

Lifewatch Sermon by Bishop Scott J. Jones

Text: Hebrews 12:14

Place: Washington DC

Date: January 22, 2010

Subject: Lifewatch Sermon

Theme: abortion and role of churches in multi-religious society

Title: The Once and Future Church

Two days ago, I testified before the Judiciary Committee of the Kansas State Senate. They were holding hearings on two bills that would abolish the death penalty. I was given six minutes in the group of persons urging that judicial executions be ended. I quoted from the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church to support the moral part of my argument, and then added practical and economic factors that were compatible with our church's doctrine.

Following our group several persons spoke in favor of retaining the death penalty in Kansas. One of them was a young woman whose boyfriend was murdered by the Carr brothers. She spoke movingly about why they deserved to die. She then identified herself as a Christian, and as a United Methodist. She spoke respectfully of me, but then said that many United Methodist pastors supported the death penalty, and that many United Methodist lay persons, like herself, disagreed with their bishop. A pastor from the Kansas East Conference was in the room and afterwards said to me that the hearing had gone well, and that he was shocked to learn that United Methodist clergy disagree on this issue. (His tongue was firmly in his cheek on that one!)

Now I am preaching the annual Lifewatch sermon addressing the issue of abortion. Do United Methodist clergy and laity all agree on this issue as well?

I am grateful for the invitation from the Task Force of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality for the invitation to preach here today. My guess is that there are differences of opinion within the membership of that group, and I know there are differences between members of that group and other groups within our church. My goal today is to offer two frameworks as a way of exegeting the deep logic that underlies our denomination's official teaching in the Social Principles. I support the position contained there and I believe it in fact offers the best possible witness to American culture from a Wesleyan Christian perspective. The first framework is the shape of United Methodist doctrine. The second is the religious context of American culture.

The biblical text I have chosen for this message is Hebrews 12:14, "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." Mr. Wesley used this verse 29 times in his published sermons and along with other texts that talk about Christian perfection (such as Matthew 5:48) he continually holds up the image of holiness as the goal of the Christian life. Holiness was his passion beginning in 1725, and after 1738 he developed a mature theology that I have called "the extreme center." At the heart of Wesleyan theology is the conviction that salvation by grace through faith has at least three moments: repentance, justification and sanctification.

In "On God's Vineyard" Wesley recounts the origins of the Methodist movement by referring to this verse from Hebrews:

Two young Clergymen, not very remarkable any way, of middle age, having a tolerable measure of health, though rather weak than strong, began, about fifty years ago, to call sinners to repentance. This they did, for a time, in many of the

churches in and about London. But two difficulties arose: First. The churches were so crowded, that many of the parishioners could not get in. Secondly. They preached new doctrines, -- that we are saved by faith, and that "without holiness no man could see the Lord." For one or other of these reasons, they were not long suffered to preach in the churches.

Later Mr. Wesley used the image of a house to summarize his doctrines: repentance is the porch, justification is the doorway, sanctification (or holiness) is the house. We see the pursuit of holiness in light of the whole way of salvation, which Wesley regards as the main theme or general tenor of the Bible. This balance between justification (entry into the Christian life) with sanctification (the goal of the Christian life) along with his emphasis on both grace and good works lead many of us characterize Wesley's theology and United Methodist doctrine as occupying the extreme center. Even our way of talking about holiness has this approach: we balance personal holiness and social holiness.

Some of the General Rules which still guide our church are very personal: Methodists are to avoid drunkenness, should never smuggle, should speak well of magistrates and more positively should do good of every possible sort as far as possible to all people. Spiritually, they were held accountable for using the means of grace—in his phrase "attending upon all the ordinances of God." To my personal dislike, this includes fasting and other practices which I wish Jesus had never talked about.

Wesley's passion for holiness was applied to the social issues of his time. He opposed slavery, and the economic forces that diverted corn into distilled liquor. He set up alternative medical systems because no one was delivering adequate health care to the poor. As modern society has gotten more complicated, our Wesleyan witness for social justice has taken on more and more complex issues, seeking to apply biblical teachings to issues and situations radically different from those faced by our foremothers and forefathers in the faith.

