

The Secret Pain

By Linda Bartlet

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Mother's Day, Father's Day, Grandparent's Day and Life Sunday are not happy events for those wounded by abortion. These days, intended to celebrate life, can instead be a reminder of lost lives and denied relationships.

For 30 years, abortion has been the subject of heated debate. But for millions of American women, and for the men, grandparents, siblings and friends in the lives of those women, abortion is not a debate – it is a loss. It is the loss of a son, a daughter, a grandchild. That's because motherhood and fatherhood — and even grand-parenthood — begin at conception.

Many of us know someone who has lost a child through miscarriage. We grieve with them, offer the peace of Christ and entrust the precious little one to God. But abortion is a secret pain. It is a loss that is carried deep inside and alone.

The great loss of life should pierce the heart of every one of us. The numbers are staggering. More than 3,000 women have abortions every day. These women are in our families, congregations and circles of friends. They are Christians who worship with us and go to Bible study with us. I know some of these women. At least 21 of my relatives, friends or acquaintances have had abortions — 16 of these women are Lutherans. Two are the wives of Lutheran pastors. At least three have had more than one abortion.

Abortion has created a new mission field for the church. There is a need to enter this mission field — but, first, we must understand that we will almost certainly encounter denial, anger, self-hatred, distrust, grief, remorse and the natural, but perhaps deeply buried, desire for reconciliation with the Giver of Life.

For those in denial, our message must gently convict. For those already convicted, our message must be of hope and our behavior sincere. Just as we have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, we have been given a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18).

Eight months ago, I became a grandmother for the first time. Holding my grandson is surprisingly different than holding my own two sons. Each gaze upon the child of my child is a generational moment. The room of my heart excitedly receives this little one. The room of my life rearranges itself.

Often, when I am holding my grandson, I think of the thousands of other women of my generation whose arms will never hold a grandchild. Their arms will never hold the child of their child. That's because pregnant women believed the lie: "Make this one sacrifice and choose a better time to be a mother." Although the room of their hearts may have whispered a word of welcome, the room of their lives did not.

Because these women either did not hear or did not trust God's promise, the world captured their every thought and desire. Tossed in a tumultuous sea, these women reached toward "salvation" in the guise of a "quick and painless" abortion.

But the degrading act goes against all that is maternal and natural. Sent away from the abortion clinic, women are abandoned to burdens of guilt, grief and anger that threaten to pull them into cold and lonely darkness, away from the Giver of Life.

How to respond

So how do you and I respond?

Some say, "How could a woman do such a thing!" This statement is not intended to be cruel, but it is heard as a judgment.

Others, hoping to be less judgmental, say, "I would never have an abortion myself, but I believe every woman should have the right to choose." This statement sounds compassionate, but to the woman who has had an abortion, it sounds like a comparison: "Abortion is wrong and because I am a good person I wouldn't do such a terrible thing, but women who are incapable of doing the right thing should have a choice."

Both statements are condemning. Neither offer hope before or after an abortion.

There is a third response: Trying to imitate Jesus. Jesus understands why people like you and me sin; He came to live among us, to feel our frustration, fears and sorrow. He placed Himself in a very different circumstance here on earth than that of heaven. Jesus loved us so much that He willingly took on our disgrace, our burden, our sin. Only by living under the Cross are we able to see those hurt by sin (including ourselves) in a new way.

Days on which we celebrate life are meant to be happy days, but for many they are not. In the heart of nearly every post-abortive woman is an empty place that is forever expectant and waiting. Although she may have believed the lie that there was no room, a cry of sorrow echoes in the room that was always there, waiting.

We cannot go back in time to erase 30 years of legalized abortion nor the effect on women, men, children and society. Mothers who once believed there was no room in their life for a baby now mourn the child whose heart beat so close under their own. Fathers who once believed that there was no room in their life for a baby are now angry at themselves for failing to protect their son or daughter. Could-have-been grandparents who once believed there was no room in their lives for a baby now dream of grandchildren that would have filled the rooms of their homes with laughter.

Sometimes, when I'm holding my grandson, my thoughts turn to Mary. She approached me after I was finished speaking to a group of Lutheran women, asking for my address.

In the letters that followed, she confessed two abortions. “There has been so much pain in my heart,” Mary wrote. “I could understand how God could forgive a murderer, but not some-one who has killed her own child.”

This pain and the belief that she had committed the sin “too big to be forgiven” held Mary captive. But, “the reason I want to tell you my story,” Mary continued, “is to thank you! If, years earlier, I had heard the words of compassion and forgiveness that I heard from you, I would not have had a second abortion. I would have been reconciled to God and turned my life around a lot earlier instead of wallowing in the muck of sin and accusation.”

A word of hope

“Mary”s are everywhere ... and they are waiting. They are silently waiting for a word of hope. Their broken hearts long to be healed. God has given us His Word to speak in love. To be sure, the Word of Truth presses hard on the source of pain. “When I kept silent,” wrote the psalmist, “my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and You forgave the guilt of my sin” (Ps. 32:3–5).

There is hope for women and men who have been pierced by abortion’s blade. It is Jesus! In Jesus, all who confess their sin are cleansed and forgiven (1 Tim. 1:15). In Jesus, the captive is set free (Gal. 5:1)! Jesus fills the empty and expectant rooms of hearts — and heals the secret pain.

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