

PENTECOST XVIII

(Jesus) said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the realm of God belongs.' Mark 10 15

In a few moments we will welcome Liam Musante into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism. As always, we at St. John's rejoice in these occasions. Baptisms bless not only the newly baptized, but they bless us all. Baptisms, above all perhaps, remind us why we are here, and who we are as a community.

I've been on a bit of a psychic wave recently – tuning in to some anniversaries of importance in other people's lives by providence, and beginning to think about a sermon topic before I've read the propers, and then finding particular congruence. Last week, for instance, an article in the Globe caught my particular attention. The headline was

Couple to give up baby after mix-up and the piece went on,

Carolyn Savage didn't know what to think, what to say, where to look as the ultrasound wand glided over her belly. It was supposed to be her baby inside. Not someone else's.

Yet here she was in her doctor's office with the baby's biological mother, both brought together by a terrible error at a fertility clinic. A doctor, they said, had given Savage the wrong embryo, and now she was carrying the other woman's child

Embryo mix-ups at fertility clinics are extremely rare. In those few instances, they've degenerated into custody battles, ugly lawsuits, and at least one abortion. But not this time. Savage and her husband decided that the right thing - the only thing - to do was to give the baby to the biological parents.

Savage, 40, is due to give birth to a boy within the next two weeks via caesarean section. When it happens, biological parents Paul and Shannon Morell, of the Detroit suburb of Troy, Mich., will be nearby.

"How do you thank somebody for what they've done?" Shannon Morell said. "I could say thank you a million different ways."

The Savages say the fertility clinic transferred the wrong frozen embryo to Carolyn's womb in early February. Ten days later, Sean Savage got a call from a doctor saying his wife was pregnant with someone else's child.

The doctor told them they could abort, but the couple didn't consider that a viable option. "It wasn't even something we had to discuss," said Sean Savage, 39.

The Morells, who live north of Detroit, learned of the mistake a day after the Savages. The two couples knew nothing about each other. Shannon Morell feared that the pregnant woman would choose abortion, ending their chance to give their 2-year-old twin girls a sibling.

"I felt helpless," Shannon Morell said. A few days passed before they learned that the Savages were not only willing to continue with the pregnancy, but also to give them the baby without hesitation.

Carolyn Savage won't have another chance to carry her own baby because of her age and difficulties during her earlier pregnancies. She and her husband plan to hire a surrogate and try again for a fourth child.

Many of you know, I think, that over the years I've worked consistently as an advocate for women's reproductive justice, women's reproductive health and choice. So items like this do catch my attention, and I was struck, as well, by a story of extraordinary integrity, compassion, and selflessness on the part of the Savages.

And their decision and their moral stance, their comprehension of the pain of the Morell family, their apparent grasp of what really matters, was especially compelling to me. Because, coincidentally, I was reading a novel about a family whose children (twins) were created by donor sperm. The story is set the night before date that the parents have decided to disclose to the children, who are 16, that their "father" is not "their real father." For 250 pages the children's mother, the narrator, tells the story of the marriage and worries, endlessly, about how the children will react to the news that the man who has parented them for their entire lives is not biologically related to them.

I rapidly lost patience with this theme. The book was written in 2007. I kept shouting silently at this (I thought) misguided mother/narrator "What are you on about, you idiot, not their *real* father?" What do you mean by *real*? What do you mean by *father*? What's so *real* to these children about an anonymous sperm donor? What's so *fatherly*? And why are we even discussing this in 2007, or even 1995 when the story is set?

As someone concerned with reproductive health and justice, I do some reading about reproductive technologies, and I was quite startled when a book I'd ordered a couple of years ago, sight unseen, a book titled **Everything Conceivable**, began this way.

The Reverend Beth Parab— young associate rector of the Episcopal Church of St, Matthew in San Mateo, California ... read an email asking whether she could find a way to incorporate another participant in the baptism ceremony of triplet boys. In addition to 6 godparents, family members and friends, that participant would be the Ramirez boys' egg donor. Reverend Beth had never written an egg donor into a baptismal ceremony. But she was glad to try. How, logistically, to incorporate an egg donor into a ceremony that dates back more than two millennia? St Augustine had not confronted the role of the egg donor in the formation of the human family, nor had St. Paul, nor Archbishop Tutu, Never before in history has it been possible for a woman to give birth to an infant who is genetically unrelated to her. Never, it seemed safe to assume, had two such women stood

together in the nave of St Matthew's to celebrate the rather resounding results of their joint efforts. (Abridged and paraphrased from **Everything Conceivable**, by Liza Mundy))

And never before has a book I've read on reproductive technology begun with a question about theology or liturgy or sacrament.

One more story. A number of years ago a young couple came to church here, and as I greeted them after the service they said that they had a question. The woman's brother was gay, and he and his partner had adopted a child. They had gone to the Episcopal parish in their town and been told that the priest would not baptize the baby because the baby had parents of the same sex. I said, *well, they need to find another parish*. That was easy advice.

Well, they did find another parish, and somehow – I've forgotten how- they found our bishop, Tom Shaw, and he became close to their family as it grew and is now godfather to one of their four sons.

My point? There are all kinds of families. There always have been. Jesus, in fact, had two fathers, didn't he? And Mary got pregnant in as unusual a way as any outcome of modern reproductive technology.

That's one point. Another point is that, as so often happens, technological advances are way out ahead of ethics and theology in the area of human reproduction. Anyone faced with a complicated decision about reproduction: an unplanned pregnancy, an inability or impediment to straightforward biological reproduction – good old heterosexual sex, that is – anyone faced with such a decision wrestles with moral dilemma, moral values, moral choices.

I found the story of the Savages and the misplaced embryo so heartening because this couples, with or without help and counseling, seem to have arrived at a morally exemplary, even sacrificial, decision. It can't have been easy, it can't have been without great pain. But their conclusion is inspirational.

And I found the beginning of **Everything Conceivable** heartening because of its opening frame – the pastoral, theological, and sacramental questions raised by advances in reproductive technology.

We all need help with the complicated, painful, difficult decisions we and those we love must make as we contemplate making our families. These are delicate conversations, because they involve the most intimate aspects of our lives. But all the more reason to seek, and to find, assistance as we wrestle with the choices we face. And it's this assistance that I hope and pray theologians and ethicists and pastoral counselors will increasingly provide.

What we at St John's can provide, as a particular community of faith in this place at this time, what we can witness to, is that there are all kinds of families. There always have been. Biological families, families of choice, families of necessity. They all have the potential to be, and to become, families of love. And in our theology, and our community, they are all families in Christ, all equal in value, all equally welcome among us, and equally embraced in the all-loving arms of God.

Last year, during a baptism, I asked the children, as I always do, what was about to happen. And they replied, as they always do, that I was going to pour water on the baptizee. Liam said, "not on me."

But I told him last week that water is part of the deal. We baptize everyone the same way. And we baptize everyone into a new family, the family of Christ. Let us now welcome Liam into that beloved family, my dear friends.

Alleluia! Amen