The pursuit of holiness, both personal and social, is deep in the DNA of Wesleyan Christianity. We are committed to seeking holiness for ourselves, and to helping others move toward that goal. Yet, we know that holiness is a gift from God—something God does in us by grace. Not only that, but holiness itself is complex and involves many different aspects.

This is the first framework for discussing abortion—United Methodist doctrine is characterized by the extreme center. We hold in creative tension commitments that others find so opposite that no one can credibly hold them at the same time. We believe in both personal and social holiness. We believe in evangelism and social justice. We believe in preaching and the sacraments. We believe in episcopal hierarchy and democratic processes of governance. We believe in strong doctrinal statements and yet we welcome diverse positions on matters of opinion. We believe in corporate worship and small groups for discipleship. We believe in both personal holiness and social holiness.

This sometimes leads to confusion as other persons, espousing simpler and cleaner positions, claim that we have compromised far too much with the other side. Between the alternatives of pro-choice and pro-life, there are many on either extreme who find our balanced United Methodist position mushy and unclear. The extreme center is not a comfortable place to stand. At the same time, there is a danger inherent in our approach. Holding things in tension can become so tiring or confusing that we drift into the dead center, where we actually do become mushy and never stand for anything.

The second frame is related to how we relate to American culture at large. John Wesley believed in the first part of this verse, "pursue peace with everyone." Wesley's efforts at

remaining within the Church of England are well-known as are his efforts to build good relationships with other evangelicals of his time. But in his efforts to participate in the shaping of English culture during the eighteenth century, Wesley could appeal to a common religious base. England was by its very nature a country with one legally established church that, in theory and to some extent in practice, united the vast majority of its people into one liturgy, one doctrine and one ecclesiastical hierarchy.

We no longer live in a Christian country. Indeed, in the sense in which The Church of England mirrored the government and societal structures of that country, there was never a time when all of the United States had a single established church. The direction of our country was clearly set in 1791 with the ratification of the Bill of Rights, and there would be no established religion for us. Eventually, the states that had established churches followed the federal government's example as well.

While Protestant Christianity was informally dominant in many parts of the country until the middle part of the last century, the 1954 Supreme Court decision prohibiting officially sponsored prayer in public schools began the more complete disestablishment of Christianity in American culture. Other cultural changes have eroded our ability to shape American culture according to Christian principles. In the last 50 years, the media elites who run our movie, art, television and internet vehicles of communication have become increasingly hostile to organized religion in general and Christianity in particular. Universities, many of which were founded by religious groups a century or more ago now are places dominated by a "culture of disbelief." In addition, the migration of persons from non-European parts of the world means that religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam play an increasingly larger role in American culture. It has been estimated that there are more Muslims in America than Episcopalians. This constitutes a radical change from the founding days of the American republic.

Another change, driven by the philosophical convictions of the baby-boom generation in the 1960's and fueled by rapid technological innovation, is the increasing role of individual freedom. More and more of our culture can be experienced alone or in isolation from others. Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* chronicles the many ways in which community has declined in our country since 1964, and the opportunities for individuals to shape their own beliefs, value systems and networks apart from community pressure and influence has been increasing steadily.

These demographic and cultural changes mean that our Wesleyan drive for social holiness faces significant intellectual and political challenges that did not exist during the abolitionist, temperance or civil rights movements. We cannot appeal to biblical principles as common ground for all Americans. We cannot appeal even to the existence of God as a warrant that will always work. We cannot always appeal to the need to make a common decision. Instead, there is great diversity of religious expression, there are many competing religions in the marketplace of ideas today, and even the philosophy that all persons should be free to "do their own thing." In such a situation, given the decline in communal acceptance of moral values, Christian claims to impose our moral values on others are not well received and appear to be negative and punitive.

Taken together, these changes mean that Christians must adapt their approach to social holiness. In the debate about abortion, for example, biblical teachings and classical Christian convictions will not carry the day either in judicial rulings or legislative deliberations. The appeal to individual autonomy is incredibly powerful.

