

Pregnancy, the series, #2: Prenatal Care (Going Places We Don't Want to Go)– John 21:15-19
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV –3d Sunday of Easter (April 14) 2013

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

As I described last Sunday, the Worship Committee’s study of the scriptures for this season of Easter led them to a realization that the story of a pregnancy is being described – all the way up to May 19, **PENTECOST**, the **birth of the Church**.

And all through this pregnancy, we hope that you will bring in your baby shower gifts and put them into the baby crib in the Narthex. We are having a Baby Shower on Sunday, May 9 (Mother’s Day) for some expectant mothers, who have great needs that their financial situation won’t cover.

Easter Sunday was **Conception Sunday**. Like the way it happens in life, no one talked about the conception happening in the “moment of.” We just had the spectacular feel good celebration.

Last Sunday, we got the news: **The EPT strip turned blue; a baby is coming**.

This morning’s Gospel leads us to think about the kinds of things we need to do in order to provide good prenatal care.

In the premarital counseling that I do with couples, we use a book and video entitled, **“The Power of We.”** Some of you here today have gone through this material, either in preparation for marriage OR as part of a marriage enrichment class.

The study material focuses on how a marriage takes two separates (husband and wife) and creates a third entity: “WE.” In setting up the concept, we talk about the similarities to creating a baby. In the creation of a “WE” (marriage) like in the creation of a BABY, the couple has to make some changes. Some are welcome, but not all. Spending time with your spouse, spending time with your baby – instead of going bowling with the guys/girls – is a change that most couples have no problem in doing. Getting up in the

middle of the night to change a dirty diaper is not something that ANYBODY enjoys doing. But it's a change in life that you make, anyway, for the sake of the new one – the baby, the marriage.

Some people “get” that; some do not.

Perhaps you know of someone, expecting a baby, but who refuses to make certain life style changes. Continued unhealthy diet, unhealthy life style, continued use, or overuse, of drugs, caffeine, nicotine, and LSD. And, too often, when that kind of bad prenatal care is followed, the baby is the one who suffers – with birth defects of various and sundry kinds.

Jesus told Peter to:

- **Feed my lambs**
- **Tend my sheep, and**
- **Feed my sheep.**

And each time, Peter responded: **You betcha!**

And then Jesus told Peter just what that would mean (in verse 18): **That means you are going to be led in places where you do not want to go!**

In the years that followed, the Spirit led Peter again and again to undesired destinations.

“Peter.”

“What?”

“Go to that Roman officer’s house and be his brother.”

“Lord, I can’t, he’s one of Them!”

But Peter the bigot was led into new relationships, and in so doing opened the Church to people theretofore thought of as sinners and outsiders.

“Peter.”

“What?”

“See your sisters and brothers eating food your Bible says not to eat?”

“Lord, don’t tell me!”

“That’s right, pull up a chair.”

“But my friends in the Church won’t like it!”

“Bingo!”

And Peter the legalist was led to his freedom, and in so doing opened the Church to people theretofore thought of as sinners and outsiders.

Today, Forest and Christie, and all of Charlie’s family and sponsors, in the presence of God -- and you, as witnesses – made a promise that they will nurture Charlie in Christ’s holy church, that by THEIR teaching and example, Charlie will be guided to accept God’s grace for himself, to profess his faith openly and to lead a Christian life.

There will be times when that will come easy; other times it will be difficult. But for the sake of Charlie, they will keep their promise.

Then **ALL OF YOU**, in the presence of God, and one another, as witnesses, made the promise that **YOU** will, with God’s help, **proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. YOU will surround Charlie with a community of love and forgiveness, they he may grow in his trust of God, and be found faithful in his service of others. YOU promised that YOU will pray for Charlie, that he may become a true disciple, who walks in the way that leads to life.**

There will be times when that will come easy; other times it will be difficult. But for the sake of Charlie, YOU will keep YOUR promise.

Being a Christian is NOT A SPECTATOR SPORT. WE have this Baby, **the Church**, entrusted to our care. What kind of care are WE going to provide?

