

Have any of you seen the PBS show *Call the Midwife*? It's a wonderful, thought-provoking period drama series produced by the BBC and aired on PBS. It is set in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and is a well-researched historical fiction series set at Nonnatus House, an Anglican convent dedicated to women's reproductive health in East London. (Raymond Nonnatus being the patron saint of childbirth, midwives, children, and pregnant women.) The main characters are Anglican nuns and lay midwives who work together to advocate for and support pregnant women who are in critical medical situations. Aside from the brilliant writing and acting, what draws me in is that the main characters gather at meals and in prayer to explore the complexity of ethical and moral situations in which they find themselves.

In *Call the Midwife*, abortion is illegal, but not inaccessible, and not surprising, extremely risky. Yet this most recent season has highlighted storylines and the varying circumstances that lead several characters to consider terminating their pregnancies: maternal health, poverty, social stigma of unmarried mothers, mental illness, inaccessibility to birth control, and domestic violence.

It is interesting that the fictionalized storylines of this show are hot topics in our national news.

In the show, the main characters repeatedly encounter situations that do not neatly fit into their moral or ethical world view. While the mothers face impossible choices, the nuns and midwives are caught between their patients' physical and mental wellbeing and their legal obligations. The complexity of the moral and ethical options are highlighted as the show's leading characters are not in agreement about whether abortion ought to be legal, much less accessible.

But in every case, the nuns and midwives respond to the needs of their patients with grace, empathy and compassion. The nuns and midwives of Nonnatus House are constantly evolving and changing due to the stories and circumstances of those they serve.

The sharing of stories, both fiction and non-fiction, have the power to shape the world-views of their hearers. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are

composed of one story after another, describing the love of God for all of God's children, and urging that God's children respond to that love of God by loving each other. Jesus, as we know, taught in large part using stories related to issues his hearers struggled with: fear, loss, pain, stress, death, abandonment, resentment, judgment, pride... And through his stories which have endured for two millennia, our hearts and minds are opened to the Love of God, and we are given a blueprint as to how to conduct ourselves in the here and now.

In this morning's Gospel story, for example, (and for the second Sunday in a row) we find ourselves back in the upper room. Isn't it odd that in the liturgical season that the Church celebrates the risen Christ, we're back where we were in Holy Week, on Maundy Thursday, feasting with Jesus at the last supper? Clearly there's something here that is relevant *now* – now that Jesus has died and has risen from the dead – that is important for us to pay attention to.

John's Gospel tells the story of how Jesus has gone to Jerusalem for the Passover. His twelve disciples are gathered there at the table. And Jesus knows what is going to happen. He knows that by the end of the night one of them will betray him to the authorities. Another will deny him three times. And all of them will leave him in his hour of greatest pain.

In a world where his disciples were often surrounded by messages of retaliation, vengeance, or eye for an eye cries for justice, Jesus embodies a different message: Jesus breaks the bread and pours the cup. He eats with them. He blesses them. Extending to them love and grace, his compassion and abiding affection. He shares his peace with his disciples. This is a formative story for the followers of Jesus ~ one that we hold so dear that we enter into it and participate in it through the Eucharist whenever we gather as a community.

Through the stories in *Call the Midwife*, I see a vision of how the Church should be: I see characters who serve those with whom they fundamentally disagree. I see people of very different perspectives and ideologies break bread with each other and pray for one another. They love, they weep, they care, they heal, they pray, and they stand by those whom they serve through joy and grief and everything in between. Some do it out of religious conviction. Others because they simply believe it to be the right thing to do. It's an inspiring portrait of the Church – they aren't perfect to be sure, but they are beautiful in their struggle to be and do their best.

I acknowledge that I'm an idealist. I always have been. I want to believe the best of people, and I admit that I fully expect others to do the right thing, to play nice, to treat others with respect and dignity. But in these recent national and legal debates, I struggle to hear the voice of Jesus ... the voice of compassion and grace ... (and not just when women have an unwanted or unviable pregnancy.) For better or worse, the loudest voices are the ones who get the attention. And the voices of kindness, respect, empathy, compassion are sadly not the loudest ones I've heard from any corner of the ring.

And this is why I'm grateful that my attention is drawn back to the lessons of Maundy Thursday. That was the night that Jesus spelled out the commandment that gave the night its name (Maundy meaning 'mandate' or 'commandment.')

"I give you a new commandment," says Jesus, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The irony is that sometimes, especially in the public arena, Christians don't behave in very loving ways.

The reality is that we are often our own worst public relations people. Jesus told us that our love for one another, our kindness, our affinity for hospitality to the stranger, our compassion and desire to extend grace and mercy to a hurting world ... *that* would be the mark of how people would know us. *That* would be our calling card. And yet, sometimes we Christians do just the opposite.

In the last few weeks, we've heard about what is happening in Georgia and Alabama and elsewhere. Abortion rights are being revisited and contested again. And in those places it is primarily those who identify themselves as "Christian" who are driving this new legislation: their tone is angry, their approach uncompromising, and they come across as uninformed. *And on the other side* are those whose tone is angry, their approach is uncompromising, and they are making personal attacks against the legislators rather than appealing to what they believe to be the merits of their cause.

