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The Moral Fog of Abortion

a Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE

Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga

December 5, 2010

Good morning and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere and I am the minister of this church. Hanukkah began at sundown Wednesday. This Jewish festival of lights commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the Assyrians and the rededication of the temple. At this time of the year we anticipate this Sunday when we can sing “Light One Candle.” It’s number 221.

HYMN 221, “Light One Candle”

GREETINGS

PRELUDE: “Norse Legend”

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

This morning, we have replaced our chalice with a menorah, which is used during the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. Hanukkah is a week-long celebration and one candle is lit every evening. Hanukkah began on Wednesday, so we’ll play catch-up and light five candles this morning. Lee Adler, will you please light the menorah?

To accompany the lighting of the menorah, I have a story. I’ll have a story for our benediction as well and both stories come from the Hasidic tradition.

Hasidic Judaism or Hasidism, is a branch of Judaism that promotes spirituality and joy. It began in 18th century eastern Europe as a reaction against overly legalistic Judaism. Its communal gatherings celebrate storytelling as a form of mystical devotion.

Like all good storytellers, I will tell you this story a little differently than the way I heard it. I call it “Windows and Mirrors.”

Once upon a time, in a very large city on the eastern coast of North America, there lived a very wealthy man, whose name was “The Donald.” Did I say he was wealthy?

He had more money than God, more gold than Fort Knox, more credit cards than the Irish government. He had all that he ever wanted: seven vacation homes, a battalion of servants to wait on him, a personal chef for every day of the week, several cars and motorcycles, a few really big boats, a jet airplane and his own private island in the Caribbean. “The Donald” was friends with every president and potentate around the world and he was forever in the company of super models. And he had his own TV show.

But “The Donald” was unhappy. I mean really unhappy. For him, it was a struggle to get out of bed in the morning and fight his way through the day. “Why should I bother?” he asked himself. “I have every luxury that money can buy. Yet nothing makes me happy any more. How can this be?” So “The Donald” called Rabbi Mordecai, and asked his advice. Or rather, he had his butler call Rabbi Mordecai, who hadn’t heard from “The Donald” in ages and thought he’d stop by that afternoon.

When Rabbi Mordecai arrived to see “The Donald,” he found him in his hot tub, which was on the top floor of a building overlooking Central Park. He was watching *The Desperate Housewives of Red Bank* on his I-Pad, so Rabbi Mordecai knew he was *really* bored.

Rabbi Mordecai threw him a towel and said, “Get out and dry off.” When “The Donald” had dried off, Rabbi Mordecai led him by the hand to the window of his penthouse. “What do you see?” Rabbi Mordecai asked. “I see people walking down the street and people in Central Park,” the Donald replied.

Then Rabbi Mordecai led him to a mirror, and again asked, “What do you see?” “The Donald” replied, “I see me.”

Rabbi Mordecai said, “Both the window and the mirror are glass. But the glass in the mirror is covered with silver. And as soon as silver is added, you can’t see the people, and just see yourself.”

After Rabbi Mordecai left, “The Donald” wandered through Central Park. For the first time he neglected his own needs, and saw the needs of others. For the first time, his eyes were not covered over with silver. He decided to share his wealth with others, keeping only enough to feed and clothe himself. And a nice little rent-controlled apartment on the upper east side. His mood lightened and in time, the happiness he knew as a young man returned.

Minister. The story about “The Donald” is not the only one I have this morning. I have one about Christmas and about a cat. Actually, all this month, if you listen to me, you’ll hear stories about cats and dogs and Christmas. That’s because we are helping out the Pet Placement Center and all their residents for Christmas. I’ll tell you more about that later. First, let me tell you about the Christmas Cat.

It was the day before Christmas. It had snowed all week, but had in the morning. A cold wind blew through the forest, bending the trees down and piling up great gusting drifts around them. Birds sat huddled together in the treetops, their little claws clutching the branches. Below them, deer stood clustered together, nibbling at tree bark because they could find no plants. They were thinking of sunlit woods and leaf-covered bushes. But the forest lay dark and cold.

A gray cat was struggling to walk through the deep snow. He meowed quietly.

SFX. [*Meow.*]

Minister. Occasionally he would stop and lick a paw caked with icy snow. For the cat, the wintry forest was not only cold but also dangerous and unfriendly. Owls and foxes were everywhere, ready to pounce on him. So far he had always managed to hide in time.

