

Life Sunday 2023
Psalm 41:1-2; Matthew 5:13-19 “Light and Life”
Rev. Dr. Daniel Selbo, New Brighton, Minnesota
lutheransforlife.org

Dear friends, sisters and brothers in Christ, greetings in the name of our Triune and Living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The theme for this year’s Life Sunday, “Blessed for Life,” is based upon the opening verses of Psalm 41 in which the psalmist declares how the one who “considers the poor” will be blessed by God, “protected and kept alive in all things” (Psalm 41:1-2), for he did not give him up to his enemies.

It’s an appropriate theme for this occasion, since it speaks of the calling we share to be protectors of life, to be advocates and voices for the poorest in our midst, for the ones who have no voice and who cannot advocate for themselves. To be able to share in this calling with other partners in the Gospel, proclaiming and affirming the “Sanctity of Life,” which lies at the core of who we are as ones created in the image of God, is a high and a noble calling indeed.

Although there are many life-related issues needing to be addressed in the society and culture in which we live, the one most often thought of and central to any serious discussion of life issues is tied closely to the question of abortion. *Roe versus Wade*, as we all know, was a landmark decision of the U. S. Supreme Court, in which the Court ruled that the Constitution of the United States protects a pregnant woman’s freedom to choose to have an abortion without excessive government restriction.

That same Supreme Court decision also became the fuel for an ongoing abortion debate in our country about whether and to what extent abortion should be legal, who should decide the legality of the abortion decisions, and what role moral and religious views should play, if any, in the political sphere, when it comes to finally landing where we need to land.

Part of the challenge, as we all know, is that there is not only diverse and passionate opinion in the political realm as to how we, as “One Nation Under God,” should proceed in addressing this crucial and defining question, but also within the Church itself.

Not one of the many Christian denominations in our country would be able to claim that every one of their members is of the same opinion and speaks with the same voice, at least not in terms of the specifics of where they would land in this debate and the place they would give to the parents of the yet-to-be-born child, when it comes to the ultimate decision of whether anyone has the right to take the life of another human being, yet-to-be-born or not.

Add to the debate the complicating factors and questions about when, in the pregnancy, a child actually becomes a child and whether the so-called “unborn fetus” has the same inherent rights and deserves the same protection as a child that has left the mother’s womb, just to mention a few, and the discussion and debate and ultimate decisions on the political front only become more complex.

And if that’s not enough to cause us all to be challenged in our thinking and our actions and to raise the bar on the significance of the decisions and to debate the place in which we ultimately land as followers of Jesus, add to it the words of our Lord, the scriptural witness we have been given, and the fact that our ultimate allegiance as Christians is, as Peter declared to the Sanhedrin, to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 4:19 RSV), and there’s little question or room for doubt that the questions in front of us and the ensuing answers are of ultimate and eternal concern.

And so, we come to the passage we just read. And so, we come to words from our Lord that are as pointed and powerful as they are familiar. And so, we come to the question of what

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this means for us today, in light of the abortion discussions and debates, and the fact that most, if not everyone here today, has been involved with or related to someone who has had to make an abortion decision, that we are called and have been declared and have become, in Jesus, this world’s salt and light.

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus said. “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-14). As followers of our Lord, you and I have the opportunity and the responsibility to have an impact on the world in which we live. And not because we are so salty in and of ourselves. And not because our light is any brighter and more important than that of anyone else. But because we are connected in our calling to the One who salts all things in this life and whose light, from the beginning of time, is this world’s only real and lasting hope.

As I look back on history and as I consider some of the critique that is often thrown at the Church from the outside world, that we have not been aggressive enough, or involved or relevant enough, in addressing human need, I have to confess that there is an element of truth to the words and critiques that are shared. Any honest assessment of what has been done and what has failed to be done, and where and in what ways the Church has fallen short, would lead us all to an acknowledgement, if not a confession, that in many ways we have come up short and, in more ways than we’d care to admit, we are all in need of God’s forgiveness and grace.

At the same time, there is a long and growing list of ways in which the Church has, throughout history, been a motivating force and, more often than not, been the primary force behind nearly every significant major social advance that has happened.

Go down the list and it’s consistent: the care of the sick, of the elderly, of the orphan; the movement toward a public education system at the primary, secondary, and college levels; the

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advancement of the status of women in society; the cultivation of the arts and the humanities, which have enriched all of our lives; concern for the physically and mentally handicapped; the whole concept of welfare, the dignity of work, the elimination of slavery; the idea of a constitutional government and of democracy itself.

In every case, it's the same. In these and many other areas of life, the Christian Church as such, or the leadership of individuals with a Christian motivation behind what they have done, have been instrumental, if not responsible, for these things we all would consider to be humane and good.

Don't let anyone ever tell you that the Christian Church has ignored the needs of this world, nor failed to address its challenges. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although the ultimate truth of the Christian Gospel has to do with forgiveness and the promise of life eternal because of what Christ accomplished for us on the cross and the empty tomb, that message, nonetheless, does have unavoidable and immediate implications for this world and this life, here and now. Over the course of this world's history, the witness and the actions of the Christian community have been significant and profound.

