

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Jan 22nd 2014

“Is it lawful...to save life rather than to destroy it?” Mark 3: 4.

The Philistines proposed a way to end the conflict: the greatest warrior from each army would do battle. The side that loses this contest would surrender. With sword and spear, the massive Goliath filled the Israelites with fear. Only one volunteered for the fight. The desperate king piled armor on the youth, but David was a shepherd, not a soldier. His weapon was the slingshot that he used against the bears and lions that preyed on his family's flock. Goliath was surprised and insulted by the young man who raced toward him. Later David would sing of the God who delivered the Israelites from the enemy's sword.

Today we pray for the legal protection of human life. In this struggle, the odds often seem daunting. In our time, troubling moral questions are called matters of opinion, best left to the individual. But the continuity of the self's existence that begins with conception is a startling fact. Where is the gap in this ongoing development that could delay the onset of personal existence?

The wonder of this tiny beginning sows respect for persons of all stages and places. No life is excluded, not even Goliath's. Jesus confounded the Pharisees by healing the man with the withered arm on the Sabbath. He was not a warrior or zealot bent on insurrection. The merciful love that embraces the poor, criminals, enemies, strangers, and the unborn proves more potent than any fortress or shield.

Annie Dillard captured the truth of personal existence in this way: “An English journalist, observing the Sisters of Charity in Calcutta, reasoned: ‘Either life is always and in all circumstances sacred, or intrinsically of no account; it is inconceivable that it should be in some cases the one, and in some the other’” (For the Time Being). Persons matter in ways that cannot be measured. With persons we are present to what is holy from the start.

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