Once he had a home, a warm home with soft chairs to sleep on and fresh water to drink. But one day he had come home only to find the house deserted. The door never opened for him again. And after waiting for several weeks, the cat left, more than a little confused. He would have to seek another home.

In his travels he came upon many houses, but in each there had been a dog to chase him or another cat defending its territory. Now, in the

forest, the cat could not walk another step. He crept under a log and fell into an exhausted sleep.

At the edge of the forest was a small farm. It was a well-kept place and the little house looked festive, with a wreath on the door and candles in the windows.

Inside, Nate and Jason sat in the warm kitchen decorating gingerbread animal cookies for the Christmas tree. They felt uneasy, listening to the wind moan down the chimney and through the cracks.

Jason. Will Santa Claus be able to come in weather like this, Nate?

Nate. He lives at the North Pole so I'm sure he's used to this kind of weather. And don't eat all the icing. We have three more animals to do.

Jason. We'd better finish these cookies soon. It's getting late, and we light the creche tonight.

Minister. The creche was a most special part of Christmas. It was already set up in the old brick oven beside the big fireplace. Nate's old gray plush donkey and Jason's little toy goat stood in the hay, looking at Mary and her baby. Miniature baskets of fruit stood nearby and carved wooden doves hovered in the corners.

After their father read "The Night Before Christmas" aloud, Nate and Jason each lit a candle and placed it carefully in front of the creche. Then the whole family stood for a few moments looking at the scene, silent with their own thoughts.

A gust of wind threw snow against the windows and the candles flickered.

Nate. I'm glad the animals are in our nice warm barn.

Jason. The wild animals must be cold. I wish I could put them in, too.

Nate. Winter can be hard on them, but most of them are used to it.

Minister. In the woods, the gray cat woke uneasily. The bitter wind had stopped, leaving the forest heavy with silence.

The cat crawled out from under the log and looked around cautiously.

SFX. *[Meow.]*

Minister. Through the treetops the sky was brilliant with stars. Somehow, the forest no longer seemed forbidding. The cat was aware of an unfamiliar feeling of peace. He heard a sound in the far distance. An elusive music, enveloping him, beckoned deeper into the woods and he followed. As he went, other animals came, along too, emerging from their dens and nests and burrows and joining him, until the forest was filled with creatures of every kind.

They moved silently together through the trees until they came to a clearing bright with moonlight. The music became louder. It was the sound of bells.

Into the clearing came two great horses pulling a low sled with wooden runners. Upon it stood a tall man with long hair and a beard. A small owl sat on his shoulder and other birds flew around him. At his feet were baskets full of berries and nuts.

He smiled when he saw the animals gathered there. Drawing his horses to a stop, he stepped down from the sled and moved among the forest creatures, patting them and talking to them.

Now and then he would cluck sympathetically at a lame leg or a paw that had been mangled by a trap. As he went, he scattered seeds on the ground. Squirrels clambered up onto his shoulders for handfuls

of nuts. From the trees he hung pieces of suet for the birds, and he carried leafy branches for the deer.

As he came to the cat, he stopped in surprise.

Man. Well, well, little fellow, how did you come to be here? You belong in a warm house with soft chairs to sleep on and a saucer of milk to drink. I know of a small farm not far from here. Two little boys live there and there isn't a finer place for an animal to live.

Minister. He picked up the shivering cat and returned to the sled. He stood for a moment smiling at the forest animals. Then the great horses started up and once again the music of their harness bells filled the forest.

The horses traveled swiftly, but the cat was no longer cold. He lay curled in a basket at the tall man's feet, lulled by the music of the bells.

It was Christmas morning. Their parents were still asleep when Nate and Jason raced downstairs to the big fireplace to find their stockings.

Nate. Jason, Jason, look what's here! It's a little cat!

Minister. And indeed, to the boys' amazement, there was a gray cat curled up in a chair close to the fire.

Jason. But Nate, where could he have come from?

Nate. I'm not sure, but some unexpected—and wonderful—things can happen at Christmas.

SFX. [*Purr.*]

Minister. The gray cat began to purr. He looked at the creche, and

for a fleeting moment, he heard again the sound of distant bells.

