

3rd Sunday after Pentecost – June 26, 2022
Luke 9:51-61 and Galatians 5:1; 13-25

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I start my sermon preparation every week with a text study on Monday morning, and I will tell you that this past Monday I had absolutely no intention of talking about abortion this morning. But it is the elephant in the room. It is what everyone is talking about and thinking about in the wake of the much-anticipated Supreme Court decision handed down on Friday that overturned *Roe-versus-Wade* after almost fifty years on the books and declared that there is no constitutionally guaranteed right to an abortion in the United States. Since this has been cast not only as a political issue, but primarily as moral and religious one, I think it would be irresponsible to ignore it. So what to say? First, I think that in spite of some rhetoric to the contrary, abortion is not an easy or a simple issue. Pregnancy begins with two cells that come together and over the course of nine months develop into a human baby. When does human life begin? Is it at conception, as some now argue? Is it at birth, as the Catholic Church used to believe before the modern era? Or is it somewhere in between? And if somewhere between, where do you draw the line? The first trimester? “Viability” at about 24 weeks? Or should it be when there is a heartbeat at 6 weeks, or at “quickening” at around 18 weeks? Wherever you draw the line, it seems abundantly clear that those two original cells are not the same as a full-term baby. They may be the beginning of human life, they may be a “potential” human life, as the majority opinion of the Supreme Court stated, but those two cells are not recognizably the same thing as a newborn baby. The second question to address here is who should have jurisdiction? Who should have control over a pregnant woman’s body? Should it be the woman in question, and her alone? Should it be the woman and her doctor? If she is married, should her husband make the decision, as would have been the social norm at the time the U.S. Constitution was written, and for at least a century after that? Should it be the government that has sole jurisdiction here? Or should it be some combination of some or all of the above? Again, not a simple question. And then there is the question of what to do, and who decides, when a woman’s life is endangered by her pregnancy, or when it is determined that a fetus has fatal defects that would not allow it to live once disconnected from the mother? And there are other possible complicating circumstances. The status quo that the *Roe-versus-Wade* decision established 49 years ago, for better or for worse, was something of a compromise. It did not give a woman complete autonomy, an absolute right to end a pregnancy at any time. There were limits. “Viability” was the line that was drawn, the point at which the unborn life was protected by the state, except in extenuating circumstances. In 1991, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, our national church body, adopted a social statement on abortion. It is easily found and downloaded from the ELCA web site. It is a statement that recognizes abortion as morally complex based on some of the issues I have already laid out. It values and seeks to protect both the life of the unborn and the life and liberty of women. It encourages women with unintended pregnancies to continue the pregnancy in most circumstances, but it also recognizes that there can be sound reasons for ending a pregnancy and seeks to give guidance in such cases. (Notice the language, “encourages,” which implies that women should have some choice in the matter.) It also recognizes the related importance of preventing unwanted pregnancies through education and contraception, and also of supporting life *after* birth. Friday’s Supreme Court decision tips the balance between these sometimes-competing values that our church body has identified. Under the clear influence of religious views significantly different from ours, the court majority has rejected a constitutional right protecting the life and liberty of pregnant women, and will now allow individual states to take away from women the moral deliberation that our church’s social statement calls for. And because of so-called trigger

laws, that has already happened in a number of states. This amounts to imposing the religious views of some on the population as a whole.

That is a problem constitutionally, it seems to me, in a country that guarantees freedom of religion. But it is also, I think, a perversion of Jesus' own teaching and example. And it just so happens that today's Gospel reading is a case in point. At the beginning of this reading today, Luke tells us that Jesus had "set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jerusalem was the epicenter of the Jewish religion, the place where God's temple, God's house on earth, was located. Jesus and his disciples, I don't need to remind you, were Jewish. Jesus' mission was first and foremost to and for the Jewish people, who were then meant to be his partners in continuing his mission and spreading his message to all people, people like you and me, for instance. To get to Jerusalem from Galilee, where Jesus and his disciples lived, it was necessary to travel through Samaritan territory. Samaritans shared a common history with Galilean and Judean Jews, but their religious views had diverged. The center of Samaritan religion was Mount Gerizim in Samaria. Jesus has a conversation about this with a Samaritan woman in John chapter six. So, because Jesus was headed to Jerusalem and not to Mt. Gerizim, one of the Samaritan towns on the way refused to receive Jesus. This was religious prejudice on their part. "You do not share our religion, so you are not welcome here." One more thing to understand here is the importance of hospitality in the ancient world. They didn't have Super 8 or Marriot Hiltons or their equivalents in the ancient world. Travelers depended upon the hospitality of those whose land they passed through. And this was not just a matter of good manners. Travel in ancient times was a dangerous undertaking. It exposed you to bandits and to wild animals, both of which were serious threats to life and limb. So to refuse hospitality was to expose travelers to these dangers. The Samaritans, then, started this fight. And Jesus' disciples want to finish it. "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" they ask Jesus. In other words, "can we murder them, Jesus?" I mean, it's what you do with heretics, isn't it? It's a time-honored tradition. It's a persistent instinct among religious people of all stripes, and the reason that some people are convince that religion of any kind should be rejected. Although I'd argue that even non-religious people have this instinct as well.

Jesus' reaction is the key to this whole passage. He rebukes the disciples. This is not mere disapproval. He lays into them and categorically rejects their suggestion. The second half of this reading is Jesus urging those who would follow him to let go of such instincts, and to separate themselves from all those commonsense, worldly attachments and allegiances that privilege some over others. If you find Jesus' words challenging here, you're catching the point. Jesus uses stern words. The Kingdom of God is a serious thing that requires a radical change in life from us, a different way of living from the ways of this world. But Jesus does not force the kingdom upon us, and he does not authorize us his disciples to drive people into the Kingdom of God by force. And he certainly does not authorize us to wage holy war, calling down fire on those who oppose his rule.

How then are we to step into the future in light of this ruling? First, I'd suggest reading the ELCA statement on abortion. Second, I'd recommend engaging in your own moral deliberation on the matter that the statement suggests, including on issues that the statement says need continuing discernment. Third, live out of the convictions of your faith in this matter to advocate for the lives and liberties of all involved, and to support those who are called upon to make difficult decisions. Finally, recognized that whatever course of action you choose to take, none of us are without sin, or without need for God's ongoing mercy and forgiveness in our own lives. Let us trust in God's promise of life, love, and forgiveness for Jesus' sake, and do not give in to the temptation to despair. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.