I believe that we are no longer living in Christendom where churches can directly shape the values, laws and practices of any country. Instead, we are facing the situation described so

cogently by Loren Mead in his 1991 *Once and Future Church*. The early Christians before Constantine knew they lived in a hostile culture, and yet sought to bear witness to the reign of God by building communities whose values were more in harmony with God’s will than the surrounding culture.

We must remain engaged with the larger culture and nurture our corporate commitment to use every resource we can to end evil and promote biblical values. I continue to believe in the promise God spoke to Solomon as contained in 2 Chronicles 7:14:

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

But we cannot quote this verse as if the United States is like Israel in the 10th century BC. We are not one people with one religion, one temple, one form of worship and one priesthood, all in service to one God we all know. We cannot even agree on one set of fundamental values except those enshrined in the Constitution and the especially the Bill of Rights. Instead, I believe our calling as Christians is to serve the culture in three ways:

First, we need to clearly announce God’s call for holiness with specific teaching about the behaviors and attitudes that are pleasing to God. This requires a greater willingness to name personal and social sins with clarity. Too often our preachers and our churches have watered down the gospel for fear of offending persons. In our drive to be nice, in our effort to talk about God’s grace, in our commitment to tolerating different views on matters of opinion, we have quit talking about repentance, sin and holiness. When we United Methodists do talk specifically about sin, it is usually to condemn the sins of others who are not present rather than looking at our own lives confessionally.

Second, we need to create communities that foster growth toward holiness through the means of grace. We need to always have before us Romans 3:23: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We need to create discipling communities that engage sinners with love and the grace of Jesus Christ, that lead them through justification toward entire sanctification so that they may participate in God’s transformation of the world. This is our mission. It is not something we are doing, but the grace of God active through us.

Third, we need to build consensus with other partners—including Christians, followers of other religions, agnostics and atheists—to move our societies toward a greater degree of personal and social holiness. We need to cast our vision of social holiness in terms that will connect with the teachings of Buddha, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, and atheistic ethical teachings so that we might help God’s will be done even by those who do not follow Jesus.

What does this re-framing mean for United Methodists and the abortion debate in the United States?

First, let me give my summary of United Methodist teaching on this issue. In my understanding, the Social Principles paragraph can be summarized as teaching “abortion should be legal and rare.”

The fundamental teaching of our church on this issue is that human life is sacred, and the sanctity of life extends to the fetus. There is no teaching here on when life begins. There is no teaching here about determining viability outside the womb as a key determiner. Rather, I believe our commitment to the sanctity of human life means that we welcome the possibility of new life developing and we believe that pregnancy is an opportunity for affirming that life. Therefore, anything that intentionally ends a pregnancy is wrong. Abortion is sin. Like the death of an infant outside the womb, abortion is a cause for grieving and sorrow. While miscarriage is

usually a medical problem that is a grievous tragedy, the intent to cause an end to a pregnancy rises to the level of sin.

Our doctrine notes a crucial phrase: “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.” This is our way of stating that while abortion is always a sin, there are occasional situations where the only realistic options are sinful ones. Things happen. Stuff occurs. There are times when the options are so bad that all of them violate God’s laws. The words “tragic conflicts of life with life” should be taken very strictly. There are times when the mother’s life is so in danger that it is genuinely a choice of either the mother or the fetus living. There are times when continuing the pregnancy is so unacceptable that the least sinful thing to do is carry out the abortion.

Here we face a dilemma. Who gets to make the decision about what rises to the level of a “tragic conflict of life with life” and what is the least sinful thing to do? We as Christians also value the liberation of women, and much of the abortion debate has centered around the right of women to control their own bodies. We are appropriately hesitant to give to the government the right to determine sensitive issues like the decision to end a pregnancy.

Here is another problem. Given the cultural change to individual freedom and the constitutional values of limited government and the rights of the individual, which have brought so many blessings to the United States and the rest of the world, outlawing abortion would have two tragic consequences.

First, it would remove the sensitive decision away from the individual and her physician. Few of us want the “tragic conflict of life with life” to be determined by government agents. Whether those agents are courts, police forces, medical examining boards or district attorneys, we think our commitment to freedom requires the locus of the decision to remain with the individual, her family, her church (if she is a Christian) and her medical advisors.

