

THE QUEST FOR CHRISTIAN VALUES:
VALUING LIFE WITHOUT PLAYING GOD
John 10:10-15

Dr. J. Howard Olds
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God likes life, He invented it. It is to the full-flowing, free life that He invites us. I have lived my life by that simple motto.

Jesus put it even better in John 10:10 which is the text I want to linger on today. *“I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly,”* or to the full, to the maximum.

In our quest for Christian values, we must do some serious thinking about this thing called life. Who gives it? What’s it worth? Who has the right to end it? Those are some of the questions I would like to raise with you today.

LIFE IS A SACRED RESPONSIBILITY

May I ask you a personal question? What are you worth? I’m not inquiring about the real estate you own or the assets you have accumulated. You are going to surrender all that anyway. I am talking about you. What are you worth?

Harry Emerson Fosdick was the finest preacher of the 20th century. In one of his sermons he asks, “Materially speaking, what is an average man worth? He contains enough fat to make 7 bars of soap, enough iron for a medium size nail, enough sugar to fill a bowl, enough lime to whitewash a dog house, enough phosphorus for 2,200 match tips, a single dose of magnesium, enough potassium to explode a toy cannon, together with a little sulphur. All this sold at 1940 prices would come to about 98 cents.” Is that all we are?

Last year my medical bills amounted to about 1/2 million dollars. Some might rightly question, especially those whose insurance premiums increased dramatically—is he worth that much? Sometimes I ask that question myself.

Because we as a society value life and consider it to be sacred, we treat life with honor, dignity, respect. We pass laws to protect it; we practice medicine to restore it; we provide education to enhance it.

It is a right, good and proper thing that our tallest buildings, our brightest minds, our largest charities are dedicated to providing you and me the finest quality of life possible because life is sacred and valued.

It is sacred and valuable because God is here in the midst of us. God is not just ‘out there’ but he is in the thick and thin of our day-by-day lives trying to help us make sense out of what is going on in our days. God has enriched every moment with his presence.

For those of you who depend on me to keep you up on country music, Randy Travis has a new song entitled *A Place to Hang Your Hat*. Some of its lyrics go like this:

I'm just passing through,
Wearing worn out clothes and shoes.
But it matters not what a man has on.
This old flesh and blood of mine,
Is willed on borrowed time,
It's just a place to hang my hat... 'til I go home.

With all respect to Randy Travis it seems to me that life is more than a place to hang your hat. At least I've found it to be that way. This is more than just a place to spend some time and mark time until you go on to live at another place.

Understand what I'm trying to say. I'm not afraid to die. Through the grace of Jesus Christ, I plan on making heaven my home. But I'm not anxious to catch the next bus. I don't know about you. If it's all right with the Lord, I'd like to spend a little extra time and hang on a little longer. This life is something to be treasured and valued and lived. Eternal life is a quality of life here as well as a quantity of life there. I've still got some living to do. That's why every day is a gift; every sunrise is sacred. That's why every sunset is holy. That's why every suicide is a dramatic tragedy. Life is sacred and precious.

LIFE IS A COMPLICATED DECISION.

Life is difficult. As Ziggy says in one of his cartoons, "I went to the school of hard knocks. Right now I am doing post graduate work." Life is tough. It's even tough when we come to some of the social issues that confront us. We try to find answers to them which, in my opinion, we'll never find politically. All I can do is just mention them this morning.

When it comes to the question of abortion, life is difficult. On January 22, 1973, three things made the evening news. Former President Lyndon Johnson died. A peace treaty of sorts was announced in Vietnam. And the Supreme Court of the United States handed down the Roe vs. Wade decision opening the door for millions of abortions to happen in all 50 of our states. It also sets forth a debate that has now lasted for 30 years.

Within the sound of my voice there are certainly persons with passionate views on both sides of the subject and I have no power to change a person's passion nor would I suggest I could in the brief moment of a sermon. So I just ask a couple of questions.

What does the Bible say about the subject?

A) Actually the word abortion is never mentioned in the Bible.

B) However, the Lord says to the prophet Jeremiah, "*Before I formed you in the*

womb I knew you and before you were born I set you apart. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

C) Psalm 139 says, *“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”*

Life is more than the union of a sperm and egg in a human body. Life is a sacred gift of God.