It's as true today as it was when Jesus first said it. “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-14). Those words from our Lord were not only given to the Church as a whole, but to each one of us, within the Church, who have been called and claimed by Him. This is not only an “us thing” as we think about the calling we share together within the body of Christ. It is also a “you thing” and a “me thing” as we consider the calling laid upon each of our lives by our Lord.

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As hard as it is to hear, the truth is that abortion takes a life. Abortion brings an end to life. And the life it takes and the end it brings is not a decision we have the right to make, although we all do have the right to make decisions, and we all, in the same way, do have to live with the consequences of the decisions we make.

If we’re going to get this right, it’ll take a good amount of forgiveness and grace. If we’re going to make this right, then it’s going to take a lot more than we have on our own to give.

Collectively and together, each one of us doing our own part. The protection of the unborn is not going to happen in this country without the witness of the Church.

In the North American Lutheran Church, we have a strong statement that takes a strong stance in support of the unborn. It’s not a social statement, declaring what we all need to believe, but a word of counsel to the Church on what we hold to be true and how the conversation and decisions need to be framed.

“The Lord Is with You” is the title of the document – “A Word of Counsel to the Church on the Sanctity of Nascent Life.” I encourage you to read it, if you haven’t, and to use it as a way of putting into words what we teach and believe as a body of believers. It’s important and it has its rightful place.

But this must be more than just a document on a website if it’s ever going to take hold and change lives and have the impact we’re hoping and praying it will. It must also become our own witness, individually as believers, in our churches and to our own communities and to a world that is confused and doesn’t have the same moral framework with which to start, let alone the ability to come up with any answers that last and make sense.

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“You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-14). Let your light shine that the world might see. Let the salt that is yours in Christ give flavor to that part of the world in which you live.

That’s one of the realities, if not the beauty, of how the Christian faith is meant to be lived and played out. I can’t change the world any more than you can. You can’t change it any more than I. Thankfully, that’s not our call. But I can, as I witness to Jesus and offer the light and salt that He can give, have an impact on the lives of those I know, and so can you.

Let your light shine, that the world may see. Not in harsh and condemning words. Not in lines and with judgments drawn so straight and absolute that there’s no room for forgiveness and there’s no chance for a second chance. That type of witness only serves to deepen the divide that’s already there. But in love and with grace and with a recognition that all our lives come up short, and that we all need a Savior, every one of us.

The good news is that we have one, and He loves not only the child who never had a chance at life, but also the one who made the choice to bring an end to that life before it ever had a chance.

For all of us, and that’s the witness we need to give, there’s life and there’s hope and there’s forgiveness in what God has done for and promised to us in Christ.

It’s a complicated web, this whole question of who has the right to choose. Pro-life or pro-choice? Pro-choice or pro-life? Situations involving incest or rape or the life of the mother are ones we cannot avoid, let alone quickly and easily dismiss. Decisions have to be made by someone, and choices are not always ones where everyone wins.

But if we're to make choices that are responsible and life-affirming and if we are to bear witness to the God who has created and who sustains all of life, then our voice and our witness and our decisions need to be consistent and in alignment with the calling we have been given in Christ.

From the beginning of time, from that moment God created the first human beings and placed them in that garden, He gave them the ability and the right to choose. There's a tree in the middle. It produces beautiful and enticing fruit. Stay away from it and you will live. Go near it and eat of it and you will die.

It was the same thing with Moses. Not long before he was to die and hand the mantle of leadership of the nation of Israel over to Joshua, he gave the people a choice.

“I call heaven and earth to witnesses against you today,” he said, “that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live...” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Years later, it was the same choice offered by Joshua to the people. Not long before he was to die, it was the same thing.

“Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes,” (and you think you can find a better way), “choose this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:14-15).

All kinds of choices in life. All kinds of choices you and I must make in life. But not every choice is right, even if there is a right, and not every choice leads to life, as much as we might try to convince ourselves that it does. It doesn't.

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And that’s why the salt and the light of the Christian community, and everyone in it, need to be the seasoning that brings out the flavor of true life and the light that dispels even the darkest of situations and fears and troubles this world has to give.

Let your light shine by the choices you make. Let your salt do its “salting the world” thing by allowing your choices, offered in a spirit of love and of grace, to add the flavor that this world is longing to taste.

We could talk for a long time about the complexity of the discussion and the seriousness of the abortion debate. We could talk equally as long about all of the related salt and light decisions and discussions about life and death we all need to make.

Not just the beginning of life, but the end of life. It’s different, but it’s just as sacred. Not just the unborn child, but the child that is born and the mother that has made that hard choice and now needs help. We can’t just let her sit there and struggle with her decision and her child and go it alone, as we go on to something else.

The stance for life and its sanctity goes far beyond the focus of today’s message and infinitely beyond what any Sanctity of Human Life Sunday might bring about. Our stance in favor of life needs to be one in favor of all of life, and it needs to be consistent, even when our consistency forces us to stand out and sometimes even against.

As Christians, we know the Author of life and we know the Author’s will. And He has called us, as a faith community and as individual followers of Jesus Christ, to be the salt and the light this world so desperately needs.

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“You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of this world ... Let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:13-14, 16). Amen.