

A Letter to My Daughters
Following the Supreme Court Decision Overturning Roe v. Wade¹
1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21, Luke 9:51-62
Rev. Andrew Connors
Proper 8
June 26, 2022

My dearest daughters,

Like both of you, I'm angry at the Supreme Court's decision this week overturning Roe v Wade. I'm fearful over what this decision could mean for anyone like you who is able to conceive,² not only in regards to the right to end a pregnancy but in the possibility that things we took for granted like access to contraception could be at risk for the first time in my life. I'm fearful about what this could mean for the gay couples in my life whose marriages are seemingly at risk and whose privacy is once again up for negotiation.

As your father, I'm realizing more and more how I raised each of you with the implicit assumption that things were getting better in the world - that setbacks were exactly that. A temporary loss. That the battles that we fought for equality alongside women and people of color and LGBTQ siblings were progressing in history. That assumption was dead wrong and I lament its loss. As I grieve the loss of this naivete I'm struggling to find a new kind of hope to replace it. Hope that I will need to preserve, in the words of a friend, "the hallelujah in my spirit" so it's not completely overwhelmed by "the anger in my soul."³

As you know, a person's right to terminate a pregnancy already had significant limits on it - the Roe decision allowed states to regulate abortion after fetal viability, essentially protecting this right only for the first trimester of a pregnancy.⁴ As an ethical human being, that decision made a lot of sense to me. It essentially struck a balance between recognizing that early in a pregnancy, a person who is pregnant has a right to make decisions about their own body and that the precise moment at which a bundle of cells becomes a child is not clear to any of us. That in the absence of this clarity the best way to proceed is by preserving the choice of a woman to make her own decisions.

¹ With special gratitude to my daughters who granted permission for the sermon to take this form. Each daughter gave specific feedback on certain aspects of the sermon some of which resulted in changes to the initial draft. I take full responsibility for the final version of the document.

² My daughters cautioned me against referring only to women as a group, but rather to those who are able to conceive which is the more accurate group reference. There are, however, references to women as a group, mainly because of the historic way that women as a group have been targeted by patriarchal systems and cultural norms.

³ Shani McIlwain texted this to a friend. You could learn more about her at <https://shanimcilwain.info/hello>

⁴ Beyond viability, the court protected abortion from state interference only to protect a patient's life and health.

That decision also made a lot of sense to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that declared in 1970 “the artificial or induced termination of a pregnancy is a matter of careful ethical decision of the patient ... and therefore should not be restricted by law.”⁵ I’ve viewed the church’s role to provide compassion and love to any person making such difficult decisions. Our Presbyterian Church said it this way in 2006:

Life is a gift from God. We may not know exactly when human life begins, and have but an imperfect understanding of God as the giver of life and of our own human existence, yet we recognize that life is precious to God, and we should preserve and protect it. We derive our understanding of human life from Scripture and the Reformed Tradition in light of science, human experience, and reason guided by the Holy Spirit. Because we are made in the image of God, human beings are moral agents, endowed by the Creator with the capacity to make choices. Our Reformed Tradition recognizes that people do not always make moral choices, and forgiveness is central to our faith. In the Reformed Tradition, we affirm that God is the only Lord of conscience-not the state or the church. As a community, the church challenges the faithful to exercise their moral agency responsibly.⁶

As your father, my hope would be that you are never in a situation where you have to entertain the possibility of terminating a pregnancy. But you both know life doesn’t always turn out exactly as we hope it will. That, up until a certain age, most adults who engage in heterosexual sex risk the possibility of a pregnancy even when taking good precautions. I’m happy to be part of a theological tradition that provides the foundation for me to be able to teach that our bodies are good, pleasure itself is good, sex between adults when guided by the protection and care of the other is good. I’ve done my best, however imperfectly, to raise you to love your own bodies, to cherish your own needs, and to set your own boundaries in relationships. To embrace desire and pleasure as gifts from God to be enjoyed and respected, but not feared.