What does the church say? Only the General Conference can speak for us Methodists and they have the right to change their minds every four years. On this particular subject they happen to have been consistent through my years of ministry. Let me just read from the Discipline:

“In continuity with past Christian teaching we recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures. We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection. We oppose the use of partial birth abortion and call for the end of this practice except when the physical life of the mother is in danger.”

After 30 years of fighting over this issue, sometimes I wonder, could we be a little closer to agreement? There are moments when I think we are. I'm hopeful. I think common ground can be found in two or three places.

First of all, no person needs an abortion who is not pregnant so the Church needs to get about the business of sex education and promoting contraception and helping people avoid even having to make this decision at all. The Church needs to get off the back seat when it comes to this subject.

In the second place, it seems to me that abortion should at least be safe and rare. Even the most liberal people among us are saying that these days, even Ted Kennedy is saying abortion should be rare. Now that would be a radical change for us and for this country.

Finally, it seems to me that the Church needs to open its arms to persons with unwanted pregnancies. We do that through ministries like Miriam's Promise, which is a great ministry supported by this church. We need to provide a place of mercy and healing for those suffering the post- stress of an abortion decision. There is grace for all of us and that is what Holy Communion is all about

Life is difficult when it comes to the question of euthanasia. Euthanasia literally means “a good death” but we call it “mercy killing” or taking a person's life to alleviate suffering. Let me be perfectly clear. Euthanasia is not the removal of life support or the refusal to receive medical care. You need to have a living

will and make your wishes about delaying death by medical procedures clearly known to family and physicians. We need to allow people to die at the right time.

H.G. Wells died in 1946. Several newspapers reported his last words. Nurses and friends were fluttering about his bedside trying to be helpful, adjusting pillows, pulling up the covers, administering sedatives. Finally Wells rallied to say, "Don't bother me. Can't you see I am busy trying to die?"

Ecclesiastes says there is a time to be born and a time to die. Thanks to ministries like hospice we are empowered to die these days with dignity and peace. Euthanasia is assisted suicide. If we euthanize our animals to relieve them of misery, why not deliver humans from severe suffering? There are several reasons why we should not do that.

First of all, you and I are not God. If you haven't figured that out yet, go home and work on it. We are not God. Ending of life is God's domain.

In the second place, we have a terrible understanding of the use and meaning of suffering. I have learned more in my days of suffering than I ever encountered in my days of success. I've looked people in the eye with terminal illness who have asked, "Why on earth should I linger any longer?" and I say, "You may have some things to learn yet in this world." I've watched some of them do it and reconnect with their families and build relationships that they had ignored all the days of their living.

And furthermore there is a better way. I went back and read some of Dr. Jack Kevorkian's work in which he helped people take their own life. As he said, "I'm helping people die."

Then it dawned on me. I've been helping people die for 40 years. I can't tell you how many people I've sat and held their hands, as any other minister has, as they took their last breath. And it was not in some dark, secluded place separated from people, but in a home or hospital or hospice surrounded by family, friends, the church, and clergy. Love was so thick you could feel it, and hope was so real you could see it, and heaven was so close that you could touch it until at last the loved one finally closed their eyes and passed away. My friends, in my opinion that is dying with dignity.

Life is difficult when it comes to the question of capital punishment. From a Biblical point of view it is easy to argue both sides of this issue. In the Old Testament there were 11 crimes which were punishable by death. In addition to murder, they included disrespect for parents, violating the Sabbath, and sexual activity outside marriage. Should we impose this Biblical standard today?

-John the Baptist was beheaded by King Herod on a promise made from a birthday striptease.

-Jesus was crucified by the Roman Government on charges of treason.

-Stephen was the first of a long string of Christian martyrs, including most of the disciples.

-Should we assume all 2,500 men and women on death row in the United States are guilty as charged? It is easy to argue both sides from the Bible. Justice demands some people be restrained from society permanently. Some people lose their right to ever be living in society.

However, because we now have the power to execute justice by other means if we would practice it, and because Christ has the power to redeem, restore, and transform all human beings, I affirm our denomination's opposition to the death penalty and urge its elimination from all criminal codes. What's great about being United Methodists is that everybody doesn't have to agree. I'm just telling you, that is where the Church is today. We will forever be discussing some of these issues but let us always do it on one firm principle, life is sacred.

God likes life. He invented it. It is to the full-flowing, free life that He invites us. Amen.

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