

Valerie Elverton Dixon

June 2, 2009

Rhetoric and Faith

The murder of Dr. George Tiller causes a pause to consider the ethics of the discourse around the issue of abortion, especially late term abortions. That he was killed in sacred space, the sanctuary of a church during a worship service, causes a longer pause as we think about the relationship between rhetoric and faith.

It is the oldest rhetorical trick in the book: divide the world into them and us. Portray the Other as evil. Portray ourselves as good. Then associate the evil Other with bad actors in human history. We assume the moral high ground for ourselves convinced that we are only working to uphold the good, beautiful, and true for the sake of human flourishing and for the sake of a just society. At its best, rhetoric is the art of persuasion. It helps us to make a case for the laws a society ought to establish, for decisions juries ought to reach in court, and for placing praise or blame upon an individual according to what we think is right. Rhetoric, persuasion, helps us come to consensus in a society about what will be our shared values and beliefs.

Faith can fall in the gap between the portrait of the evil Other and the portrait of our sinless selves. When faith becomes a certainty so certain in the righteousness of our own position that we can consider no other aspect of the question, it falls into the abyss. The position itself, whether in favor of a woman's right to choose an abortion or the position that abortion murders another human being and thus there is no right to it, becomes a word from God. It becomes its own theology. The position itself takes on its own divinity. When our faith in our own position on an issue becomes God strong, we are willing to kill and to die for it. This is especially true within the context of blood-shed theology. The faith in our own righteous cause becomes God, an idol too puny to bind us to the Other.

Our particular position on this or that issue is not God, is not divine, is not ultimate. It is the product of our finite minds existing in finite time within a limited perspective. We understand in part, and the knowledge that we do have will soon pass away. Theologian Paul Tillich warned against making that which is not ultimate our ultimate concern. When we make this mistake, we open ourselves to existential disappointment. Faith has not reached God.

In Aristotle's thinking, rhetoric seeks to persuade us through the character of the speaker, through our emotions and through the logic of our arguments. So often in the hyper media of a hyper discourse, we seek to fuel emotional fires because too too many of us have already chosen sides. So, heated rhetoric keeps our anger our fear our moral indignation aflame. This is where various media commentators ought to assume responsibility for what they say.

When George Tiller was called “Tiller the baby killer”, this was pure emotional content. When people who oppose abortion are called nuts and kooks and people who encourage terrorism, this again is pure emotional content. The name calling is empty of compassion. And if any situation cries out for compassion, it is the issue of abortion. People who stand as extra legal judges and juries of Dr. Tiller show a stunning lack of compassion for the 60,000 women who sought and received his help. What are their stories? How did they come to such a momentous decision late in their pregnancies? For people who believe that abortion is a matter for only a woman and her doctor, the question of compassion for the life of the unborn child comes to the fore. Is this the child whose imperfections would have brought a new understanding of perfection into the world? Is this the child who would have brought you or me a cool drink of water in the heat of the day?

When faith stops with the emotional appeals of rhetoric to support this or that position, when it stops before it reaches compassion, when it stops before it reaches radical love, even and especially a radical love of the one with whom we disagree, we have already desecrated sacred space, the holy space of the relationship between ourselves and the Other.