You can help keep a cat or a dog warm this winter by making a donation to the Pet Placement Center. Just stop by the table in the Fellowship area for details. And next time you come to church, bring something for the animals. They will appreciate it.

Thanks for listening to my story. You are free to go to your classes now. And remember to listen for the sound of distant bells. That's Christmas coming.

CHILDREN'S RECESSINAL

OFFERTORY: "Souvenir"

If your bank credited your account each morning with \$86,400, and every evening canceled whatever part of the amount you had failed to use during the day, what would you do?

Draw out every cent, of course!

Well, you do have such a bank, and its name is "Time." Every morning it credits you with 86,400 seconds. Every night it rules off, as lost, whatever of this you have failed to invest to good purpose.

If you fail to use the day's deposits the loss is yours.

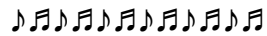
We speak of saving time and also of wasting it. We say time flies or time drags. And yet we cannot say what time really is! Our age is one of speed. We are constantly inventing mechanical devices to hasten all tasks and to traverse distances in space with ever-increasing speed. We want to go faster and faster because we want to "save" time.

There was an old farmer who failed to respond enthusiastically to the

glowing accounts of the speed of air travel. He listened unmoved, and then asked: “But what will you do with the time you save?”

What will you do with the time you save? It is not merely saving time that makes for progress, but how we use the time we have. And it’s time now to collect the morning offering for the support and ministry of this church. Please be generous when the plate comes your way; make good use of this time.

If you have a pledge payment, please mark it as such. As always, the Wood–Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary Hunter will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and remember to be thankful for them.

Christina—and Jesse—please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

Sixty nine years ago this morning, actually about an hour from now, the US military base at Pearl Harbor was attacked. More than 2400 people died and this country was dragged into a war with Japan and Germany. Let us reflect for a moment on the sacrifices that men and women make in wartime.

This is a rather tense time on the international diplomatic stage. I pray that our leaders act prudently and that other countries act prudently as well.

Thou, which are everywhere,
Many are your names.
May we always feel your presence,
May your wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.
May we live purposefully and joyfully
in every moment, in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come.

During this time of silence let us hold close to our hearts those who are suffering and rejoice with those who are jubilant, but let us never forget those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

RESPONSE

HERE

Here may no one be altogether a stranger,
no honesty of thought ignored,
no depth of feeling dismissed,
no life belittled, and no life shut out.

Here may clarity of mind and heart
be humbly treasured,

brought to bear toward word and person.

Here may fellowship be treasured most of all
and paths to sustain and renew it
be sought and found.

Here may growth of spirit be our purpose;
such understanding as shall lead us
to new ways in which to live our lives.

SERMON: The Moral Fog of Abortion

We need fog lamps. Fog lamps.

Wouldn't it be nice if every moral issue could be decided on a point system, like which teams get to play in the bowl games or which prizefighter wins a contested bout? With a point system, we could assign points to every moral issue and we'd have our answer in minutes.

But life is not like that. We constantly run into gray areas, questions that do not have a black-and-white answer. These gray areas are like a moral fog, and we feel our way forward slowly, touching the wall here, avoiding the drop-off there. Sometimes, we just have to wait for the fog to lift before we proceed.

I think the question—if indeed, there is a question—I think the question of abortion is like a moral fog. And so we need moral fog lamps. You know what fog lamps are, don't you? They are moderately powerful headlights, mounted low at the front of the vehicle. Typically, they are about eighteen inches from the ground.

Have you ever driven in thick fog at night? Like through the mountains? What happens when you turn on your high beams? You are blinded by the light reflected right back at you by all the millions

of little water vapor molecules that make up fog.

Fog lamps are mounted low, because fog does not go entirely to the ground. Or at least, it is not as dense closer to the ground. There is a layer of clear air below the fog, and fog lamps shine under the fog to give you a better idea of what's ahead.

If you try to come to grips with abortion by listening to the radical right or the liberal left, if you form your opinion of abortion by reading the papers or watching TV, you will be poorly served and your moral sense will be stunted. Because what you'll see, read, hear and experience will be just like turning on your high beams in a dense fog on a dark night on a mountain road.

You need to look *under* the fog to see where you're going. You need to look *under* the TV reports and newspaper accounts; you need to see what's *under* the hysteria and jingoism. Here are some fog lamps that may help us come to grips with our morality of abortion.

