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Take Heart: Is Neutrality Really What We Need Right Now?



I opened my email on a September morning to find an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* highlighting the ways that our post-Roe world is influencing our institutions, our teaching, and our mentoring of students. I was drawn in by the part of the headline that read, “A University Tells

Faculty to ‘Remain Neutral’ on Abortion Discussions in Class.” Learning about the ways that abortion legislation is impacting higher education in other states amplified very real fears and uncertainties present in our changing legislative and educational environments. As I processed the piece, my thoughts kept returning to one phrase—‘remain neutral.’ It was somehow disturbing. As I sat with it, I wondered, is neutrality really what we need right now? I understand that, legally, this may be the best advice that general counsel can give. But, what about pedagogically?

Neutrality is problematic for several reasons. It presupposes that the issue in question is about taking sides, it relies on a lack of investment or care, and it can be a barrier to critical engagement since neutral positions

are rarely as truly neutral or value-free as they purport to be. As an ethicist, I am concerned about the ways that remaining neutral can prevent the kind of deep, intentional, and careful engagement needed for addressing issues that so intimately affect our lives and the lives of others in our communities. Emphasizing neutrality seems like just another way to say this issue is too hot to touch and that we’d better just leave it alone.

The shared and distinctive values of Lutheran higher education, as expressed in the statement “Rooted and Open” combined with the approach taken by the ELCA in its 1991 Social Statement on Abortion (SSOA) call us to take heart and consider more fully how to create and maintain spaces for learning and growth. These spaces ought to be those where we and our students are challenged to think critically about our assumptions and to grow into a greater awareness of our lives in community and the ways we can work toward a common good. Urging neutrality threatens to stifle conversation precisely when we ought to be opening up more opportunities for collective reflection on how we preserve important social and moral goods like access to reproductive health care and respect for life. As we engage with our students and each other we don’t need neutrality. What we need is courage.

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Courage: Identifying and Responding to Fear

I've been teaching courses in sexual ethics for nearly 15 years. In that time, I've noticed that it has only become harder for students to talk about the ethics of abortion. A big reason for this is fear. In the polarized environment we are in, students expect conversations about abortion to be contentious, adversarial, and intractable. Many of them have only experienced engaging with this topic through the dualistic "pro-choice vs. pro-life" framework and they are often very anxious about entering into any kind of "debate" or conversation with those who have different views. These fears aren't easily dismissed. A polarized environment feeds insecurity, it suggests that one must choose a side and it can feel threatening to those who are unsure. Students are often afraid of being shamed or judged by their peers, and having little experience with civil and respectful dialogue, the threat of rejection is not imaginary. It often feels like a safer option to stay quiet or avoid having a view at all. Furthermore, when it looks like there are only two sides to choose from, those who have chosen a side may be afraid to examine it because important parts of their self-understanding may be closely tied to that position. The threat of losing oneself is very scary.

One of the strengths of the SSOA is that it makes room for ambivalence and disagreement while also sustaining a commitment to remaining in a community united by shared values. This shared commitment to affirming the goodness of life includes attention to the many factors that support flourishing more broadly such as access to education, a supportive community, and health and child care. In our Lutheran higher ed environments, we ought to be guided by a similar spirit. Grounded in our common calling to "intentionally pursue conversations about big questions" and to nurture and educate students who are "intellectually acute, humbly open to others, vocationally wise, and morally astute," we ought to be boldly confident in our commitment to holding space for courageous conversations about challenging political and ethical matters like abortion. It is unfortunate and frightening that our colleagues in different institutions may not have this freedom.

We have a responsibility to honor the courage it takes for our students to risk stepping into conversations about big questions in the first place. Encouraging students to wrestle with complex issues and to develop their own

perspectives can play an important role in boosting self-confidence as they are challenged to strengthen their own sense of agency in a world that will ask a lot of them. We can help them (and ourselves) to bolster their courage by challenging the dualistic framework and approaching this issue with greater nuance and care.

Courage: Taking Heart and Challenging Apathy

Courage is a virtue of the heart, it opposes neutrality in part because it relies on caring about something enough to face challenges. Courage boosts our spirit when we'd rather run away, it enables us to "take heart" and keep going. A neutral position can often mask an underlying apathy, a lack of interest or care. As we just explored, there are many uncomfortable and frightening obstacles to engaging in dialogue with others about abortion and reproductive rights. In my experience, student's commonly try to remain above the fray by assuming that this issue does not concern them. They may have their own privately held views or beliefs, and a sense for what choices they think they would make, and that is where they prefer to keep them. In some ways this can be a good thing if it creates space for being generally respectful of the different views and decisions that others may make. But the other side of this is that it releases them from having to care about the lives of others and from thinking about the role they play in shaping a society that can be more or less supportive of life and well-being.

"The values of Lutheran higher education directly challenge apathy. Students are called to be a "neighbor" and to serve and understand the needs of others in the pursuit of a common good."

The values of Lutheran higher education directly challenge apathy. Students are called to be a "neighbor" and to serve and understand the needs of others in the pursuit of a common good. We have a responsibility to

challenge ignorance and speak openly about the ways that laws and policies impact people's lives. We need more awareness of the ways that members of our communities are suffering so that we are better able to envision alternatives that can alleviate that suffering and promote flourishing.

Courage: Confronting and Breaking Silence

Conversations about the ethics and legal status of abortion are severely hampered by the power of taboo and the perpetuation of ignorance. Despite growing up in what seems like a sex-saturated cultural environment, my students still overwhelmingly agree that talking openly about sex and sexuality rarely happens. This is even more the case with abortion specifically. Over the past 15 years of teaching, I can recall only a handful of students who have any knowledge of what a decision about abortion or an abortion experience is like. Most of my students tend to assume that abortion is something that "other" people experience. Having little to no exposure to the experiences of real people making real choices in complex situations leaves them free to make all kinds of assumptions, often negative, about who chooses to have an abortion and why. Adopting a position of neutrality risks perpetuating the problem by failing to challenge this damaging status quo.

Having the courage to break the silence that persists when abortion is a taboo topic is essential for empowering our students to adopt a careful, compassionate, and nuanced understanding. Over the past few years more and more women have been sharing their experiences in order to break this silence. Listening to their stories is

transformative because it helps students to see and better understand all of the variables at play in each unique circumstance. It makes it clear that addressing abortion entails much more than determining the moral status of the fetus or defending an abstract legal right or determining who is right or wrong. It requires asking difficult questions about the society we are building and living in and the ways that our society either honors or fails to promote human dignity and flourishing.

Roe v. Wade is gone. Our current reality has opened up the political "flood gates" and we are now confronting a dizzying array of new legislative realities that will significantly impact the lives of ourselves, our students, and our communities. Our graduates need to feel confident in their preparation for this new and uncertain world. Neutrality will not get them there.

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