Second, the tragic consequence of outlawing abortion would be the deaths of many women who would seek illegal back-alley abortion providers. We must judge real-world consequences of our policy decisions, and the future of American in the 21st century means that we cannot go back to a 1950’s world where abortion did not happen legally. The negative consequences far outweigh the positive benefits and the net gain for social holiness. This is a hard calculation to make, but we must be as realistic as possible.

At the same time, our doctrine teaches that it is sinful for abortion to be used as a means of birth control. The vast majority of abortions in the United States are done as a means of birth control. People have irresponsible sexual intercourse—either unprotected by birth control measures or without regard to the possibility of pregnancy—and then want to avoid the consequences of their actions. In some cases, their fornication—sexual intercourse outside of marriage—is already a sinful act, and now another sin is being committed to relieve the persons involved of the consequences of their behavior by destroying the beginnings of a new life.

Realistically, as long as any abortion options are legal, there will be abuses and people who chose sinful behavior. We have seen that with gambling, environmental degradation and divorce. Living in a society that values individual freedom inevitably leads to more sinful behavior than we would prefer. What is a Christian to do?

For those who agree that abortion is tragic and even for those who will go so far as to say that it is sinful behavior that should be avoided as much as possible, what can be done?

The first step is to create communities of holiness that use the means of grace to help people through personal crises. We need to teach that abortion is sinful and that it is to be chosen

only when other alternatives are more sinful. We need to create small groups of people where women in a crisis pregnancy can receive encouragement to do the right thing. Our congregations should surround a woman who is carrying the baby to full term with the love, emotional support and financial support she will need. Adoption services are essential. A highway billboard I see regularly in Kansas says “Millions waiting to adopt”, but I wonder how a scared young woman struggling with an unintended pregnancy can connect with even one of those million families who would love to raise and care for her child.

We need to connect with other partners in our society to reduce the number of abortions in the United States. We need to strengthen our laws against late-term abortions except in well-defined circumstances, because our courts have concluded that viability outside the womb is in fact a value that is sufficiently widely held that it can be sustained in law. We also need to be clear that reducing the number of abortions is a goal.

A number of steps could help move toward such a goal. We need to commit ourselves to greater availability of family planning resources so that unintended pregnancies happen less often. We need to recognize that access to an abortion is not a right. While we believe that persons have the right to health care, abortion is not normally a health-care issue. Rather it is a sinful behavior. Proposals in the recent health-care debate to provide tax funding for abortions are very misguided. What you fund with tax dollars will increase. Our policy as an Anglo-American culture since the early 18th century has been to tax behaviors that have bad social consequences, in essence dis-incentivizing immoral actions. In Kansas, I am advocating an increase in the cigarette tax, because smoking is bad public policy. While taxing abortions is both unfeasible and wrong, we need to find ways of dis-incentivizing abortions. We should be subsidizing positive alternatives to abortion that provide life-giving options that enhance personal and social holiness.

As a church we should be supporting the existence of crisis pregnancy centers that will provide support and counseling to young women and their families in difficult situations. Christian counseling always has a value-laden point—we are seeking to help people reach holiness. So our counseling is giving support and help in reaching the goal that the gospel prescribes for all persons. Where abortions are prevalent, United Methodist congregations should be offering help to those in need.

I said earlier that we need to adapt to our new context of living in a pagan culture. Christianity once knew how to do this very well. When Aristides was writing to the emperor Hadrian, he highlighted the Christians’ care for the most vulnerable in roman society. He wrote,

[Christians] love one another. They never fail to help widows. They save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the man who has nothing. If they see a stranger, they take him home and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don’t consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit, in God.

At our best, we United Methodists do the same. Once we realize that women in crisis pregnancies are among the least of these, and that our commitment to the sanctity of human life means we should do all in our power to welcome new life rather than end it prematurely, helping create communities of love for the unborn will come much more easily. The early Christians did it in a hostile society. We can do the same in our time and place. The Church that once was, will be again an agent for caring for the least of these among us.