Of course, like any gift they can be misused, even abused. But even then I’ve tried to impress upon you that mistakes are simply that. That my love for each of you is

⁵ Minutes of the 182nd General Assembly (1970), United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., p. 891.

⁶ Minutes of the 217th General Assembly (2006), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 905. After preaching this sermon, a hearer reflected that while she agreed with my sentiments, she wondered how much moral education is really offered through the church. She makes a very good point. My reflection to her comment is that those who engage in the smaller group ministries of the church - Bible study, book group, faith reflection, etc. receive much more education than those whose church engagement is only a Sunday here or there. Because this subject is so tender for so many at this particular time, I chose not to make the sermon the place to try to share resources for moral reflection.

not contingent on perfection in your choices, and that mistakes in relationships are how we grow. That God is not some otherworldly bearded man on a cloud who sits stoically waiting to pass judgment on your daily choices, but the very source of our being, a kind of love energy from which all that is good springs forth.

If you were to become pregnant at a time when having a child would be difficult for you, the most important thing I could offer to you is the assurance that I trust you to make the decision that is best for you. I've sat with more than a few women who have faced this kind of a decision in the past. They've come to me, I think, because the political debates about abortion make it difficult for women actually facing this decision to find the actual support they need. To have the space to share their grief over what some may feel is ending the possibility of a life, or share their fear about punishment by God, the church, or the state, or share their anger that though it takes a sperm and an egg to achieve a pregnancy, the burden of this decision in all of its physicality always falls on the person with the uterus.

Part of my duty and my joy as a pastor is holding that space trusting the Spirit of God to bring guidance and healing and direction.

The 2006 General Assembly said it best:

When an individual woman faces the decision whether to terminate a pregnancy, the issue is intensely personal, and may manifest itself in ways that do not reflect public rhetoric, or do not fit neatly into medical, legal, or policy guidelines. Humans are empowered by the spirit prayerfully to make significant moral choices, including the choice to continue or end a pregnancy. Human choices should not be made in a moral vacuum, but must be based on Scripture, faith, and Christian ethics. For any choice, we are accountable to God; however, even when we err, God offers to forgive us.⁷

Of course, other traditions - most notably the Roman Catholic tradition - disagree. For them, abortion is always wrong. So is contraception. In fact, anything that might impede a possible pregnancy is seen as sin because sex itself is "ordered" toward procreation. But this is not our tradition's approach to sex and procreation. For Reformed Christians a joyous pregnancy is a significant positive outcome of sex within a committed relationship, but it is not the only purpose of sex. This is why, though it took us awhile to get there, Presbyterians more easily opened ourselves to gay ordination and marriage equality than other traditions. Part of the struggle that we are living through in our time is the attempt of some forms of Christianity to impose their beliefs and ideals on the rest of us. You have both seen this is your time on this earth. Whether it's the toxic masculinity of the white evangelical tradition, or the binary roles

⁷ Minutes of the 217th General Assembly (2006), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 905.

prescribed by the Catholic church.⁸ We've seen the dangerous way that faith and politics have intertwined.

But this is not a new development. Scripture itself records centuries of abusive patriarchal systems codified through religious codes. A polygamous marriage system that required that women be transferred from their fathers to a husband; a system legitimized, amazingly, as the best way to serve the interest of women themselves! Or systems of slavery defended by religious ideas that some races were so subhuman that they needed this kind of control to keep them in line.

As my friend Shani said recently, "body autonomy ain't never been a birthright. We've always had to fight for it."⁹ The forces that have taken away your body autonomy, robbed you of a right, have been working on this for the last several decades at state and local levels. As the former President of Planned Parenthood said recently, "what happened is not about religion or morality or unborn babies. It's about politics. . .it's about control."¹⁰ If it really was about reducing or even eliminating abortion, then political leaders would have focused on the things that have reduced abortions in the past - support for policies to get more women out of poverty, expansion of access to contraception for all people, and more affordable child care and health care to make having a child the joy it could be for more people rather than the burden that it often is.

