

**“You Asked for It” – The Divisions Between the Conservative
and Progressive Church. - Part 11**
A Sermon by Martha (Missy) Shiverick
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Mark 5:21-43

Last week we began a two part series prompted by the request in the “You asked for It” Summer Sermons on the division between the conservative churches and the progressive ones with in our Presbyterian denomination. These divisions are not unique to our denomination as we hear about conflicts in all the mainline churches and the issues are pretty much the same. Even within our Presbytery of the Western Reserve, made up of 52 churches and two new church developments in Northeastern Ohio, we are divided on issues of doctrine and positions that have been adapted by the General Assembly. A few of the more conservative churches have stopped giving money to the denomination in an effort of voice their objections and one or two have made it unofficially known that they might join with other Presbyterian Churches around the country who are joining other denominations of Presbyterianism that are far more conservative than the UPC(USA) of which we are a member. This division within our church is not going away. We have had numerous controlled and orchestrated conversations even at our Presbytery meetings to find mutual ground to live together and still the divisions persist. I honestly do not know what the outcome of this will be for our larger church but it is important to talk about these divisions and to understand why our denomination and our congregation has taken specific stands on these controversial issues.

Last summer an ecumenical group formed to focus on the religious community’s mission in the state of Ohio. The initial meeting was called by the Rev. Marvin McMickle from Antioch Baptist Church in Cleveland. In this initial meeting Dr. McMickle spoke to the clergy and church leaders that were present about a national meeting that had taken place for the conservative church movement in America. He said that there was great anticipation about the meeting as a study was going to be presented that was going to shape the mission of the conservative church. The idea was that if all the conservative churches in America got together over common ministry goals, they could really accomplish God’s work on a grand scale. Would it be changing the inequality of education in our country between the rich and the poor? Would it be working to halt the repeated cycle of poverty in our

cities? How about the city crime which kills far too many of our young men each year? Would it be working toward a color blind society? Would it be global peace initiatives or hunger projects? What would this common ministry project be? The list of hopeful projects with whom this group of church folk could focus on and make a difference in God's world was long. What would this study report?

Dr. McMickle spoke with emotional horror that the report was given and the two mission objectives were wiping out homosexuality and abortion. He could not believe that with all these other justice issues that Christ would call us to work on and the group of conservative churches just came up with homosexuality and abortion. Where was the God of justice and righteousness in that list? Where was the compassionate Jesus in those mission objectives? Dr McMickle ask that we join with him in creating a group that would have mission objectives based on what he felt were the real needs of today. That day an organization called "We Believe Ohio" was formed as church leaders began to feel that there were other mission goals that God was calling us to be. The cry of the meeting was to say "Yes" to justice for all, "Yes" to diverse religious perspectives and no to self-righteous piety. The cry was to say "yes" to the common good and no to discrimination of any of God's people. To say "Yes" to the voice of religious traditions informing public policy and no to crossing the lines that separates the institutions of religion and government.

Last week we dealt with the Progressive church's stand on homosexuality and the inclusion of GLBT people into the total ministry of the church. Our church is a part of a group called the Covenant Network which has just this as its goal. This week we will focus on the issue of abortion and why the Presbyterian Church has maintained a pro-choice stand for over 30years. I want to acknowledge that some Christians believe that life begins at conception and therefore abortion is wrong. They are entitled to that perspective. It is their choice. However having said that they are entitled to that view, we must also acknowledge that millions of Christians in this country have a different view, believing instead that a fetus is a potential life but not actual life. These Christians hold that the life, health, freedom and moral agency of the pregnant woman are more important than the potential life in the womb.

Many Christians avoid thinking and talking about abortion because it makes them uncomfortable, it is about a problem pregnancy, not a happy thought for anyone. But it is an important topic that must be brought up and

appropriate for today as it is directly related to freedom, especially religious freedom. It is especially important for Presbyterians because in some ways we are the most American of all protestant denominations. John Buchanan, senior pastor of Forth Presbyterian Church in Chicago says that is because we were here in this country shaping colonial America. “We helped establish independence, and our Calvinist ideas helped shape the constitution.” I remember understanding Presbyterian Polity by the Seminary Professor discussing the checks and balances within our United States Government. And Presbyterians are involved in government and changing society. Buchanan writes, ‘Throughout history, we have fought and argued about the same issues the nation itself was arguing about. When the nation divided over the issue of slavery, so did we. When the nation discussed and argued about race, so did we. When the role of women in society became a topic of discussion and controversy in the nation, the church took it on as well. And now society is arguing, very publicly about issues of sexuality and we are as well. The Presbyterian Church is definitely a church with in the society we live. We do not hide from these issues of inclusivity of homosexuals and abortion rights. They are our issues as well.

Separation of Church and State! Not a radical concept for people who celebrate their heritage in the forming of our country. Presbyterians have firmly fought for this ideal and have spoken out against the conservative church when it has crossed the lines that separate church and state. The religious liberty that lies at the foundation of our free society provides that people with these differing beliefs can live together in one society assured that our government will not take sides in religious arguments. Our United Presbyterian Church (USA) is pro choice. The church also supports that individual choices might be different. The Presbyterian Church bases its pro-choice position of Biblical teachings of justice and Jesus’ message of compassion to others. I am too young to remember what it was really like 40 years ago before Roe v. Wade; however this year we celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Clergy Consultation on Abortion which was a consortium of 19 ministers and 2 rabbis who helped women find safe abortions even though they were not legal at the time. They took out a full page ad in the New York Times with a phone number to call if you had a problem pregnancy and soon were overwhelmed by the women calling from all over the country. At its height the Consultation had 1,400 ministers and rabbis referring women to doctors both inside the US and abroad for safe abortions. When New York State made abortion legal in 1970, the city hospitals were completely unprepared for the thousands of women who would be coming

on July 1, the day the law went into effect. Having had three years of experience with abortion referrals, the clergy opened up a clinic. Perhaps one of the least known facts in American social history is that the first legal abortion clinic in America was sponsored by the clergy.