If you knew that mountain road like the back of your hand, if you had traveled on it a zillion times, if you knew every turn, every pothole and every landmark, you'd feel pretty confident driving that road at night, fog or no fog. If you knew every woman who ever had an abortion, if you knew her circumstances, if you knew her story, the sun would come out and the moral fog of abortion would burn off real quick.

So here's your first fog lamp: Abortion is a lot more common than you'd think.

You probably know someone who's had an abortion. She may not have told you, she may never tell you, but you probably know a woman who's had an abortion. If not, then you most certainly know someone who knows someone who's had an abortion. The most commonly cited figure is 30%. Nearly a third of American women have had an abortion. That's what the cover of the bulletin is all

about. You may not know her, but she is 30% of the population.

Next time you walk across the Walnut Street Bridge, or go to the mall or see a movie or go out to eat, take note of every third or fourth woman you see. Every third or fourth woman you meet.

The best way to use this fog lamp is to learn her story. Obviously, you can't go around asking women to tell you their abortion stories, but you can be aware that when you hear her story, the fog will begin to lift.

In my opinion, we cannot think about the morality of abortion in the abstract. Every woman's situation is different, and every moral decision about abortion will be based on different situations. I believe, then, that we must consider this abortion or that abortion, and not stack them up like so many building blocks.

So the first fog lamp shows us that abortion is a personal thing. There is no one-size-fits-all morality. We would do well to learn all the stories we can from as many women who will confide in us before we drive through the moral fog of abortion.

The second fog lamp we need is one which shows us very clearly who or what is a human person and who or what is not. This is not easy.

Many people would ask "When does life begin?" If this means, at what stage between conception and birth are we dealing with living matter, then the answer is obvious. At every stage. But it's irrelevant. Worms and rosebuds are alive, but no one thinks to give them the protection of the law.

So to reformulate, we might ask, "When does human life begin?" And the answer is at the beginning. Inside a pregnant woman, at any time in her pregnancy is not a dog or a cat. It's a human. From conception to birth. But it's still irrelevant, because what people are

really wanting to know, what they mean when they say, "When does life begin?" is "When does the life of an individual person begin?"

This is an important distinction because you cannot always trace the uninterrupted history of one adult human back to one fertilized egg. Sometimes, twins develop from one egg. And the twins, as adults, cannot both be the same organism that once was a fertilized egg. It's logically impossible.

So the question really is, "When does a person begin?" Obviously, it has to be after conception. Everyone is clear on that, because of the evidence of twins. But the fog sets in quickly. A fertilized egg, an embryo, must implant itself within fourteen days or it will not thrive and develop. In its early days, it may turn into something that is one human being or two or more or none at all.

For this question of when a person begins, there is no answer to which everyone agrees. Some would say at birth, some would say at conception, some would say about three weeks after implantation, some would say when the fetus first moves, some would say shortly after birth.

When does a person begin? That's a question I cannot answer. I leave it to you. Unfortunately, some legislatures are wont to tackle this question. The anti-abortion forces would love to have one governing body—just one—somewhere decide when a fetus is a person, because with that issue decided, it's just a short step to equating abortion with murder and thus, making it impermissible.

The beginning of a human organism we could probably pinpoint; it's a biological issue. The beginning of a human person is a philosophical issue and not so easily determined. Philosophy is more art than science, so there is no rigid, mathematically derived and logically locked down way to determine when a person begins. Nonetheless people have tried.

Lynne Rudder Baker is a professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts. She holds that to be a person, a being must possess a first-person perspective. A first-person perspective is the basis for self-consciousness and makes possible memoirs, confessions, deceptions and goal-setting. She believes a first-person perspective is closely tied to the acquisition of language.

A six-week-old human infant has none of this, yet we all would identify the infant as a human person. Baker reminds us that our first-person perspective actually begins with much simpler qualities, specifically, consciousness, the ability to imitate, and behavior that is explainable only by attribution of beliefs, desires and intentions. She believes beings with these qualities have a *rudimentary* first-person perspective and that's good enough for her to identify them as persons.

As to when an infant acquires a rudimentary first-person perspective, it is probably shortly after birth. Infants are conscious, they are known to imitate and their desires for food and warmth are easily understood.

