PASTOR'S NOTES.   Doing Religion and Politics Differently, Part 5.

I didn't expect to do a fifth installment on this topic, but I thought it would helpful to apply these principles to a specific issue. To review:

- Everyone is in our mission field.
    - *"Go and make disciples of all nations…" (from Matthew 28:19)*
- We will not reconcile all our differences with reason.
    - *Our ideas are all a unique combination of experience, emotion, and reason, and we were never meant to agree on everything. (Romans 14:1-12 and other passages)*
- No principle is more important than persons.
    - *Jesus came not to promote ideas, but to save people. (many Bible verses)*
- Group identifications serve some initial purposes, but we must go past them.
    - *"Neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female…" (from Galatians 3:26-28)*
- Something about your position (on whatever issue) is wrong, or at least incomplete.
    - *Our culture has made assumptions about science and groups of people that are at least dubious, and likely false.*
- Most likely, you do not fully understand another person's ideas or position.

Consider the issue of abortion. While we have argued about this issue for over 50 years, in my experience we are not as divided as we think. Most persons I have talked with around this issue, especially persons of faith, are personally opposed to abortion – saying things like "it is not an option for me." But with respect to others, some question whether it is right or even possible to prevent others from doing it, and many of these hesitate to make a public statement because they fear being seen as "one of those…" I would estimate that if people gave anonymous feedback, a strong majority would be in favor of at least reducing the number of abortions. One might think that we have common ground.

What we find instead is arguing with the assumption that we have nothing in common. Either you are a person who favors killing babies, or you are a person who favors forcing women (some who have been raped) to carry babies even if it is physically risky to do so. Or so we argue.

We argue that this could only be solved legally: criminalizing either the pregnant woman, or the doctors/practitioners, or the male, or the guardians. Others argue for social approaches: better sex education, contraception, abstinence, safer sex, better adoption services, or social or financial incentives for women to keep the child. In our politically divided climate, we argue these as if they were opposite sides, and worse, we act as if we force the matter politically, we will "win." We forget that in the next election cycle everything we "accomplished" can be undone.

If we are really serious about reducing abortions, shouldn't we be willing to explore as many different strategies as possible? Including actually persuading people to hear other opinions and try new things?

In my old neighborhood in Columbus, abortion is not an issue; it is unheard of. I suspect that years of Church teaching may have helped cement that value. But like other churches, sexuality was not

openly discussed; as if it didn't happen. Perhaps this is partly why in this culture women get pregnant very young; it is almost expected for a 14 year old to become a mother. You could say that we solved one problem by trading it with several others: typically these young mothers never finish high school, the rate of sexually transmitted disease is high, and most live the rest of their lives near or below the poverty line.

By doing Bible studies on abortion, and having had many conversations with women who have had abortions, who have considered abortions, and persons working in crisis centers, I know that any proposed solutions might not have its intended consequences. Many of the women found themselves in the situation not entirely by their own choice, and many faced pressure from others (most commonly the man) to abort. There are long-term psychological consequences as well, The issues are complex enough that any proposed solutions must be weighed carefully, with input from the many different people who may be affected.

I do not think there are easy answers, but we can begin with this. If we accept that we cannot settle any of these issues by force, we might ask what it is that we want to accomplish. I suspect that we want a culture that esteems all life, whether born or unborn, male or female, young or old, sick or healthy, of all races. For at least some of us that will require a change of heart. Most of us could use a bit more compassion for every hurting human being. And to reach any kind of consensus requires us to be willing to engage one person at a time and share stories. I have my own ideas, but unless there is a willing listener, they go nowhere. Further, I should not expect anyone to listen to me unless I show myself a willing listener myself. So it starts with me being willing to hear other people's experiences, even if they don't match what I have come to believe.

Let me confess my sin here. I am told that over the last 50 years, there were 65 million abortions in this country. I could take that number as a sign of how bad "they" are. But inasmuch as I did little or nothing to bring us together to solve the issue, I bear some responsibility. So I have written this in the hope that it helps to begin some conversations and in this way helps us start doing something…

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish…

John 3:17, 2 Peter 3:9a (NRSV)

Yours in Christ,