

Proper 9
June 26, 2022
Mary Barnett

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

Last week Steve preached from chapter 5 of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians which included those sentences.

So fierce and so clear.

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But as Steve explained, Paul is often not as clear as that. When Paul writes for example about the flesh it can be confusing. Often he seems to be damning and shaming our bodies and this does not feel like freedom at all. This attitude unfortunately has been erroneously promulgated by churches: Catholic churches, Protestant churches, Evangelical churches... Apparently, it’s a thing And as seems to happen repeatedly through history, when the body is shamed: seen as something other than whole and natural and holy, women in particular get disempowered.

Steve did a great job explaining that Paul’s thinking is more nuanced than this. For starters, Paul uses two different words for flesh. The word *sarx* is used to describe the body in all its impermanence: like cells which slough off or a dog dead by the side of the road. *Sarx* is the part of us which will eventually disintegrate and rot, like an old piece of fruit, left in a bowl. Being in the flesh in this sense is more about what is missing, than what is there.

Steve quoted Genesis to make this even clearer.

“Remember that in Genesis 2, God made the first human body from the Earth or dust, and then breathed His own breath or spirit into it. Scholars don’t all agree on what this means, but I tend to think it is talking about the Holy Spirit. Our souls and our bodies were made by God to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and it’s only then that they are in proper working order – that’s living in the Spirit.”

This is the body as SOMA: a sacred wholeness... that lasts.

We recognize this distinction from our own experience, don’t we? If you have been at a deathbed, you know the uncanny way a body changes once the breath has gone out of it. It isn’t just that it has stopped moving. I had never been to a wake before when my dear friend John D’Amico died of AIDS in our early 30’s. His mother who I had only met once before, saw me hanging to the back of the room at the wake at Casey’s funeral home in Branford (a business sold long since and which is now the dry cleaners) After the short service, John’s mother

approached me where I stood crammed in the back and took me firmly by the hand and brought me past rows and rows of people up to the open casket. If I could have run away, I would have. There I stood transfixed on the spot where now I take my vestments for dry cleaning.

And then this quiet self-effacing woman I barely knew... John's mother.... placed my hand on John's body, right on his chest. And sensing my desire to pull away, to NOT feel, she firmly covered my hand with her hand and that's how I learned... even though I didn't want to... that he really was not "in there" anymore. I didn't want it but it was truly a gift. Just because we believe in life after death, doesn't mean we keep dead bodies laying around. We know what happens to them. But we also know that when love is concerned there is something else. Something that lasts. This is the body as SOMA. And if you ever have been blessed to feel contacted by someone after their death, as I certainly was two days after John died, you will know what I mean. This body is the temple of the holy spirit: a sacred container of personhood: a temple that lasts.

Catholic theologian and Franciscan sister, Ilia Delia put it this way this week:

"God is love and love lives in persons and therefore we must place personhood over any ideal or principle. Personhood is essential to the everlastingness of God's love."

In the reading from this week Paul focuses on the inability of any law to abrogate our God-given dignity and freedom. Laws can neither banish nor vouchsafe for us what is the purview of God. Or as Dortha reminded me this week: render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's. I'd always focused on the first part of that phrase. This week had me thinking of the second part.

Here is Paul's letter:

"See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised-- only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh."

Imposing laws on other people may make us feel virtuous or holy but they aren't what make us holy. Only our own relationship with God does that.

Wholeness, bodily autonomy, freedom and dignity, a personal and sacred relationship with God: these are Christian values. Theologian Diana Butler Bass wrote recently: *"I think there is an important shift taking place in our culture and what we're actually fighting about is not politics but about God,"* And discussions about who God is and what the Bible means are exactly the sort of discussions we need to be having in church.

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****Note: At this point I decided spontaneously to come out of the pulpit and give a personal testimony. Personal testimony:***

I was gutted by the Supreme Court's decision that overturned Roe v Wade. I know one might think of this as a political issue but it wasn't. The level of my distress was not political. It was religious. I am a whole being, a soma if you will, made by God and it is God I turn to when I need to make difficult decisions. I make them imperfectly, with autonomy and attendant responsibility, in and through my relationship with God. I access this relationship by reading the Bible, practicing the liturgy and tuning into the sensations and messages in my body. It's not a mental argument or an emotional battle. It's a presence deeply felt within my "soma."