So the second fog lamp we must turn on is one which will help us identify the beginning of a single human individual; the time at which we can identify a person. The third fog lamp we need is one which will help us to avoid the dangerous moral ground around abortion when issues of rape, incest and the health of the mother are considered.

Those who hold that persons begin at conception effectively rule out any room for discussion of these issues, because to abort a fetus that was conceived in rape or incest is tantamount to murder, and murder is impermissible. Likewise, for them, if a fetus develops in such a way as to threaten the life of the mother, then that's a shame, but there's nothing to be done.

I believe this position is logically untenable, as we have seen that an

embryo can develop into twins, thus proving that a person does not, can not, begin at conception. I have always thought that a woman should not be made to deliver her rapist's child nor her brother's child simply because it would be too much of a psychological burden.

I dunno, maybe it wouldn't be, but I'd rather err on the side of her state of mind and not roll the dice. And if her life is threatened by birth, then I have always thought she has some prime moral standing as the human being already here. Again, I'd rather keep her alive than risk losing her for the sake of a potential human being.

I have lately understood another way to think about this. And by this, I mean an unwanted pregnancy—unwanted for whatever reason. You know this abortion issue forces us to assess our views on several topics: sex, reproduction, the beginning of human life, preventing and treating disease, about killing, about responsibility about sexual and gender equality and about religion. I said it wasn't easy and I was right.

Here's the thing about an unwanted pregnancy: A woman may not want to be pregnant for many reasons, all of them reasonable. It could be unwanted because the woman was raped, because she was coerced into a relationship, because her father attacked her, because delivery may kill her, because she already has too many children, because she is too young and inexperienced, because she has no support system, because she is incapable of caring for a child, because she has no resources or just because she never intended to become pregnant.

All those reasons are real reasons. Real good reasons. But of course, it won't be long before someone says, "Well, then why didn't you think about protecting yourself?" For me, that's a different issue and leads us into a discussion of birth control, sex education and the instilling of responsibility in young people.

Anyone here ever heard of Judith Jarvis Thomson? She is an emeritus professor of philosophy at MIT who has written extensively on ethics. She gives us another foglamp for understanding the phrase, “the right to life.” She asks you to imagine this:

You wake up one morning to find that you have been kidnapped and you are strapped down and connected to an unconscious man in the bed right next to you. Turns out he is a famous concert violinist, on the order of Fritz Kreisler or Itzak Perlman. A very accomplished violinist. The Society of Lovers of Violin Music has kidnapped you because you alone have the right blood type that will save his life.

So your kidneys and other organs are doing double duty now, saving his life and keeping you alive. To unplug you would be to kill him. The surgeons say the Music Society is to blame, but don’t worry about it; you’ll only be tied up for nine months. By then, he will have recovered and you can safely be disconnected.

Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation? It would be nice if you did, but are you obligated? What if it turns out to be nine years that you must be connected? Or longer? According to the Music Society, the violinist has a right to life. Of course you have a right to control your body, but his right to life is righter than your right to control your body.

Can you accept this scenario as analogous to the unwanted pregnancy? You didn’t volunteer to help the violinist live. The rape victim didn’t volunteer to get pregnant. But if every person has a right to life, surely even the fetus conceived in rape has that right. Suggesting that the fetus has less of a right than a fetus conceived in love leaves a rather unpleasant taste in the mouth. You see, it’s not within the power of the fetus to determine the circumstances that brought it to life.

Jarvis Thomson, while granting the right to life to the fetus, looks at the mother and asks, “Is she obliged to carry the pregnancy to term?”

Isn’t the mother who was raped or attacked by her father in the same position as the person tied to the violinist?

Jarvis Thomson delves right into the oft-mentioned “right to life,” and for me, her philosophical arguments are persuasive. Suppose you are sick unto death and the only remedy is for Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie to come to your bedside and touch your fevered brow. You certainly have a right to life and you can entreat them to fly out tomorrow. And it would be nice if they did so. But does your right to life *demand* they do so? Are they obliged? I don’t think so.

Likewise, the violinist tied to your kidneys has a right to life but that right does not give him the right to use *your* kidneys and it does not oblige *you* to provide *your* kidneys to continue his life, whether your inconvenience would be nine months, nine weeks or nine minutes. It would be decent of you to stay there in bed with him for nine minutes. I think anyone might agree to that. Even nine hours or nine weeks is not too much of a burden. But you see, his right to life does not compel you to grant that right; his right to life does not compel the Music Society to compel you to grant that right.