According to the research¹ involving **people NOT IN THE PEWS**, people who don’t come to church AND WHO **DON’T WANT TO COME TO CHURCH**, **WE** the regular people of the American Church Culture are perceived as being **HYPOCRITICAL, judgmental, RIGID, and UNLOVING**.

Please hear me correctly. I **DID NOT** say that **YOU** are **HYPOCRITICAL, judgmental, RIGID, and UNLOVING**. But the research is clear – **that is how the followers of Jesus are perceived** by the people who do NOT want to be a part of our fellowship.

We cannot simply sit by quietly and allow those people who speak **HYPOCRITICALLY, judgmentally, RIGIDLY, and UNLOVINGLY** in the name of Christ and His Church to do so, unchallenged.

To sit back quietly and without objection is NO DIFFERENT THAN ***someone, expecting a baby, but who refuses to make certain life style changes. Continued unhealthy diet, unhealthy life style, continued use, or overuse, of drugs, caffeine, nicotine, and LSD. And, too often, when that kind of bad prenatal care is followed, the baby is the one who suffers – with birth defects of various and sundry kinds.***

We need to speak up – LOUD AND CLEAR in **NON-HYPOCRITICAL, NON-judgmental, NON-RIGID, and LOVING** ways, and **BE CLEAR: THIS IS WHAT CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH ARE ALL ABOUT. We MUST put an end to these PREVENTABLE BIRTH DEFECTS that are being caused in the Church.**

WE have taken our stand.

In the survey that you, the people of Saint Marks, filled out a few weeks ago, you said that the NUMBER ONE priority is TO FILL THE PEWS OF SAINT MARKS FOR WORSHIP.

But, just in case, you were not in the plurality that so answered, let me remind you of the promise that you made on behalf of Charlie

AND of the promise you made in your vows of membership: to faithfully participate in the ministries of this Church by “your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness.”

- That’s not for ME, your pastor’s sake.
- That’s not for the sake of the United Methodist Church.
- That’s for the sake of the baby!

This past week, as I accompanied Susan High, and her sisters and mother, along Susan’s final days in her body – perhaps it was due to my being involved in this sermon series, I don’t know – but it occurred to me that all of this time spent in our bodies is just the pregnancy for that next birth. Saint Paul described it thusly to the Church at Rome:

²² ... we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

This lifetime, in which we share together, is also a pregnancy for the next birth, when our bodies are redeemed and we share together in the Church Triumphant.

Here, too, we need to provide good prenatal care.

It sometimes means, as Jesus told Peter, that we will be led places where we don't want to go.

- Dirty diapers in the middle of the night need taken care of.
- Reaching out to people not like us is a commandment.
- Loving people when they don't seem very lovable – and that doesn't mean just people on the other side of the planet; that also means people sitting in the pew with us, as well – is not merely optional behavior.

If we look at Peter's life, it seemed that most of his being led **where he do not want to go** went hand in hand with:

- **Feed my lambs**
- **Tend my sheep, and**
- **Feed my sheep.**

It's NOT just the preacher's job.

It's NOT somebody else's job.

You made vows today, on behalf of Charlie. Not just Forest and Christie, not just Charlie's family and sponsors. ALL OF US made vows today.

But we've made other vows, too. It's not just about Charlie.

- There are other children who are NOT coming to Sunday School. They cannot get up, get dressed, and drive the car here. They are counting on the adults.
- Sleeping in and worshipping Saint Mattress is not a valid excuse.
- Christianity is not a spectator sport.

- Christianity is not just about feeling good about yourself.
- For Christ's sake, Christianity is not just about getting yourself saved. If more people quit worrying about whether they've done the right stuff to be save, would simply assume that they are, and start acting like they are, then the Kingdom of God would be much closer.
 - **Feed my lambs**
 - **Tend my sheep, and**
 - **Feed my sheep.**

We've got to provide good prenatal care for these little lambs.

Let me call upon you to turn with me to the PRE-NATAL CARE guidelines that are contained in your hymnal. Turn to 607 and let's remind ourselves once more:

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low by thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, leet me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. AMEN.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ see "unChurched" by David Kinnaman & Gabe Lyons