

South Bay Community Church
Sermon Reflections
Courageous Conversations - Dear God, Are you Pro-Life or Pro-Choice?
16 & 17 July 2022
Lead Pastor Tammy Long

Scripture Texts: 2 Timothy 3:16; James 1:5

Sermon Preamble

We continue our sermon series on “Courageous Conversations.” The working title for this message is “Dear God, Are you Pro-Life or Pro-Choice?” The aim of this message is to know, feel, and do. We will know that God cares about every aspect of our lives, especially the hard questions, and God wants to guide us. We will feel by being open, humble, curious, and seeking. We will do by making space to listen to God through God’s Word and others, as we hold the space for this conversation so that we become doers of God’s Word. If we don’t discern a biblical response to the current division between pro-life and pro-choice, we fail to make a prophetic witness of the breadth and reach of God’s love, and we fail to represent God well. We need to be clear about a biblical perspective and response in order to respond to those seeking guidance, direction, and healing in this tumultuous and painful debate. As we celebrate the character of God, we know that God is bigger than our boxes; God is just; God is compassionate; God is love; God is forgiving; God gives freewill; God’s love is unconditional. God cares about life and every aspect of our lives; God wants to guide us with love and compassion; God is pro-life and pro-choice through the grace and truth of pro-love.

Divisiveness among Christians at Annual Business Meeting of the ECC Denomination

It was Friday, June 24th, and Pastor Tammy Long was at the business meeting convention of our denomination in Kansas City. As the meeting drew to a close, a gentleman was recognized to speak. With distinct excitement in his voice, he announced the news that the U.S. Supreme Court had just overturned Roe v Wade. As he announced this court ruling, there was eerie silence, perhaps because the people in the room were just taking it in, or processing what they heard and what it meant, or processing what the speaker was expecting from them. Pastor Tammy Long heard a woman behind her say, “He’s saying that like it’s a GOOD thing.” Then with a mixture of sadness and frustration in her voice, she added, “That is not a good thing.” Pastor Long was feeling a sense of eggshells on an issue they were not in one accord. On this issue, among committed Christians, there are different perspectives and convictions. After the comment by the gentleman, the Chair of the meeting simply adjourned the meeting. The gentleman made an assumption about the group, and they did not know exactly how to respond.

Divisiveness in the legal system

In Washington, D.C. immediately after the ruling, protestors on both sides flooded the plaza in front of the Supreme Court building. As you would know, this issue, debate, and division is not going away. As states codify what they are doing, legal ramifications arise from some states banning abortions and some states allowing it.

With that come ramifications of what will be considered criminal activity and who will be accused. For example, will it be criminal for a person in a banned state to go to an open state? What about the facility performing such an operation? What about the persons who assist? What about obtaining an abortion pill on the internet, and how will that work in states where abortion is banned? Can the internet be trusted for such health matters? What about the likely explosion in underground and black markets?

Despite the Supreme Court ruling, protests and petitions will continue. For those supporting the Supreme Court decision, this is not a matter of, we won and are done. Issues of enforcement and safety

abound. Some people will still do what they want in holding to one's convictions. Both perspectives will continue.

These issues will continue to ripple for us, God's people, as we continue to consider how to respond. How do we engage with non-believers around this topic? What do we say to our young people who are forming their thoughts and views from all the influences they have access to?

Key Points in the Courageous Conversations Sermon Series

The point of this series is two-fold. First we always begin with Book, the Bible. In humility, we listen and apply God's Word as best we can. We apply both God's written Word and God's Living Word as we look to Jesus. We may not agree on the interpretation or application of the text, but with integrity and sincerity as followers of Christ, the Book is where we start.

Second, the goal of this series is to suspend our perspective for a moment in order to truly listen and learn from one another with humility, love, and respect. We can do this even if we agree to disagree.

Seeking a Biblical Perspective

The truth is that in the Bible, you will not find a specific moral pronouncement or legislative position for or against abortion. However, as followers of Jesus, we seek to align with God's ways as best we can in applying biblical principles that we believe are true according to God's Word.

Prayerful humility becomes a must, because in our humanity, we don't always get things right. Legalistically, we can get so focused on the letter of the law that we miss the spirit of the law. We miss the spirit, like the religious leaders in Jesus' day when they took issue with Jesus healing on the Sabbath. Often things do not fit neatly into the little boxes we want to put them in. There are nuances and gray areas that need prayerful discernment and the wisdom of God.