The conservative church movement would have you believe that all Christians are anti-choice. They have claimed that as the only Christian response to an unwanted and problem pregnancy. However, one must wonder if the woman is taken into account when rights of the fetus are held as more important than the rights of the pregnant woman.

I volunteer as the chaplain of Planned Parenthood of Greater Cleveland which will soon become Planned Parenthood of Northeast Ohio. The first time I was introduced at a staff annual meeting as the chaplain, you could feel the unease within the staff. Who is this minister and will she be inflicting her Christian moral structure on our medical facilities. I began my words with the staff by discussing their work of providing quality reproductive health care to women as sacred work. I told them that I would keep them in my daily prayers. And I told them that I was a Presbyterian minister and that the Presbyterian Church has been pro-choice since the early 1970's and that the mainline protestant churches and the reformed Jewish faith are also pro-choice. The staff at Planned Parenthood had no idea. They thought that it was anti-Christian to be pro-choice. Some of them had not attended church for years thinking their denomination was against what they did. Some of them who attended church had not told people where they were employed for fear their church would judge and find them damned.

The truth is there is nothing in the Bible about abortion. It was not a subject that had any bearing on the people of Biblical times. They had children because they needed them. In their society having sons was the only way to guarantee that you would be taken care of in your old age. No wonder the mark of a person blessed by God was to live a long life and have many sons. The only mention of something that might come close to a response to abortion is in Leviticus where it is written that if a man causes a woman to have a miscarriage the man owes that woman's husband a goat. We need to go on what we feel the message of the Bible is when trying to divine what God's word is on issues such as this. The Presbyterian Church when deciding its pro-choice stand used the message of the God of justice and righteousness from the Hebrew Scriptures who demands that we act in a just way towards others and the teachings of Jesus who shows concern and love

to all. A position paper which was later published was presented to the 195th General Assembly stating the Biblical message was one of care and concern for the woman. It was a justice issue in that the full equality of women and men can only be realized if women have control over their own reproductive lives. And they felt the message from the Gospels was one of compassion for a woman facing a problem pregnancy. It was at that General Assembly that our church officially became pro-choice.

I love the stories in this morning's Gospel text. They are little gems of the Bible which tell of Jesus healing one woman and restoring another to life. A person could preach many sermons off of this one text. The audacity of the woman with the hemorrhage and how it was her faith in Christ's restorative powers that healed her. Then there is the fact that Jesus was a little late to actually heal the second person, a little girl who had died while he was on his way and that others told him he was too late to save her. He rebuked them and said their faith was weak and then restored her to life. These stories are great sermon material. But they also tell of Jesus' huge compassion towards others. In the stories in the 5th chapter of Mark we see Jesus as willing to heal under duress. A very ill woman touches his clothing and according to the laws and practices of Jesus' time, Jesus had every reason to ignore her or to stay far away from her. Not only was she a woman but she had been bleeding for 12 years, making her perpetually unclean. People would be squeamish about having contact with her and she was thought of much like a leper. She had been judged by others, punished for something she had no control over. But Jesus did not rebuke her; instead he called her "daughter" and brought her healing and wholeness. The message to us as followers of Christ is that we too should be bringing compassion, healing and wholeness to others as well. It is not our place to judge, it is only our place to show compassion and to care as Christ would.

I doubt there are many pastors who have not had to counsel a woman with a problem pregnancy. Whether it is a teenager not on birth control, a health issue for the pregnant woman, a woman whose finances prevent her from wanting another child, a woman pregnant in an abusive or unloving marriage, or a physical abnormality found with the fetus, these counseling situations are not happy. Problem pregnancies are just that. **HUGE PROBLEMS!** I have often thought that if Jesus could hear the stories of these women in crisis, he would not judge them either. Jesus would know that pregnant women seeking to end their pregnancies will go to huge extremes to do so. They will risk death to abort the fetus, just as they did in

the years prior to legal abortion. Jesus would be compassionate. Jesus would understand the pain of a crisis pregnancy. Jesus would understand that women must control their reproductively if they are to gain equality with men. Jesus would heal the pregnant women and would restore their wholeness.

So is there a meeting ground between the conservative church and the progressive one? I think there might be on this issue of abortion. Both sides want to see an end of problem pregnancies. One of the effective ways to prevent them is to lower the teen pregnancy rates in our city, our state and our country. Comprehensive sexual education has been found to be the most effective way to lower teen pregnancy rates. Here at Fairmount sex education is a part of our Christian education. We want our children to be informed about God's gift of sexuality so that they can make responsible moral and ethical decisions about their sexuality. I would hope that other churches would see the benefit of this as well.

Of course the real hope is that we can, as Christians, move past the issues of homosexuality and abortion. There are far more important missions to which Christ calls us than to fight within ourselves. The conservative churches and the progressive churches could work together in bringing about God's realm if they only can learn to live together with a mutual respect for their differences. It will be interesting to see what unfolds in our church as we decide if we can indeed live together and be faithful to what we hold as essential. Amen.

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