Now, I'll be the first to point out that there are good, faithful Christians who have deep convictions that abortion is immoral, and there are good, faithful Christians who have deep convictions that women ought to have a right to choose to end a pregnancy. And there are good, faithful Christians who have believe both – I doubt we're of one mind even within our own parish. And as Christians are taught to do when we deeply disagree, we are to come together and join in prayer, kneel

side by side at the altar rail and eat of the bread and drink of the cup. We are to bless each other. Just as Jesus instructed us on that first Maundy Thursday.

However, those who are getting the bulk of the attention (on both sides of the debate) haven't been all that Christ-like in their language or their actions. And they do not speak for the majority of Christians I know. They are not reflecting the values and convictions of our Church. So I would like to offer a different voice ~ the collective voice of the Episcopal Church ~ that has emerged from studying Scripture, listening, prayerful discernment, and loving disagreement within our community over the past 45 years or so.

First, I'd like to note that I'm proud of our Church, that as an institution composed of believers who espouse the entire spectrum of beliefs regarding abortion, has (in my opinion) found a holy middle way that is theologically sound, honors and advocates for the sanctity of all life, and respects women's autonomy.

And I'd like to point out that we have developed liturgies that call us to great pastoral sensitivity to the needs of women and others involved in decisions relating to abortion, mishaps of pregnancy, and infertility. This ministry is particularly important in situations in which there is an inability to become pregnant or that result in the unplanned end of a pregnancy. As a Church, we recognize and honor that all of these have a tragic dimension, and we as a community of faith at St. Peter's are here to support those of you who know this truth through lived experience.

At General Convention in 1994, the following was affirmed (parts have been paraphrased):

We believe that all human life is sacred from its inception until death. The Church takes seriously its obligation to help form the consciences of its members concerning this sacredness. Human life, therefore, should be initiated only advisedly and in full accord with this understanding of the power to conceive and give birth which is bestowed by God.

The Book of Common Prayer affirms that the birth of a child is a joyous and solemn occasion in the life of a family. It is also an occasion for rejoicing in the Christian community (p. 440).

As such, we affirm responsible family planning. The Church has declared that we emphatically oppose abortion as a means of birth control, family planning, sex selection, or any reason of mere convenience.

In those cases where an abortion is being considered, members of this Church are urged to seek the dictates of their conscience in prayer, to seek the advice and counsel of members of the Christian community and where appropriate, the sacramental life of this Church.

Whenever members of this Church are consulted with regard to a problem pregnancy, they are to explore, with grave seriousness, with the person or persons seeking advice and counsel, as alternatives to abortion, other positive courses of action, including, but not limited to, the following possibilities: the parents raising the child; another family member raising the child; making the child available for adoption.

All that said, we believe that legislation concerning abortions will not address the root of the problem. We therefore express our deep conviction that any proposed legislation on the part of national or state governments regarding abortions must take special care to see that the individual conscience is respected, and that the responsibility of individuals to reach informed decisions in this matter is acknowledged and honored.¹

At its General Convention in 2018, the Episcopal Church passed a resolution that calls for “women’s reproductive health and reproductive health procedures to be treated as all other medical procedures,” and “that equitable access to women’s health care, including women’s reproductive health care, is an integral part of a woman’s struggle to assert her dignity and worth as a human being.”²

Regardless of where you are in your personal convictions regarding abortion, it is a sobering fact that one in four women in the US has had an abortion by the age of 45.³ Which is to say that each one of us knows many people who have stories that ought to be heard and considered; but our culture makes it so that these stories are difficult if not impossible to tell: women who have undergone an abortion are stigmatized and so it is taboo to discuss.

¹ General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of...The Episcopal Church, Indianapolis, 1994* (New York: General Convention, 1995), pp. 323-25. https://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=1994-A054

² <https://www.vbinder.net/resolutions/D032?house=hd&lang=en>

³ <https://www.guttmacher.org/news-release/2017/abortion-common-experience-us-women-despite-dramatic-declines-rates>

And so, in place of meaningful conversation with people we know and love, we lean into the safety of popular fictionalized stories such as *Call the Midwife* to watch in private to tell us the heart-wrenching stories that real women endure.

Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” But the peace of the Lord cannot be realized when we are busy beating each other over the head with our own narrow perspectives, when we are silencing the voices of those whose lived experience can meaningfully inform public discourse, when we don’t invite honest, safe, respectful storytelling from our beloveds on both sides of the issue.

Jesus came among us, taught us through his actions and his stories, broke the bread and poured the cup, died and rose again, not to unite us in our religious convictions (because, let’s face it, we’re going to disagree – even within our own community), but Jesus did all this for the sole purpose of teaching us how to love one another.

In the words of The Rt. Rev. Jennifer Reddall, Bishop of Arizona, “I pray that our congregations will always be places where people can find the compassionate face of Jesus, no matter what story they have to tell. And those other issues – maternal health, poverty, social stigma of unmarried mothers, mental illness, inaccessibility of birth control, and domestic violence – these are where we, regardless of our beliefs about the legality and accessibility of abortion services, must find ways to draw closer to the love of God and concretely demonstrate our love of God’s beloved children.”

For more information and links to General Convention resolutions concerning abortion and women’s reproductive health since 1976, you can find it here: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/ogr/summary-general-convention-resolutions-abortion-and-womens-reproductive-health>