"If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking" (James 1:5). God not rebuking for asking means that there is no dumb question. There is no room for the attitude that I should know this one. If you are not sure and need wisdom, it is OK to ask. We get ourselves in trouble when we think we know and rush in with our own thoughts, not even pausing to seek God on our perspective. If you want to be wise, God says, ask me! God honors the heart that sincerely wants to be aligned with God's heart. God will find a way to guide us when we ask, and God guides us through the Word in the Bible.

Recall from our message two weeks ago that everything begins and ends with this book, the Bible. "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Bible teaches us what is true, corrects us, guides us, helps us do what is right, and prepares us for everything we need in life, including how to navigate the complex realities of day-to-day living. We are still growing and learning how to understand and apply the breadth and complexities of God.

The Pro-Life Perspective

All lives matter because all are created in the image of God

As we look to God's Word and seek God's wisdom on abortion and women's rights, the truth is that there is a biblical basis to support pro-life. We know that life is precious to God. God created life. Life is a gift that is precious, sacred, and a miracle. "God created mankind in his own image. In the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26). Therefore, every life matters. The total span of life matters. All ages and stages of growth and development matter, and for Pro-lifers, that includes the unborn. For a true pro-lifer, all lives matter because all lives are created by God, for God, and in the image of God. Unfortunately, some pro-life advocates seem more

interested in unborn lives than all lives. God's Word in the Bible is clear that all lives matter and are precious to God, for God so loved the world.

God knitted us together in our mother's womb

In addition to the text that we are made in the image of God, Pro-life advocates frequently point to the text where David speaks of God knitting us together in our mother's womb. "You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous. How well I know it. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed." (Psalm 139:13-17).

Life or soul even before the womb

Another scripture used by Pro-Life advocates is God's declaration that God knew Jeremiah before he was formed in his mother's womb. "I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5).

From a Pro-choice perspective, one could say that this Jeremiah passage is not affirming physical life in the womb, but speaks to the reality of a soul, and God's plans and providence over our lives. For Psalm 139 written by David, the Pro-choice perspective would state that the passage is a poetic recognition of God as creator of all; the passage is not stating when physical human life begins in God's eyes. These perspectives are not to discredit a Pro-life application, but to encourage us to study and discern what God is saying as we listen and seek wisdom from God. How we interpret and apply passages can differ. We can read into a passage what we want it to say. That is why we need to approach God's Word with humility and seek God's wisdom to teach and guide us.

Life begins at conception

Returning to the Pro-life perspective, if you interpret these passages as meaning that life begins at conception, you can follow the logic and biblical path that life must be protected. You can understand why Pro-life advocates speak of abortion as murder. Then the commandment of "thou shalt not murder" becomes another biblical application.

This message is not trying to argue or convince you of anything. This message is inviting us to follow the biblical logic and application most frequently used by Pro-life advocates so we can reflect on it afresh, listen for God, and enter into these conversations thoughtfully, respectfully, and lovingly. Many Pro-lifers are sincere, love God with all their hearts, and are diligently seeking to apply scripture with compassion and conviction in the name of justice for the unborn.

Some have a hard time when the Pro-life perspective is expressed with hostility, arrogance, guilt, shame, and judgement toward those who see this matter differently. It is hard to hear the stories of threats to abortion clinics, hurled accusations of patrons going to hell, or the demonization of those who believe differently. That is not behavior reflecting and representing a loving God. In this message, we are seeking to reflect the perspective of those who are sincerely seeking to apply what they understand to be God's Word regarding our responsibility to the unborn.

Whether we agree or disagree, if we are listening and open, we can follow the biblical thought and heart behind Pro-life advocacy. That thought defines life as beginning at conception. We can follow how this become a justice issue of advocating and speaking up for the voiceless unborn in the same way that God's Word instructs us to speak up for the marginalized, widows, orphans, children, and poor, because all lives are precious to God.

Scientific advances in *utero* development and ultrasound images

Protecting the unborn can become even more compelling with advances in science and technology. As we learn more about *utero* development and see images of ultrasounds, we see that human gestation and development through birth is truly an incredible miracle.

We can look at God's Word and find a biblical case for the sanctity of life supporting the Pro-life perspective. It is also true that we can look at God's Word and find a biblical case for the sanctity of life on behalf of pregnant women supporting the Pro-choice perspective.