The hard truth that no father who truly loves his daughters wishes were so is simply this - your safety and independence are not things I have been able to give to you. It is something you and your generation will have to take for yourselves through the long, hard work of building power to make it so. I would like to think that some of the work I have undertaken thus far has been toward that end. But it hasn't been enough or as effective as I'd hoped. And while you don't need any permission from me to learn from my own mistakes as a part of your hopes to make the world a better place, I want to encourage you nonetheless. Build the power that you need block by block to take back this night that has fallen on all of us.

In the texts for church this week, the prophet Elijah is sort of compared and contrasted with Jesus. Elijah calls his disciple, Elisha and Elisha says yes, but let me run home and kiss my parents goodbye, first. Elijah says, sure, have at it. Jesus calls a disciple who asks to return home to bury his father. And Jesus says, "let the dead bury the dead." As if that wasn't jerky enough he goes on to say, "no one who puts hand to plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven." One way to think about this is that Jesus' call is more stringent than Elijah's. But taken together, I'm more apt to

⁸ It's tricky business to both respect the beliefs and traditions of another form of the Christian faith (or any other faith for that matter) while at the same time refusing to be governed by those beliefs and traditions. But that is precisely which *religious* people argued for a separation of church a state, a historic fact forgotten by many.

⁹ Shani McIlwain texted this to a friend. You could learn more about her at <https://shanimcilwain.info/hello>

¹⁰ Cecile Richards, President of Planned Parenthood 2005-2018, quoted in "How Did Roe Fall?," Kate Zernike, *The New York Times*, June 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/06/25/us/how-ro-ened.html>.

wonder what are the things from our past that we'd better honor and observe because they are still giving life, and what are things that no longer give us life and need to be jettisoned, dropped, forgotten?

If there is hope in the present moment it is that the Roe decision was far from ideal. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg thought that a right to an abortion should have been argued as an equal protection right. She feared that the decision came earlier than was ideal, before the rising tide of support for a person's choice had time to come to full fruition. We have an opportunity now to improve the legal standards for this right going forward. You brought to my attention that this Supreme Court decision came down a day after the 50th anniversary of Title IX, which has vastly narrowed the gaps between gendered sports. But as you both noted that decision needs all kinds of changes as well in order to realize more equality among all people. There is much hope to be found when we take a step back and consider these concerns from more than just a legal standpoint. To think about the society that we are called to create - where respect, born out of love for oneself and one's neighbors guides our personal and political decisions. What must we honor and observe from our parents' past and what must we leave behind in our quest to struggle for the beloved community promised by our God?

Those are the questions that are a part of every call, my blessed children, just as they continue to be before me. To observe the struggles of your father's generation¹¹ and the ones before and learn what you wish to bring forward and what's already dead that needs to be left behind. I trust you to make good choices. Like me, you will also make mistakes. Take heart that your struggle is part of a generations-long struggle of women like you and others who have long since departed. I have been privileged to be an ally to your struggle and to the struggles of others marginalized by race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and religion. The people Jesus privileged because, as Howard Thurman said, their backs were against the wall. God willing, I will have many more years of struggle in the years ahead.

Take heart from the knowledge that even when love itself was crucified on a cross, it came to life again. Take heart that all the great social movements that made progress in the world experienced strong reactions when they actually made progress. And may the retrenchment that we all are experiencing now drive you to do what you need to do to care for yourselves, to organize and strategize for yourself and for all people whose differences are exploited to keep you apart, and to find a peace in the midst of the struggle - a peace that cannot be taken away because it comes from God.

Love,
Dad

¹¹ I chose the less inclusive "father's generation" to make sure my daughters understand that I mean both the metaphorical understanding of "parent's generation" but also the literal permission to reject things they learned from their actual father.