Jarvis Thomson takes this one step farther than I can. She would extend her analogy to those women who are knowledgeable about the reproductive process, who are not coerced, not attacked, who take no contraceptive measures and yet engage in consensual sexual behavior that results in an unwanted pregnancy. She says that the woman who does not want to be pregnant, and yet is pregnant because of her lack of planning or responsibility, is no different than the woman who was raped or attacked. Both women are pregnant and don’t wish to be. Neither woman invited the fetus into her body and neither is obliged to provide it with food and shelter for nine months.

I understand the logic in that, and yet it’s hard to restrain my tongue from wagging and from asking the woman why she did nothing to protect herself. But I understand further that that is a separate issue, one which might require a psychologist and some counseling to

answer.

Here's another analogy: Suppose people seeds drift through the air like plant pollen. If you open your windows, they will float in and attach themselves to your carpet and grow into children. So you put fine-mesh screens in all your windows because you don't want children. However, as it happens, one of those screens is defective and a people seed floats in and attaches itself to a rug and starts to grow. Does it have a right to the use of your house?

Some would say yes, because you don't *need* to open your windows, you don't *need* fresh air; you could have sealed all your windows and doors and lived without furniture and curtains and walked on bare floors. But this analogy doesn't hold, because with the same reasoning it would be appropriate to avoid pregnancy by having a hysterectomy or hiring a squad of bodyguards.

For me, these analogies are persuasive in the matters of pregnancy through rape, incest or a threat to the mother's life. I believe that abortion in such instances is permissible. These analogies are also persuasive in cases where pregnancy is accidental, yet was preventable. I wish that were not so, but sex education and responsibility are separate issues, and rightly so.

At the end of the day, a right to life is only a right. It is not an obligation; no one is obliged to grant the right to life. A person's right to life does not supercede another's right to life. It does not even demand human decency in your response to a dying person's request to touch her fevered brow. The violinist's right to life does not obligate you to surrender the use of your body for his health. The right to life is only the right to life.

More finely drawn, the right to life is the right not to be killed unjustly. A woman might be callous, mean-spirited or selfish, but in aborting a pregnancy, I am convinced, a woman is not killing unjustly. She may be foolish or irresponsible, but she is not acting

unjustly.

So if we have determined that abortion is permissible, a question that many people raise is, "When is abortion permissible?" That is, when in the nine months of gestation, is it permissible for the mother to abort her pregnancy? We'll need another fog lamp here, (I think this is the fourth) because this relates to our previous discussion about persons.

Murder is not permissible. On that everyone can agree. More exactly, *unjustified* murder is impermissible. *Justified murder* happens all the time. Innocent soldiers and innocent civilians are killed during wartime. We can be justified in killing an unbalanced person wielding a knife because he poses a threat to others. In dark alleys, thugs are justifiably killed by people in defense of their lives. The state engages in justified murder and calls it capital punishment. So for abortion, when is it permissible? When does abortion become murder?

If someone were to kill an infant ten minutes after birth, that would clearly be murder. Anyone disagree? How about ten minutes *before* birth? Still murder? Ten days? Ten weeks? Twenty weeks? Thirty?

Normal human gestation is 38 weeks, conception to birth, about 260 days, give or take. Anyone want to suggest a point beyond which abortion is murder? How about the point at which the fetus has developed identifiable organs? The day the mother is first aware of movement? How about two weeks after conception?

Anyone want to draw a line in the sand?

I am not ready to draw that line. I have never been pregnant and never will be. I would rather leave that decision to the mother, her family and friends, her spiritual advisor and her physician.

I'll tell you what, though: The fog is thicker the closer the fetus is to birth. For me, there is little moral fog about abortion in the first ten weeks. I can see clearly in the first 70 days.

But I am not the only one. And I am not pregnant. So there certainly are other opinions. Some have suggested that anything after the 20th week is too late; others suggest the 16th or 12th week as the point of no return.

You have probably guessed by now that I am not among those who would once again make abortion illegal. I believe it ought to be available to women, regardless of the existing political and religious culture. I used to think it should be legal because it's better than the alternative, illegal abortion. And I still see no compelling reason to criminalize the act. But in this sermon, I have sought to explore other, more philosophical reasons.

