

SUNDAY FOCUS

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Pressing societal question: What greets emerging lives?

On a recent visit to move my young adult children home from college, my daughter Katie and I sat down to talk about state bans on abortion. She shared with me that she and her college friends are trying to understand the reasons behind such bans. As she conveyed some of their conversations to me, I learned a great deal from her. Of interest in our conversation was the rationale provided for the Alabama ban. The rationale as laid out by lawmakers in the new law is one that seeks to align itself with the history of civil rights.

"In the United States Declaration of Independence, the principle of natural law that 'all men are created equal' was articulated. The self-evident truth found in natural law, that all human beings are equal from creation, was at least one of the bases for the anti-slavery movement, the women's suffrage movement, the Nuremberg war crimes trials and the American civil rights movement. If those movements had not been able to appeal to the truth of universal human equality, they could not have

been successful." Section 2(d)

The bill also likens abortion to mass murders throughout history.

"It is estimated that 6,000,000 Jewish people were murdered in German concentration camps during World War II; 3,000,000 people were executed by Joseph Stalin's regime in Soviet gulags; 2,500,000 people were murdered during the Chinese 'Great Leap Forward' in 1958; 1,500,000 to 3,000,000 people were murdered by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia during the 1970s; and approximately 1,000,000 people were murdered during the Rwandan genocide in 1994. All of these are widely acknowledged to have been crimes against humanity. By comparison, more than 50 million babies have been aborted in the United States since the Roe decision in 1973, more than three times the number who were killed in German death camps, Chinese purges, Stalin's gulags, Cambodian killing fields and the Rwandan genocide combined." Section 2(i)

As I read the language of this bill, I can feel its intent



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to persuade me that I would not want to deny equity to another person. I don't want to deny equity to another. I can also feel its intent to persuade me that I would not want to extinguish life. I seek to honor life and all its dimensions.

But I am wondering if the bill's language is entirely congruent for the unborn life carried by a mother. After all, the unborn life is remarkably dependent on the healthy womb and healthy brain of the woman who carries life. Though we are all interdependent in our life as civilians and human beings, the umbilical cord and shared chemical exchange between mother and child is much more intimate and complicated. Between mother and unborn life there is an increased intimacy and vulnerability. The vulnerabilities of the mother whether biological,

psychological or chemical can be writ large upon the life that is carried by her.

Further, the unborn life is remarkably dependent on the network of family and community that waits to receive life into the world. If that network is not resourced, ready and intent on nurturing, the unborn life carried becomes an emerging life uncared for. Without a resourced, ready and intent network, life itself can feel like an isolated prison in which one's humanity languishes and dies before the body perishes. Such experiences can be cruel and unusual for a young emerging life.

No one wants to deny another person equity. No one wants to preempt life. But life carried is not enough unless life is *cared for*. Only a woman and the network of those who love her can determine if life can be carried *and* cared for.

For the record, I sit on the Community Board of Planned Parenthood. I do this because women's health and the health of their families is a primary concern for me as a citizen and pastor. Planned Parenthood is premier in its

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provision of comprehensive, non-anxious care for women. It is premier in its empowerment of women to make important decisions about their capacity to carry life in the womb and to care for life after it emerges from the womb. It helps women and their networks plan for what they're capable of. In so doing Planned Parenthood believes in the intelligence and decision-making ability of women and their loving communities. Presbyterians within PC(USA) have many different opinions on this issue, and I do not come close to representing them all. But our Presbyterian tradition has taken a long and careful look at issues of the choice involved in carrying and caring for life. One of our fundamental beliefs is that "God alone is Lord of the conscience." In other words, human beings are intelligent and discerning in their intimate relationship with God. The role of the church is to be in sacred conversation with the conscience of each person to strengthen his or her relationship with God and a purposeful life.

Unfortunately, those who oppose women's right to choose about carrying life may be primarily persuaded by religious voices who have over-simplified complex circumstances. Those same religious voices have, in an audacious power move, declared to know the mind of God, asserting God is not on the side of abortion. To stabilize this outrageous assertion, some go further, declaring human beings should make no decisions about life or death. Those decisions are God's to make. I have heard this opinion espoused by those who oppose the work of Planned Parenthood. When we hear this, caution is in order. It is worth noting that any theology declaring to know the mind of God is deeply flawed with hubris. Further, on matters of life and death, it is important to acknowledge that, as a culture, we intervene and make important decisions all the time to mitigate suffering and sustain well-being. If we are to critique the interventionist model, we must be consistent how we do this when we consider our medicines, surgeries, when we make legal decisions about end of life.

I believe in life at the atomic level of our existence. And I believe that abortion extinguishes a particular expression of life when a woman

decides that, in a particular season of her life, she cannot either carry or care for life. Even so, the decision to have an abortion holds an important place in a society that values and trusts their women and the loving communities around them. I have known countless women who made the decision to abort and went on to become committed, loving mothers and grandmothers. When they are not receiving cultural shame, many women find the courage to share the truth. Many understand the decision to have been appropriate given circumstances as informed by conscience and community.

Though I do not speak for all in my tradition, I value our sentiment that God alone is Lord of the conscience and I seek to support and serve the conscience of women and their networks of partners, children and families as they determine if they can welcome life from the womb. To be sure, these women feel the tingling of "life to be carried" in their nerves and know the complexity of their circumstances that will be required to care for life as it emerges. Women are intelligent and capable of choosing. Of all the ways that life moves through us and around us, perhaps most of all life longs to be welcomed and nurtured by us — not mandated to arrive under obligation.

The bills in Alabama and other places make me nervous, even scared. There's a deep distrust in the capacity of women, their conscience and their loving communities to make important decisions about life in all its dimensions. The culture of shame around abortion keeps some women mired in fear that prevents their voices from informing our collective wisdom. True democracy believes in the capacity of people to make decisions of all sorts. True democracy does not seek to curtail civil rights by banning behavior at the state or federal level. True democracy attends to the spirit and environment in which we all live as moral creatures. For we long to do the right and moral thing as we assess our capacity and conscience. Safe, legal abortion is a necessary service as women and their loving communities consider the challenge of carrying and caring for life. Katie and I are wondering, perhaps others are as well, what exactly are states like Alabama banning? Wouldn't it be ironic if they were banning the very experience of civil rights that they declared to be protecting?

Leslie King is pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Waco.