The Pro-choice perspective

One life in pregnancy

Pro-choice advocates consider the symbiotic oneness of pregnancy. They raise the question of when does one life become two lives. At what point do the rights of the unborn become a factor? In other words, when does life begin?

Those with a Pro-choice perspective regard life in this world beginning when a baby can survive outside the womb, as they take their first breath. They point to God breathing life into Adam and Eve. "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Genesis 2:7).

Autonomy for the body

Pro-choice advocates refer to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, who you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). From a Pro-choice perspective, God has given us autonomy and responsibility to care for and steward our bodies. No doubt that we are to do so for God's glory. To do so is our responsibility and choice. Pro-lifers can take this verse to mean that we do not have control over our bodies; the bodies belong to God. The Pro-choice perspective may respond that the decision should be between the pregnant woman and God, without the government intervention. The government is not God.

God offers free will

The larger biblical basis for believers who are pro-choice is that God gives us free will. God does not demand only one way, but invites us to choose the way with love. "Love does not insist on its own way" (1 Corinthians 13:5a). Joshua told the people of Israel to choose who they were going to serve. "And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day who you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the regions beyond the River; or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15). We serve a God who invites us into relationship to follow God's Will and Way; as followers, we believe it is for our good, but ultimately the choice is ours.

Pro-choice proponents contend that to subject, obligate, and enforce the personal and fundamental freedom of bodily autonomy is against the character of God. Free will is at the center of what God offers each and every person.

Women's rights as justice for the pregnant woman

Advocates of pro-choice seek justice for the woman who is pregnant. She needs medical care, support, and information as she faces these difficult decisions. There is often not equal access to such support and services.

About 15 years ago, Pastor Long's friend, a sister in Christ, who worked for Planned Parenthood, had a conversation. She shared stories of women. Some were frightened, uncertain and not sure where to turn. Some felt they had no one to talk to, especially their parents. Some were conflicted about what they believed, but now found themselves in the very situation for which that they had judged others. There were also those who knew what they wanted to do. The friend told Pastor Long about how she listened, cried, prayed when they asked, encouraged them to talk with someone, and held their hands. Without question, this friend was love in action. Recently, there was an article about an abortion clinic in Alabama; most of the 11 staff members are black and deeply faithful Christian women. Their cases include a pregnant woman who has cancer, but has to make a choice because she would not be able to continue chemotherapy if she kept the baby. What about the 13 year old who had been raped, was in shock, and didn't know what to do? What about the woman living under the

poverty line, and now questioning how she would feed one more mouth? These issues are so much bigger than the little boxes we want to place them in.

Where we can agree and Next steps

Advocates of Pro-choice and advocates of Pro-life both see an issue of justice and compassion. Advocates of Pro-Life are seeking justice and compassion for the unborn who cannot speak for themselves. Advocates of Pro-choice are seeking justice and compassion for the woman who is pregnant needing medical care, support, and information as she faces decisions.

God calls us to be a prophetic witness from God. “And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:17).

What is next as we continue these courageous conversations?

-Learn. Consider views other than your own with an open mind. Consider science and what we are continuing to learn about human development. Consider the factors of mental and emotional health, as well as physical health. Consider justice and inequality. What are the justice and equality ramifications of these decisions, including who is impacted, who benefits, and who suffers?

-Listen to hearts, perspectives, and logic of others. It is especially important to hear the next generations. Listen to your own heart, asking the Holy Spirit to give you wisdom.

-Look to the Word, both scripture and the Living Word of Jesus. Consider how Jesus responded to people, addressed people, and loved on people. Even while we were still sinners, Jesus loved us and died for us. In short, what would Jesus do?

-Love in giving and receiving. Without love, our speaking is a bunch of noise. Love covers and multitude of sins that we and others do. Love heals; love forgives; love is justice in action. Let us show the love of Christ to others and to ourselves and grow closer to God. Let us seek to manifest the love of God in this broken and hurting world around the issue of Pro-life vs. Pro-choice.

Dear God, are you Pro-life or Pro-choice?

