

Building a Culture of Life

Msgr. Parent delivered a version of this homily at our 9:00 & 12:15 Masses on Sunday, June 26.

True story. With children present I'll tell it as gently as possible. Years ago in another parish a young woman I had known for most of her life wanted to talk to me about something.

I had known her and her family since she was a young girl in Catholic school. I had helped her mother and stepfather finish their sacraments and blessed their marriage in the Church.

I should add that she was very close to her stepfather. He came into her life when she was quite young and had been the only father she had ever known.

So the girl was now a young woman in her early 20's – very smart, very pretty, finishing college, not yet married, and her potential for the future seemed almost unlimited. The reason she wanted to talk to me is that she had a problem: she was pregnant.

As I listened to her tell me about her problem, I honestly didn't know what she planned to do about her unborn child. Since she had come to me, I suspected that she wanted to keep her child, but I wasn't certain.

And so I told her that our various pro-life ministries in the parish and others we supported in the community could help her cope with all of the practical decisions that she would be facing and that she would not face them alone.

But those considerations were not what was bothering her most. She had already decided to keep her child, and she was fairly confident

that she could count on her family to support her.

Her problem was the way she got pregnant. She and one of her oldest closest guy friends drank way too much together and in an alcohol induced fog were intimate. Once. Neither of them remembered exactly what happened. At that point in her life, it was the only time she had ever been intimate with anyone this way.

There was a further complicating factor. She and the father of her child were different races. This was a complicating factor because she had to admit that her stepfather and his side of the family tended to be, frankly, racist. She was afraid that they might not accept her mixed race child and that they might all jump to the conclusion that she had been abused the night she got pregnant. She assured me that she was not abused and that she was as responsible as the father for what happened.

But how could she tell any of this to her stepfather? That was her main problem and why she wanted to talk to me.

Friday was an historic day in the United States. Whether overturning *Roe v. Wade* was good or bad according to our personal politics, we can certainly all agree Friday's Supreme Court *Dobbs* decision is a monumental change in how we handle the thorny justice of balancing the rights of women and the rights of unborn children. I would tend to agree with those all along our political spectrum and on both sides of the abortion question, including the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, that *Roe v. Wade* was a poorly reasoned decision that has horrendously distorted not only our courts but our politics for almost 50 years.

But let's put aside the legal issues for a moment to consider something deeper,

something that defines us as Christians, something that St. Paul is saying to us across the centuries in today's passage from his Letter to the Galatians.

The problem in Galatia is that the Galatian Christians were tearing each other apart. The controversy is over the Jewish Law. They were predominantly *not* Jews, but some among them were saying that you had to practice aspects of the Jewish Law to follow Christ. This controversy over Law was dividing them as a community. That's why in today's passage, Paul said this:

But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.

That sounds like a pretty good summary of our political life as a nation today. We are biting and devouring each other in a way that is consuming us, destroying us. The only way out of this mess – as Paul said to the Galatians and is in effect saying to us – the only way out is *love*.

The Letter to the Galatians ultimately contrasts two very different ways of living out Christian discipleship: living for Law or living for love. What's true of Jewish Law in this regard is true of any law. Living primarily for law will divide and destroy us. The Christian alternative is to live for love.

Allow me to clarify a common misunderstanding of today's passage. When Paul contrasts life in the flesh and life in the Spirit, he's not talking about our spiritual selves as opposed to our physical selves.

“Flesh” in this context means practice of the Law, and “Spirit” means transformation by the Holy Spirit that makes true Christian love possible. Paul is ultimately saying that the

Galatians will not heal their divisions by law – and neither will we.

As Christians we have our laws. We certainly can and should be concerned about the laws of our Church and the laws of our nation. Laws are important to us but are always at best secondary, because we strive to live by a higher standard – the standard of love.

Christian love is a generosity that exceeds the demands of justice – that exceeds the demands of any law. And when we treat each other with the generosity of love, law is simply not very important because we're already doing more than what justice requires.

The work of building a culture of life is not primarily a matter of law and overturning a flawed Supreme Court decision. Building a culture of life means building a society that truly loves women struggling with pregnancy and also truly loves their unborn children. We all have much more work to do to build a culture of life where every pregnant woman feels blessed and supported in choosing life.

Years ago I thanked that young woman for choosing life. I told her that she was a hero for choosing life. I also told her that the circumstances around her getting pregnant were nobody else's business and that she had no obligation to tell anyone. She seemed relieved to hear that from a priest.

About 7 months later, she gave birth to bi-racial baby girl, who grew up to be a beautiful young girl.

You know, it's funny, without exaggerating I can honestly say that I've never seen a prouder grandfather than that same racist stepfather carrying in his arms his beautiful granddaughter that society calls black because that's how our race labels work.

I can't say he's completely over his racism – I honestly don't know – but he is changed, certainly less racist and a better man, transformed by love because he and his stepdaughter and their family embraced life.

That's what embracing life does: it changes us for the better, as you parents know better than I. Transformed by love, we end up blessed in so many unexpected ways.

Years later, through their shared custody and relationship with their daughter, this young woman and the father of their child would ultimately marry each other. It was not the life she planned or expected before she got pregnant, but now, in retrospect, through the love of her daughter, she would have it no other way.

Embracing life changes us for the better. Transformed by love, we end up blessed in so many unexpected ways.

May the generous love poured out for us from this altar give us the courage to build up a culture of life that truly loves pregnant women and their unborn children.