

Yesterday I spoke at a rally in San Luis Obispo protesting the probable end of Roe v Wade. This is some of what I said,

“In the ancient stories we hear that God gave humanity free will. God gave us the power to choose, and God rejoices when we use that power for the highest good of all beings. God also gives us consciences and it is in the interplay of conscience and freewill that God gives each one of us, every individual, the power to choose the highest good for ourselves, our families and our community...and God gives women the power to say No! when others try to take away our right to choose, and God gives women the power to say Yes! To a world where every child is wanted and every child is healthy.

No-one, whoever they are, no-one has the right to take away from us our God-given gift of freewill.”

Now you may agree with me, or you may not.

Before I go on, let me be very clear I do not support abortion except when absolutely necessary. It is never an easy choice for a woman, and yet sometimes it is necessary for reasons of health and for reasons of human flourishing. I am grateful for contraceptives which enable us to enjoy the powerful and wonderful aspects of sex without necessarily making another human life.

You may agree with me on that, or you may not.

These are matters on which Christians disagree, passionately. And that disagreement has been exploited by politicians and made into a boundary issue. If you are anti-abortion you are part of the true faith and the pro-choicers are not OR if you are on the other side, being pro-choice is a badge of honor and believing that abortion is always wrong marks you as being outside the group.

There have always been disagreements among the people of God. In the first few centuries there were several church councils called to settle

matters of doctrine. They did not always succeed, and sometimes violence ensued. The Nicene creed which we use regularly was an attempt to settle on of these major disputes in the 4th century.

Even earlier than that there were battles. In the middle of the 1st century, just 25 years or so after the crucifixion, the church was racked with the question of whether Gentiles could be followers of Jesus or whether they first had to convert to Judaism. That is the context of this morning's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Peter was criticized by the Christians in Jerusalem, which was then the center of the church for baptizing Gentiles. Although it sounds by the end of that passage as though everything was resolved, it wasn't. There was a council later where the whole question was argued again. And even after that it seems to have simmered on.

We have tended to think that there was one gospel on which everyone agreed – what we call the apostolic faith or as our baptismal vows put it, the “apostle's teaching and fellowship” and then there were heretics who diverged from that faith. But in reality, Jesus did not give us the answers to some very important questions, and as the church grew in different places, different ideas developed and the process of deciding on things we take for granted today was a painful political process with lots of shouting and lots of excommunications.

Where I'm going with all this is it is normal for Christians to disagree.

It is actually unusual for the people of God to agree on things. In the Jewish tradition there is much greater comfort with disagreement between rabbis. But we Christians tend to get mad and then we pick up our toys and leave.

The Anglican tradition is based on conflict and compromise which is what gives us intellectual freedom to disagree even as we worship together. But that is not always enough. For the first twenty plus years that I was in the Episcopal Church we were engaged in arguments about

sexual orientation. These only ended when the majority decided at General Convention to accept gay, lesbian and transgender people in all levels of ministry in the church and to allow us to marry. Those who disagreed left. And we are poorer for that.

In the very short gospel reading today Jesus said “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

At first glance that seems pretty ironic doesn't it?

But let us not confuse agreement with love. Respectful disagreement is also love.

Every long-term marriage manages disagreements. There are things which may be called “perpetual issues” between partners which are not likely to change significantly but which the couple find ways to deal with. This is not a lack of love but a function of love. The importance of the relationship, the importance of the beloved is greater than the need for agreement.

Yet in the church we tend to think that loving one another is the same as agreeing and seeing things the same way. We assume that people agree with us without checking it out and can end up hurting one another. Or if we disagree we think maybe this isn't the place for us. And then being part of the community stops being fun and rather than finding ways to disagree in love, we leave.

Here at St Ben's, we are enjoying a time of peace and prosperity. We have a low level of conflict. We deal pretty well with each other. But that may mean that we do not have the tools as a community to deal constructively and lovingly with conflict. I don't have an easy answer for that – we don't want to create conflict in order to hone our conflict-resolution skills.

Yet what makes us different from other organizations is that our head is Jesus and we are guided by the Holy Spirit. We are not just here to enjoy one another's company as we engage in our joint hobby of serving and worshiping God. Enjoying one another's company is the result not the goal. As we listen to the promptings of the Spirit, as we listen to one another's stories and journey together towards the Christ, love grows.

As we join together in the Body of Christ we can have disagreements, we can hold a minority position knowing that we are loved and valued, and those in the majority can support those whose opinion is different. As I said yesterday, "it is in the interplay of conscience and freewill that God gives each one of us, every individual, the power to choose the highest good for ourselves, our families and our community." It is in the interplay of conscience and freewill that we can find the highest good even when we disagree.

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."