

Sermon Preached on May 22, 2022 – Sixth Sunday of Easter

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Acts 16:9-15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

John 5:1-9

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ~ John 5:3

Thirty-eight years. That's a long time. Thirty-eight years, think of it.

I belong to a national organization, G.R.R., which originated and is based here in Maine. G.R.R stands for Grandmothers for Reproductive Choice and was founded by Judy Karhi 9 years ago when she was 89!

I recently signed up for a training. G.R.R. has begun to help women, women who have had abortions, to tell their stories. My training included about 15 women from around the country who have had abortions, all of us white, all of us, well, grandmothers. The training was led by a young Black woman, (young at least to us grandmothers) from an organization called We Testify. She announced early on that she has had 6 abortions. Six. One of them was for an ectopic pregnancy, and that saved her life. One of the women asked her politely what she said when asked about the other five. She said, I say, *None of your business.*

When I was called to give feedback about this session, I admitted that I had been put off by her presentation because of not understanding about those half-dozen abortions. The facilitator pushed back. She said that she knew that several of the women in my cohort had had more than one abortion, and that one goal of our storytelling project was to destigmatize the notion, indeed the fact, that many of us do have more than one abortion.

So I had to interrogate myself. I had one abortion. I was a single mother going to school, working, and aspiring to ordination. The man who inseminated me, I knew, would not be a fit father; he was alcoholic, abusive, and unstable. To me, my choice was a no-brainer. I was an upper-middle-class well educated white woman whose birth control had failed. Abortion was legal and easy to obtain. I changed birth control methods, also easy. But had that method failed, and I were again in similar circumstances, would I have had a second abortion. Probably yes. So, who am I to judge?

I have felt called by a person of faith and a religious professional to speak about abortion as a moral decision, a decision that affirms the moral agency of women, a decision that can and should only be made by a woman herself. So then, if I believe, and I do, that most decisions about child-bearing, or not, are in fact moral decisions, then who am I to judge? Who, indeed?

Let's revisit the poor guy waiting by the healing pool, waiting and waiting. What does he have to say for himself? *Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I*

am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me. What do we think of this? Do we think, *All those selfish bullies who cut in ahead of him!* Do we think, *what a loser this guy is who doesn't assert himself and just lies on his pallet for 38 years!* Certainly these are two very legitimate reactions, reactions I've certainly had as I ponder this Gospel story.

But please notice: Jesus does not interrogate anyone. He does not judge any of this rather uninspiring cast of characters. His only interest is whether the man on the pallet wants to be made well. The man does. So Jesus tells him to take up his pallet and walk. And he does.

Now here's a question. Does Jesus do the healing by a laying on of hands? Or does he tell the man to take up his pallet and walk down to the healing pool and get in the healing water? Does it matter? I don't know. I do know that his faith is what matters. And it also matters for the arc of John's narrative that *that day was a Sabbath*. Fuel for the Pharisees' fire: a healing on the Sabbath.

I spent some years, as I believe many of you know, doing chaplaincy work at the Planned Parenthood clinic in Portland on Fridays when abortions were performed. Here are some things I learned first-hand. Most women were quite young. Many had other children and could not afford one more, financially or psychologically. Some barely spoke English. Some were in rehab. Many did not have partners. Not one *looked* pregnant; they were all presumably in their first trimester. Only rarely did anyone have doubts about her decision. Very few feared God's judgment, and if they did, I worked to assure them of God's forgiveness and what I believed to be the moral rightness of their decisions.

As I said, most girls and women I saw at the clinic were in their first trimester. But/and there are so many reasons women delay getting abortion care. Teens often don't know they are pregnant, or are afraid to tell anyone that they are, or have trouble finding money or help. Poor women face significant barriers. Tests for fetal abnormalities aren't reliable in the first trimester. And many who delay are indecisive or ambivalent about terminating a pregnancy.

Are any of these blameworthy reasons? I don't believe so. And anyway, who am I to interrogate anyone but myself? Who am I to judge? If I'm to follow my leader Jesus, judgment is *none of my business*.

That's my moral reasoning, my faith reasoning. But there are also my emotional reactions and my political beliefs. Jesus does not judge, he acts. And he very occasionally gets angry. This is where our paths diverge a bit.

They diverge because Jesus is God and I am not. I am not and I am angry a lot. These days I'm in a permanent state of anger, disgust, and fear, for what's happening in this country, and in particular what's happening about women's access to safe and legal abortion.

Jesus' command in our alternative Gospel for today is *Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.* (John 14:26) But my heart is troubled, troubled indeed.

And so I'm using my anger to motivate me. Motivate me to continue in the struggle to achieve safe, legal abortion. That is, to struggle for women's health care. Because abortion is health care.

Imagine these contrasting worlds:

Men	Women
Pool	Health Care
Waiting	No Waiting

Which world would you rather be in?

Which would Jesus?

Alleluia,

Amen