

Life Sunday Sermon

A Question of Rights

Sermon Text: Romans 1:18-20

Sermon Theme & Parts:

- I. Known Naturally
- II. Rejected Subjectively
- III. Secured Eternally

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. Among these are the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Most citizens recognize those words as part of the preamble to the Declaration of Independence. The “rights” were subsequently spelled out in the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution.

The reference to “inalienable rights” is attributed to Thomas Jefferson. But where did he and his compatriots get their notion about inalienable rights? While Jefferson did not quote the Bible, his words reflect what is commonly referred to as a *Judeo-Christian ethic*. That in turn has its basis in what was known in the past as *natural law*.

A murky cloud of confusion exists today about what natural law is – and also about our inalienable rights, especially about the right to life. That confusion is fueling one of the major controversies currently dividing the people of this nation. The spark that ignited the conflagration was the infamous *Roe v. Wade* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973.

Natural law theory traces back to Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. It also figures prominently in the philosophies of Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and many others. Of special interest to us is the reference to natural law which St. Paul made in his letter to the Romans. Here’s what he wrote:

*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, **since what may be known about God** is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20)*

Similarly, on Paul’s first missionary journey, he and Barnabas told their audience at Lystra in Galatia to “*turn away from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. **Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons.***” (Acts 14:16-18)

Natural law refers to what human beings can know about God, and about good and evil, apart from the Bible. It refers to what we know *instinctively* about God. It informs what the Declaration says about the “Creator” as well as our understanding of “inalienable rights.”

Without question God has given the world clues apart from the Bible both to His existence and His expectations. When we look at what God has made, by extension we know something about the Maker (cf. Hebrews 11:3). We know that this is God’s world. He wields all power and authority. We are merely guests in His world, and that makes us answerable to him for the way we conduct ourselves. We also know that as creatures of God we have certain inalienable rights. One of those rights, as the Constitution says, is the right to life.

Which brings us to Life Sunday [Insert year].

The Supreme Court called the right to life into question in 1973 its controversial *Roe v. Wade* decision. That ruling cleverly shifted the point of controversy from a question of an unborn child’s right to life to a question of a woman’s right to choose.

Where did that idea come from? Have you ever heard anyone claim that a woman’s right to choose an abortion is an inalienable right based upon natural law? Fact of the matter is that the idea originated in the minds of public relations experts who used their ingenuity to find a way to break down public resistance to the idea of abortion. They knew the public would never be receptive to abortion if it were treated as a right-to-life issue. So they determined to confuse the issue by recasting it in terms dear to the heart of every patriotic American – freedom and choice.

That shift of focus obscures the real issue, the termination of a life. It focuses instead on the popular notion that intelligent people ought to be free to make their own choices in personal matters.

So the point at issue is no longer whether human life begins at conception. That’s irrelevant. What matters is the proposition that human freedom begins *with* choice. If you take away a woman’s choice, you take away her freedom. That’s un-American, or religious bigotry, or both.

Meanwhile what happens to the inalienable right based upon natural law? It gets lost in the fog created by the proponents of freedom of choice.

But unfortunately the question of rights does not stop with the abortion issue. Once truth is obscured and suppressed on one issue, it becomes easier to suppress it on other issues. People who dispense with natural law become a law unto themselves. In 1991 voters in the state of Washington were first asked to approve two right-to-die initiatives sponsored by the Hemlock Society. The new law would have given physicians the right to terminate life under specified conditions. The narrow margin of defeat at the polls left right-to-life proponents apprehensive about the future.

From our perspective it’s unsettling that the initiatives even got on the ballot in the first place. The constitutional guarantee of the right to life becomes a negotiable issue. It all depends. Instead of natural law deciding the issue, ballots decide it. Is that where we are headed? Recent

history provides a disturbing answer to that question. In 1994 Oregon voters approved a so-called “Death With Dignity” initiative. Washington subsequently followed suit. And in 2009, Montana’s high court ruled that although assisted suicide remains technically illegal, a doctor, if prosecuted, can use a “defense of consent.” Like a cancer, the problem is metastasizing.

In 1940, less than 7% of our citizens were elderly. In 1980 it was 11%. In 2000 it was 17% and counting. What are we going to do when the young people who were not aborted can no longer meet the tax burden of supporting the elderly? If it is legal to deprive the unborn of the right to life, can we also legalize the same for the elderly. Two decades ago, voters in Washington were offered the opportunity to ask: Why not? If abortion is an option to resolve a thorny problem, why not death with dignity?

Isaiah addressed a word of warning to Israel 2700 years ago. It’s as pertinent today as it was then. *“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter”* (Isaiah 5:20). As a nation are we repeating Israel’s mistake today? Are we setting ourselves up for the day when “the wrath of God” is going to be *“revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness?”* (Romans 1:18).

Paul’s words paint a gloomy picture. What we need to remember as we ponder them is that the first chapter of Romans is followed by 15 more – 15 chapters that offer a positive testimony to God’s other revelation of Himself in Jesus the Christ. Not only is He a God whose “invisible qualities” are plainly evident in His creation of the world, as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says. He is also a God who has made Himself visible to us in the person of His Son, our Savior, *“the Word made flesh.”*

In Christ the God who created us has also recreated us and reclaimed us to be His very own. Not only has He given us a new status as saints of God. He has also given us a new mission in life. The world is still willfully blind to the obvious, still “suppressing the truth”. But we have the privilege of “unsuppressing” it and making it known. Life Sunday is a reminder to us that our work is not finished. We have a big responsibility. But we’ve also got a big God whose eternal power and Godhead still stand behind us guaranteeing victory in the end. So let’s resolve together to get on with our mission, not just talking about the sanctity of life, but demonstrating it too for Jesus’ sake, Amen.