From colonial times, abortion was common and practiced; it was only criminalized in the late 19th century. In the years before *Roe v Wade*, a clandestine network of people and institutions came together and helped women get abortions. A woman might mention that she was "in trouble" to her girlfriend, who would tell a bartender who knew someone who could help. The woman would be passed along this chain of people until she was delivered to someone with enough knowledge and experience to help her.

No one in the chain knew anyone beyond the next contact. Some in the network were clergy, some were physicians and some were police or nurses. This network did not have a name. It was set up like so many cells, each insulated from the others, but bound together with a common purpose. Botched procedures injured or killed a lot of women, and yet they did not stop until *Roe v Wade* legalized abortion.

When I was in seminary, I was the Illinois coordinator for the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. I marched around the

state capitol in Springfield, wrote a play about abortion laws and generally did what I could to keep the organization together. I learned a lot about the issues and heard many stories. Many stories.

What it would be like if *Roe v Wade* were reversed? For sure, abortion would not go away. Those who want to make abortion illegal would still have their bogeyman, there would still be posturing and hysteria. Abortion has been a part of human culture since the beginning and it will be with us through the end. If *Roe v Wade* were reversed, the practice of abortion would go back underground and would exist much the same as the practice of drinking at a speakeasy during Prohibition.

If *Roe v Wade* were reversed, the question of legality would go back to each state to decide. We might end up with a patchwork quilt of states that do and states that don't and states that sorta do and sorta don't.

One thing I know will happen is that, just like the in the days before *Roe v Wade*, the wealthy woman with resources will have easy and speedy access to an abortion. What *Roe v Wade* did was democratize access and make it available to the woman with no resources.

Clandestine networks would re-appear. With the internet so widely used to disseminate information, the knowledge of how to conduct a sterile procedure would be available to anyone and the incidence of botched abortions would probably be less than it was before *Roe*.

Speaking strictly from a legal perspective, *Roe v Wade* does not stand on bedrock. Its foundations are a bit shaky, especially when the Supreme Court leans more toward a "constructionist" viewpoint. My concern is not that *Roe v Wade* stand up to assault, but rather that abortion remains available to rich and poor women alike and that it not be criminalized. How society should accomplish that is for us to decide.

There are many issues to consider with an abortion, and I probably did not mention every one. I plead a lack of time. This sermon is long enough. OK, one last thing I gotta say about this and then I'll shut up. Until the benediction.

No one wants and abortion. Let me say that again, because we often forget that the decision to abort a pregnancy is not arrived at lightly. No one wants an abortion. It is not easy to do. It's not fun. It has residual psychological effects. No one wants an abortion.

HYMN 224, "Let Christmas Come"

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

BENEDICTION

After "The Donald" donated most of his fortune to charity and kept only a modest apartment for himself, he lived among the people as he had never lived before. He took out his own garbage, he cooked his own meals, he walked most everywhere he went and he joined the Y and learned to swim. And he changed his name to Don.

Only one thing bothered him. His neighbor was a young man, about 22 years old, who attended a local college. And you know how college students are. He liked music. Loud music.

One day, Don made an appointment to see Rabbi Mordecai. He sat down in the rabbi's office and said, "You tell me to love my neighbors, rabbi. I understand, truly, I do. I gave away my boats. I gave away my cars and airplanes and my private island in the Carribean. I donated it all to your favorite charity. I gave away everything except one apartment, one chair, one table and some clothes. I love my neighbors, truly I do. All but one. Rabbi, please help me! How can I love my neighbor when he constantly plays his stereo loud enough to wake the dead?"

Rabbi Mordecai asked Don, "Where is the Spirit of Life?"

Don thought for a moment and replied, "Everywhere."

Rabbi Mordecai replied, "Everywhere, yes. Your neighbor contains the Spirit of Life; it permeates every part of his body, down to the tips of his toes. You contain the Spirit of Life; it permeates every part of your body, down to the tips of your toes. Sometimes your foot stumbles on a stone, and you fall. Do you curse your foot and beat it with a stick for causing you to fall? No; you remain kind to your foot. Equally, even though he causes you pain, you should remain kind to your neighbor."

POSTLUDE: "Amaryllis"