pro-Choicers hurling invectives at Pro-Lifers; politicians trying to walk a fine line in the middle ... "personally opposed but upholding the law of the land, the legal right to choose;" Planned Parenthood speaking of "reproductive services and procedures;" Right-to-Lifers marching each January on Washington and praying rosaries outside Planned Parenthood clinics ... a whole lotta shouting and demonizing and not a lotta serious listening and thinking.

The whole matter, I think, comes down to one simple concept: PERSONHOOD. The American Constitution and, more importantly, the Ten Commandments, The Golden Rule guarantee the right to life for all PERSONS. Thou shalt not kill. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The Preamble to the Constitution holds government's purpose as being to secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity. The question has always been who is a person? When is a human life a human life? When does property achieve the dignity and rights of humanity? When do you become "YOU" and not "IT"?

Ancient (and not so ancient) cultures denied personhood to women ... they were property not persons. Colonizers denied personhood to native cultures ... they were savages not persons. Slaveholders and traders denied personhood to Black Africans ... they were inferior, animals, property. Nazis denied personhood to Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, Slavs ... they were vermin, deviates, sub-human. Planned Parenthood and the law of the United States celebrate the dignity and rights of women while denying personhood to the unborn ... they are cells, they are property, they are "ITS", and they are disposable.

A couple of weeks ago, I was listening to an interview on WGBH Public Radio. The guest that day was an Episcopal Priest, a woman who is a pastor and professor in Boston. I'm sorry, but I don't remember her name, but during the course of a few minutes, she made sure to let it be known that she was highly educated, that she was something of a learned scripture scholar and that she was certain that in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, there was no insistence on defending life before birth. Life is celebrated at birth, angels announce births, ages are dated from the birthday, baptisms and circumcisions record the date of birth, birthdays are marked as milestones, but never, never, never is what is conceived, what is carried, what is anticipated a person, imbued with a divine soul, claiming the right to life as a human being made in the image and likeness of God. She fairly sneered that before birth, there was no soul, no humanity, no personhood, no rights.

I may not be a scholar of the law or the scriptures, but something has been gnawing at me. In the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, God is calling the young man to be His prophet, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." If Jeremiah wasn't born yet,

was still in-utero; if Jeremiah had no soul, no dignity, no humanity; if Jeremiah wasn't a person, then who is this "YOU" that God formed, that God knew, that God consecrated?

In the Gospel of Luke, the young Virgin Mary has just conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. She sets out to visit her elderly relative Elizabeth who is six months pregnant with her son John.

"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb ... and Elizabeth exclaims who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me for as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy." If John the Baptist, as yet unborn, had no soul, no dignity, no humanity, if this one unborn wasn't a person, then who is the child doing all the leaping and rejoicing and testifying? And, who's word is the unborn responding to; Mary's or the Word-Made-Flesh, the Lamb of God, in the womb of the Virgin.

Is the unborn prophet a person? Is the unborn Baptist a person? Is the unborn Savior a person? I would say the bible answers with a resounding "Yes", and if that is true, then: Do unto the other as you would have him do unto you; secure and defend the blessings of liberty for our posterity; and remember, always remember, THOU SHALT NOT KILL.