The Supreme Court decision this week felt like an invasion. It was analogous to someone breaking into my house.

This doesn't mean abortion is right or wrong for you or that adoption is right or wrong for you or that donor egg is right or wrong for you but that those are decisions to be made between you and God. We don't always get what we want. To have a freedom I took for granted taken away was a shock even if I had never had reason to use it. It is still an affront to my dignity and to my religious beliefs. I want to find more muscular words for this Christianity because otherwise that narrative is taken over and managed by others and I'm not willing to let my religion go. It's too important to me and I believe it's too important for the whole world.

God is love, a love that lives in persons and therefore we must place personhood with all its attendant difficulties and differences over any ideal or principle. Personhood is essential to the everlastingness of God's love, a love that lasts forever and is stronger than death.

And now I will turn to some denominational resources:

In our baptismal covenant we promise to see Christ in all persons: to love our neighbor as yourself, and to recognize the dignity of every human being. In our Episcopal Catechism (on page 845 in the back of the BCP) what we believe is laid out in a series of questions and answers. Here is the very first one.

Question: What are we by nature?

Answer: We are part of God's creation, made in the image of God

Question: What does it mean to be made in the image of God?

Answer: It means we are free to make choices, to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God.

Let us now turn to the Bible and to a letter I received from Dean Sterling, the dean of Yale Divinity School. He wrote:

"The pro-life stance is often linked to Christianity and there are many people who are genuine in their faith who will support the Supreme Court's decision, including members of the YDS

(and this) community. It is, however, a more complex issue than some acknowledge. There is no biblical basis for the ban on abortion. The only text that deals directly with a fetus is Exodus 21:22–25, and it makes a distinction between the penalty levied on someone who causes a pregnant woman to miscarry versus an injury to the woman herself. The former results in a fine: the latter in the lex talionis or an eye for an eye. In other words, it distinguishes between a fetus and a human being. Simplistic appeals to the biblical traditions are just that, simplistic. Christianity is supportive of human life, but we must work through our traditions with care.

There are millions of American women who feel violated by today's decision. They understand that this is not only a decision about abortion, but about women's rights. The decision is a step backward for human rights. Does it portend the reversal of other rights—as some have already suggested? Is the elimination or suppression of individual freedoms pro-life?

This decision will not heal our country. It will only exacerbate the divide that already exists. May we find ways to promote life, not political agendas. May we find ways to discuss our differences, not build higher walls.”

This is certainly my prayer for this church.

In closing, let us turn to the words of our presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. He wrote:
“While I, like many, anticipated this decision, I am deeply grieved by it. I have been ordained more than 40 years, and I have served as a pastor in poor communities; I have witnessed firsthand the negative impact this decision will have.

We as a church have tried carefully to be responsive both to the moral value of women having the right to determine their healthcare choices as well as the moral value of all life. Today's decision institutionalizes inequality because women with access to resources will be able to exercise their moral judgment in ways that women without the same resources will not.”

God made us to be free and to be free, people require agency over their bodies, something the framers of the constitution, most of whom were slaveholders, did not have a concept for. But regardless of anyone's beliefs, I want to be a listening ear and a pastoral resource for anyone anywhere dealing with these issues. You may share my contact info. Whether it is a long ago miscarriage, infertility issues, abortions, adoptions, a passionate belief in a fetus's right to life, joyful births, sudden deaths, childlessness or the everyday, often overwhelming stresses of having children, these are all pastoral concerns. And on this 4th of July weekend where we remember our great country's Declaration of Independence that proclaims our inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness... happiness that must include self-determination, I want to become more comfortable standing up for the God I believe in and the Christian faith I follow. You can probably find my photo in the newspaper standing in my collar at a demonstration with the sign: *Bodily autonomy is a Christian value.*

The arguments that we are having in the world today ARE arguments about God. About what has ultimate value. And who gets to decide. And who we are to each other. And what does it

mean to be members of the same body? And still at times disagree. What do our lives mean? And what gives them meaning?

These are discussions we must have in church and in the public square, because otherwise other people may define our religion for us.

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

Amen.