

WINGS OF THE DOVE
FROM A DISTANCE

Texts on Sunday, September 23, 2012

Isaiah 11: 1-9; John 7:53—8:11

WHEN JESUS BENDS DOWN to write on the ground, with the woman caught in adultery standing there, with the authorities standing there waiting for his words to tumble him into their trap, his response brings to my mind a little phrase from a present-day leadership expert. Concerning tight conflicts leaders get into, Ron Heifetz counsels, “Get into the balcony.” The idea is perhaps as simple as counting to ten before reacting to your child’s tantrum, but more subtly, it means, *Don’t engage with conflict at the level it comes to you. Aim to see more than they see. See it from a distance. Get into the balcony.* Or, as Jesus does, get down and write on the ground. Get some distance.

Throughout this electoral season, here at The Riverside Church, we have been aiming to get some distance on issues around which polarized blocs of Americans prove unable to imagine justice together and to act accordingly. We, however—called to peace, not polarization—have been striving for depth in our vision, which requires some distance from ourselves as well as from those we oppose. *Can we understand something in the values of the other? Can understanding drive us to deeper insights about human well-being or reveal a new horizon for action?* If this is possible, our passions will not be our first friends. Like Jesus bending down, we need sometimes to disengage from the emotions that pour through our self-protecting nature. If these words of mine make sense to you, you know that we are speaking about the fruit of the Spirit. A spiritual life is only spiritual if it gives you some real freedom and play to pull back from reaction in order to choose action—from a distance.

Today, we are going to think through abortion. In this matter, the wings of our citizenry, right and left, seem hardly attached to the same bird. While our prayer for the wings of a dove must never amount to muddling toward the middle, afraid to take a stand, we can bend down and draw out real thought.

From a distance, Isaiah dreamed of a day when the LORD’s true servant would rule a peaceable kingdom. His oracle does not touch directly on the question of abortion (in fact, the Bible has *no* word directly on this subject); however, the peaceable kingdom implies a peace for women and for men and for our sexual lives which *our* kingdoms surely do not embrace. Obviously, the “little child” of Isaiah’s dream, whether nursing or weaned, comes from the arms of a peaceable mother. Moreover, as the poet’s eye sweeps over the offspring of the beasts, the engendering of those creatures arises not in sexual struggle but in peace. Now, the prophet says nothing of peace between men and women—it is assumed—but that fact may only show that the power to dream aloud of God’s will was all on the side of men. Still, if Isaiah’s dream were extended

beyond the call to the calf and the bear to lie down together; if it said that all the sons and daughters of all generations shall stand up together, would this not resound in us like the bells of divine will? Isn't this what dreams are for, to press us on to imagine, from a distance, the justice we can make?

But when Jesus is confronted in the temple by religious authorities holding a woman caught in adultery, we are suddenly back in our ordinary bed. This is a world we recognize, where women are "in trouble" for sexual behavior which does not trouble men at all. How can we understand that old, old story which is absolutely not yet done being told? Look at it from a distance.

Having lived one or two million years in bodies just like ours, we humans have not gotten far in figuring out what we are. We were hardly different from animals until about 30,000 years ago. About 7,000 years ago, we learned to hitch a plow to a draft animal and thus became real farmers, able to support a sizeable population. Civilization began then, but it was dependent on the greater physical strength of men to drive the teams of beasts that pulled the plows that made the grain that fed the people. Fact: Everywhere on earth where large populations developed through agriculture, men controlled the public sphere and women controlled the private, interior sphere. Biology was destiny. This division of labor was not inherently oppressive, for our species could not have developed and come down to this day without that separation of spheres.

But then, as we have said here previously, in the 1700s, history began. Societal change erupted as minds devised machines immeasurably more powerful than any male of any strength. In fact, any woman could run such machines, and though a good time would pass before men would share the controls, seen from a distance, all this happened in the blink of an evolutionary eye. A man's excess physical strength no longer determined his authority in society or in the economy. Now, the mind stands master over matter. Biology is no longer destiny and society has been developing new challenges for human growth, both personal and social. While much correction lies yet before us, a woman *can* enter the public sphere as an agent. A man is called to deepen his interior and communal nature. And many of us think this normative and good. Yet this utter revolution in social and sexual roles began . . . yesterday!

Many people, both men and women, are shocked to be pulled from the predictable duties of their biological nature and its ancient social structures into the light of conscious choice, where every man and every woman is equal in power to decide who they are, how to lay life plans, whom to serve, and whom not to serve. There need be no question in our minds as to why reproductive health and the politics of abortion are so fraught with anger and misunderstanding: as a species, we are just now waking up to what it means that we ourselves must decide the meaning of our bodies. This does not mean that the leading wing of awakening consciousness chooses all the right policies, and the supporting wing all the wrong. Rather, let us see that in some measure, pro-

found spiritual struggles over the meaning of our lives always partly find expression in politics, as the new requirements of selfhood call some to try unexplored territory, make gains or mistakes, and also feel the limiting and often legal constraints of people who do not believe it at all wise that new freedoms should fly beyond the bounds of established power. This is how left and right contest the future. See it from a distance. Then stand up and address the particular case.

