

Caught in the crossfire of parental desires

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Whenever I give a talk on in vitro fertilization, I try to explain to my audiences how new human life must be procreated in the warmth of the marital embrace and in the protective hearth of the maternal womb, not in the icy, impersonal world of the research laboratory or the manipulative setting of a Petri dish.

On one occasion, after finishing up a talk, a married couple approached me. They had done in vitro fertilization and had several children from the procedure. They appeared to be struggling in conscience, and asked a searingly honest question: "If in vitro fertilization is wrong, are you suggesting it would be better that we didn't have our beautiful children? We can't imagine our life without them."

Imagining a world different from the one we have constructed through our own personal choices is difficult. This is because of our innate tendency to validate our decisions, even erroneous ones, by focusing on "desirable outcomes" and "good intentions." When we venture to look beyond our good intentions, however, we begin to discern other important truths that should inform the choices we make, challenging us to see the bigger plan for our lives in ways that extend beyond our own wants and desires.

I recall once speaking with a woman who had given birth to a little boy out of wedlock. She was raising him as a single mom. He was a source of endless joy and blessing to her and to her extended family of brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles.

Yet in a moment of candor, she admitted, "Although I love my son dearly, and I can't imagine my life without him, I've also come to see how it would have been better if I had chosen not to have sex before marriage, even though it would mean I wouldn't have my beautiful son. I could have, and should have, followed another path."

This woman told me that, by giving herself to the man she hoped might one day be her husband, she supposed she was entering onto a path toward fulfillment. She soon came to realize, though, that her son had been deprived of the presence of a father figure, and that he was subject to various other difficulties as he grew up because of the choice she had made.

Whenever we choose to follow a path that involves intrinsically immoral choices, we necessarily mislead ourselves about the best total state of affairs that could have been ours. We usually also bring harm to others because of such choices.

For the intrinsically disordered choice of in vitro fertilization, it can be doubly difficult to see the harmful nature of the decision we are making because we direct our attention so intensely towards the baby we yearn for. Couples who do in vitro fertilization are doubtless convinced that the best total state of affairs for them would be to have a child, regardless of the steps it might require.

In the conversation with the husband and wife who attended my talk, they admitted that they could see how their own strong parental desires had gotten the upper hand in their decision-making process. They also admitted they were starting to grasp other realities involved in their decision to pursue in vitro fertilization: how a third party, an anonymous laboratory technician in a back room, had actually manufactured the kids, rather than the parents engendering them through their life-giving marital embrace; how they had misused their own bodies and sexuality, becoming little more than sex-cell donors; how pornography and masturbation stood at the origin of their own children; how they had produced a plethora of children, and had frozen some, and discarded others along the way.

Probably the most difficult truth for us to grasp fully is that even the most desirable ends, like having children of our own, cannot justify the use of inherently immoral means to achieve those ends. We can think that our desires are worthy to be achieved by any means, because we imagine that we are the ones who determine what constitutes the best state of affairs for our lives. It is but a short step to disaster, however, when our own desires become the final arbiter of right and wrong, or when our own willfulness is given center stage.

An infertile couple may suppose they have a right to children, when in truth they possess no such right, because the deeper reality is that children are always a gift. By insisting on or demanding the gift (through in vitro fertilization), the child no longer becomes a gift at all, but a kind of entitlement, where he or she becomes a means or object in the pursuit of parental satisfaction, caught in the crossfire of parental desires.

Infertile couples too often may not have paused to reflect on the possibility of another path, nor fully considered the various other important and humanly fulfilling ways of expressing their marital fruitfulness, ways that might include foster parenting, teaching, becoming a "Big Brother/Big Sister" to needy children in the community or adoption.

The attraction for children can be so strong that it can prevent us from acknowledging honestly the evil aspects that may be interwoven into certain choices we make. By pursuing children in a disordered way, we end up undermining the very blessings we seek for our life and for those around us.

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