Love that Bears Fruit

Pentecost 4 June 26, 2022

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Luke 9: 51-62

This weekend many people, particularly women, are reeling with the US [Supreme Court decision](https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/scotus-roe-reaction-women-1.6500499) to overturn the historic Roe vs Wade ruling which has allowed access to abortion for over 50 years. While it looked like this decision was coming, that doesn’t make the blow any easier when the decision was announced. We have moved to an understanding in both Canada and the US, that access to abortion is a human right. The decision doesn’t consider the kinds of situations where abortion may be compassionate or humane, such as rape or incest. It does not end abortion, just makes it less accessible and more unsafe, with more risk to loss of life. It also opens up the potential of further erosions of rights, as one of [the Justices](https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/ussc-dobbs-abortion-ruling-1.6495637), Clarence Thomas, even named that they need to revisit and overturn decisions on contraception, gay sex, and same sex marriage. While we realize abortion is a difficult issue, the important part of the issue that the United Church has identified is that a woman has a right to make choices about her own body, which is a matter between her and her doctor. This decision takes away that choice or at a minimum erodes it, and moves toward controlling women’s bodies. It is clear in the letter of Paul to the Galatians, that he was against forcing decisions about or controlling people’s bodies.

After Paul had visited the Galatians, a number of leaders emerged that started promoting that the new Gentile followers of Jesus needed to follow the Jewish law, especially around food and circumcision. Paul clearly states in the letter, and in this chapter, that you do not need to be circumcised to follow Jesus, Indeed, his thesis of the letter is that one does not need to be circumcised to be an authentic follower. He says, those who are circumcised (as converts) are of no benefit to Christ and have fallen away from grace. (5:2,4). He says the only thing that counts is faith working through love. In the section we read today, we hear that the whole law is summed up in one commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. Are we loving our neighbour if we are controlling them, their bodies? Paul also talks about living by the Spirit and not by the desires of the flesh. It is important to note here, that when Paul talks about the flesh, he is not dismissing the body, but the ways we become self-serving, or live in ways that are not loving and compassionate of others. It is about living out of fear rather than love.

Jesus embodied this as well. In our gospel reading today, he sets his face, his journey, toward Jerusalem, knowing that it will mean his death. He goes via Samaria, even though the Jewish people and Samaritans did not get along, in fact there was serious racial discrimination between them. While he gets rejected and the disciples were not able to prepare a welcome for Jesus and his followers, Jesus rejects the suggestion of James and John to rain down fire upon them. Jesus’ mission is not about vengeance but restoration and compassion. Later, people in these same Samaritan villages become followers in the stories in the book of Acts.

Then Jesus is approached by or invites three people to follow him. Each of them has an excuse or reason to not make the commitment, or at least not immediately. Jesus’ message is that following him means giving up things – a home, or family in these examples. While the response may seem harsh, it emphasizes the urgency of the mission for Jesus at the time. For us, it means that as followers, Jesus, and his mission must be a priority in our lives, and guide us in all we do. It is not about forsaking our families or obligations, but seeing them in a new light, as Bruce Epperly says of the [Adventurous Lectionary](https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2013/06/the-adventurous-lectionary-for-june-30-bold-requests-and-challenges/): “to love, but love without possession, to own without greed, to save but to give generously, and to care for loved ones but break out of patterns that stand in the way of God’s vision for your life.”

Following Jesus involves sacrifice. Paul understood this, who sacrificed all he knew to follow Jesus, after his dramatic conversion. He understands the power of God working in and through him, the continuing presence of Jesus, the Holy Spirit active in his and others’ lives. He names the benefits of the Spirit working in us, the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These qualities are not something we work towards having as Christians, but are evident when we are filled with the Spirit, the presence of Jesus in us, God with us. It is what is experienced when we are loving our neighbour as Jesus commanded.

If this is the case, maybe we can use these qualities as benchmarks for discerning if a decision, a position, a proclamation, an action is of or from God. Whenever we find love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control coming to fruition, we can have confidence that we are participating in, and responding favorably to, God’s call, living out God’s Shalom community or the kingdom. Is it more loving to force people to do what one believes is right or to allow people a choice? Paul was familiar with fundamentalism, as he had to deal with people who were convinced they were right and he was wrong, and who appear to have put at the centre of their faith an obedience to what we would call a fundamentalist understanding of the scriptures' authority. Paul focused on love and what really matters most to God. He preached a faith embodied by love. Fundamentalism, through obedience to the letter of the law, to rules, to doctrine, can lose sight of this. We can see this in the so called pro-life movement, in which we can see much inconsistency. Many who call themselves pro-life also support other positions that are not very life affirming.

What is pro-life about supporting access to guns, especially assault rifles like the AR-15 that have been used at recent mass shootings?

What is pro-life about a lack of support for women who find themselves pregnant and unable to look after a child? How can we support them to have the child and if they are open to allowing it to be adopted?

What is pro-life about supporting capital punishment?

What is pro-life about supporting militarism, and toxic masculinity?

What is pro-life about supporting laws that prevent transgender people from transitioning, or being who they are?

What is pro-life about resisting universal health care and support for all?

What would it mean to be consistently pro-life? **Shane Claiborne** activist and founder of the new monastic order, the Simple Way, says, that we need to be pro-life, from the womb to the tomb. Too often support and advocacy for children in the pro-life movement ends at birth. Maybe the issue is not so much about being pro-life or pro-choice, but pro-love - pro-love of neighbour. If we truly lived out Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbour, we might have a life-affirming consistency that would bear the fruit of the Spirit. May it be so.