God is both and neither Pro-life and/or Pro-choice. We cannot contain God in those little boxes and cubicles. God is Pro-love which encompasses so much more. That is why it is essential that we continue to study and apply God’s Word and God’s Wisdom as we seek to humbly walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Sermon Preamble

-What aspects of the character of God can we share with a broken world as they divide on the question of Pro-Life or Pro-Choice? How should we present the character of God to both advocates of Pro-life and Pro-choice as they debate the question of women’s rights and abortion? In our prophetic witness, why does our responsibility to present God as pro-love take precedent over presenting God as contained in the little box as either Pro-life or Pro-choice?

Divisiveness among Christians at Annual Business Meeting of the ECC Denomination

-Describe an occasion that you have witnessed divisiveness among committed Christians, either through speech, emotions, or not revealed, over the issue of Pro-life or Pro-choice. Instead of trying to win a debate on the issue of Women’s rights and abortion, what actions and behaviors among followers of Christ would be in keeping with our call from God?

Divisiveness in the legal system

-Why is the Pro-life perspective, at least in the media, often presented as the only Christian perspective?
-After the overturning of Roe v Wade by the Supreme Court, what are some of the rampant divisiveness we can expect in the U.S. legal system on unequal enforcement and safety?
-What actions and behaviors are in keeping with God’s call for us to be prophetic witnesses to nonbelievers?

Key Points in the Courageous Conversations Sermon Series

-In our Courageous Conversations Sermon Series, why must the Bible be where we start in forming our perspective?

-Why is it important to suspend our perspective in order to truly listen and learn from one another?

Seeking a Biblical Perspective

-Discuss the lack of a specific moral pronouncement or position for or against abortion. When there is not a specific tidbit of scripture as a biblical pronouncement on abortion, how important are other factors such as context, specifics of the biblical world, and the main purpose of that section of scripture in determining the principle for application to our world today?

The Pro-Life Perspective

-Discuss the clear pronouncement in Genesis 1:26 that all human lives are created in the image of God. What factors must be considered in whether this scripture applies to the unborn, and if so, at what point in their development? As followers of God and Jesus Christ, how can those with a Pro-life perspective better witness to the world that God cares about all lives of all ages, not just the unborn?

-Reread Psalm 139. Is the main point a specific declaration that life begins at conception or at a specific point in time in the mother's womb? What is the dominant principle of Psalm 139? From a biblical perspective, why might this not be the final word on all of the varied circumstances of abortion?

-Review the biblical principle of our formation with God's thoughts prior to conception. This principle is in Psalm 139:15-17, Jeremiah 1:5, and Ephesians 1:4. What do these verses declare about the beginning of physical life or, alternatively, declare about our souls that continue for some amount of time after conception?

-What is the importance of determining that life begins at conception, that life must be protected, and abortion is equivalent to murder?

-We are called to witness to the character of God for justice. How does the Pro-life perspective witness for the justice of God in the same way that God instructs us to speak up for the marginalized and poor?

-How does scientific and technological advances in utero development and ultrasounds inform us on physical development of the unborn?

The Pro-choice perspective

-Reread Genesis 2:7. Is the biblical principle that physical life does not begin until after leaving the mother's womb? What is the principle behind this scripture?

-Reread 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. If the unborn is not a separate life (one becoming two), what is the source and character of the pregnant woman's body? God and the Holy Spirit are active in our bodies. When should the government intervene?

-What is the importance that God offers free will, and ultimately the choice is ours?

-How can we, as followers of Christ, exhibit love in action to those facing resolution of extraordinarily difficult or impossible situations from carrying a pregnancy to birth? Why are these issues of God as Pro-love so much bigger in God's Will than confining God in the little box of Pro-life vs. Pro-choice?

Where we can agree and Next steps

-How are the Pro-life and Pro-choice advocates both agreeing on the need for justice, compassion, and God's call for us to be prophetic witnesses to a broken, divided world, on this issue?

-Continue the courageous conversation on women's rights and abortion. Create a safe space for open honesty; truly listen and seek to understand; hold uncomfortable tension with prayer and humility; agree to disagree with love, grace, and compassion, without judgement; affirm and maintain confidentiality. In addition to the questions above, the questions to discuss and apply to your personal life are: What did you hear? What was new to you? What questions do you have? What is stirring as you ponder God's Word with wisdom?

Dear God, are you Pro-life or Pro-choice?

Why is it important to break out of confining God is the little box of Pro-life or Pro-choice? What does it mean that God is both and neither? How is God as Pro-love more important in our prophetic witness?