Those who want to make abortion illegal are channels for a value which has served our species well for millennia. This is the desire to protect life that is vulnerable and valuable. A sign that that is a fair statement of the value thrumming in the heart of those who oppose abortion comes when you ask *Do you mean to put women in prison and separate them from their children?* Almost always, they back away from such punishments. No, they want the laws to put doctors in prison, but the women they want home, where they belong. If that response angers you, see it from a distance, like Jesus confronting the authorities. His concern was not alone for the woman, whom only he saw as a real person. Jesus' concern was also for the violent men dimmed in blindness, to give them a way to see themselves. How can Christians bend down and disengage from the violent plans of others in order to re-engage them in ways they can see?

In the abortion question, there is something else that is vulnerable and valuable. This is the rising consciousness of women to act as and be regarded as full moral agents in their own nature, in their own identity. This too is embryonic and vulnerable, when viewed from the distance of social history. In her definitive work on the ethics of abortion (*Our Right to Choose*, 1983), Beverly Harrison wrote about this vulnerable, valuable reality:

The contention that women as a group ought to have the same basic standing as "rational moral agents" as men have, with all the rights and responsibilities attendant to that status, has deep implications for theology and ethics . . . Discounting women's standing as moral agents has been not only an historical, logical, and theological error but also a moral failing. . . . From the standpoint of women's experience, a basic moral question operates: "What am I to do about the procreative power that is mine by virtue of being born female?" The question of abortion arises only in this wider human context . . . The habits of discussing abortion as if it were a discrete deed is a way of formulating the abortion issue as a moral question abstracted out of, and irrelevant to, the way it arises in women's lives. (pp. 7, 9)

Everyone understands the desire to protect the vulnerable, unborn fetus. Every parent who awaits a child thrills to this yearning. But the agency of a woman to determine who she is and how she will plan her life, without threat of invasion upon her body, is also a vulnerable reality. It has stood free upon the earth for only two or three generations. If through the sanctions of law, a society decides that the moral consciousness of women shall not be free to act, but that women shall submit to biological processes within them which they do not want, then society itself cannot progress. Men and women alike must remain bound to their biologically defined fears and structures. Harrison says of such a society:

A society which would deny the conditions of procreative choice to women, or which treats women merely as reproductive means to some purported end of that society's self-per-

petuation, is one that mandates women's inferior status as less than full rational beings, denying them full claim to intrinsic value in the process. Likewise, a society that incorporates a perdurable structure of coercion, even violence, against women as morally appropriate to its functioning, but claims that it upholds the sanctity of or respect for human life, is deluded. (p. 197)

Where does this leave us? From a distance, can you dream a world where the need for abortion is rare? Do you want to get there? Many who oppose abortion rights do not know that we are all dreaming that dream, both those who support procreative choice and those who seek sanctions in law against it. We must make it clear that we share in one dream. Then the political question of basic disagreement becomes clear: What means are most likely to generate a society more and more in the image of that where "they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea"? Can laws that punish women (and like the Pharisees, *only* the women!) for desiring to shape their lives without legal invasions bring about such knowledge? The answer is in the dream: If the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, then not law, but knowledge—moral conscience!—must grow. The laws of the state have a great deal to do with how conscience develops in a society. It cannot not develop in a cage, moral or metal.

If pro-life advocates, especially the Roman Catholic Church and the evangelical churches, dropped their unholy alliance with state powers of coercion, and thus ceased threatening to punish women who seek abortions; if they gave themselves instead to life-giving goals, imagine how much stronger we would all grow. Dream! From a distance, we can see that abortion is never just an appointment in an antiseptic clinic. Abortion is about broken promises, broken relationships, domestic abuse, poverty, lack of educational opportunity, distorted economics, and yes—new possibilities for emotional and spiritual growth. All these are just what the church was called into being for.

The spirit of Jesus' attention to the woman whom the men caught can guide us all through the generations to come. Though no others saw her as a real human, Jesus sees her. He straightens up and says to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you." His word shows that he desires her being, her growth, her development, for like all human beings, she is an end in herself. In that spirit, we can support safe and legal abortion as essential to the present moral development of our whole society. But from a distance, we can also see legal abortion as only a step on a path; as a means of bending down and writing on the ground long enough to let deeper voices for all-embracing life arise within the human community, until that day when "they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain. For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

© 2012 Stephen H. Phelps

*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*