

“Reproductive Justice: Embodying Liberty and Liberation”

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

One fall afternoon when I was 18 years old, I sat across from the director of, what was then called, the Greater Philadelphia Women’s Medical Fund. She glanced at my application for the position of telephone loan counselor and asked, “So, you were raised Catholic. How did you end up here?” I had happened upon the job opening when looking for a position that would fulfill the federal work study requirements of my college financial aid package. The director hadn’t up to that point encountered someone with a Catholic upbringing who wanted to work at an abortion fund. At this point in my life, I was a strongly questioning Catholic and was in a process of discovery with my sexuality and feminism, and until I had seen the job opening I didn’t know what an abortion fund was.

The Greater Philadelphia Women’s Medical Fund, now the Abortion Liberation Fund of Pennsylvania, was established by health care workers and women’s rights activists in 1985 in response to the Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act which prevented women from using Medicaid to pay for abortion care.¹ The telephone loan counselors responded to messages left by women, sometimes girls, who had decided to get an abortion but couldn’t afford the out-of-pocket costs.

Despite the director’s initial reservations, I got the job and spent two days a week at the fund office responding to loan requests. I spoke with women from across the city and suburbs of Philadelphia - most of whom were poor or low-income and many of whom were Black, Latina, and Asian.

I soon discovered that I had a lot in common with the women I spoke to each week. A desire to be safe, healthy, and happy. A dependence on the services of medical professionals to ensure my health. A need for connection to a broader community who could offer care and support in the face of gender-based barriers.

¹ <https://abortionfundpa.org/history>

I also discovered differences between myself and the women I spoke to - many of these due to differences in access to economic and educational opportunity and privilege. I had reliable, stable housing - many of them did not. I had 24-hour access to clinical health services - most of them did not. And, while I was working my way through college, I also came from a solidly middle-class family and knew I could rely on my parents for financial support. This kind of financial stability was not available to the women I spoke with who needed the Fund's assistance, or if it was, they were not likely to receive help to pay for their abortions.

It would be many years later until my first and then second pregnancies and a more intimate understanding of the questions and issues that arise at the prospect of bringing a baby into the world.

My partner and I chose to become parents. I was able to conceive and carry a healthy pregnancy to full-term. One week after my due date, my midwife heard an irregularity in our baby's heartbeat and sent me straight to the hospital from her office. Our son was delivered by emergency c-section. I became a mother at a time of my choosing and with no question of reliable medical options - a fact that I am grateful for.

When our son was 5 years old, my spouse and I got pregnant a second time. After eight weeks, the embryo stopped growing and I did not carry that pregnancy through its full development. Instead, I was able to use my own sacred conscience, the consultation of my doctor and spouse, and the stirrings of my own heart to make the painful decision to have that miscarried pregnancy surgically removed from my body. It was a heart-breaking time, and again, I am grateful that I had that choice and access to quality health care.

Within the past month, I have heard from friends and loved ones living in Vermont and elsewhere who have experienced the broad array of joys and sorrows that go along with reproductive choices and realities. For one same sex couple, it's the good news of a long-awaited baby born with the support of fertility treatments. For a friend, it's the sadness of miscarrying early in her pregnancy and navigating her health care options in the aftermath of that loss. For another couple, it's the difficult decision to abort a fetus after prenatal testing revealed an adverse health prognosis.

Each day people in all corners of our state, and in this very congregation, face questions and decisions like these about their reproductive health. The right to make decisions concerning one's reproductive life is affirmed by our Unitarian Universalist faith.

Unitarian Universalist theology upholds the worth and dignity of every person and affirms the sacredness of our bodies and our sexuality in its many expressions. Our bodies and our sexuality aren't sources of shame. Instead, we believe our bodies and our sexuality are sources of wholeness. And, this faith affirms that bodily autonomy is foundational to human dignity and self-determination.

Unitarian Universalist ethics asks us to also consider our interdependence with others and to look more closely at the issues of injustice and inequity at work within issues of reproductive rights.

When we consider reproductive rights, we are certainly talking about questions and issues that lead to the decision to have an abortion, as Brenda and Bronwyn so tenderly testified to in sharing their stories earlier in our service. And, issues of reproductive health and reproductive rights also go beyond the right to have an abortion.

In 2015, the Unitarian Universalist Association adopted a Statement of Conscience on Reproductive Justice.² Unitarian Universalists had long worked to support reproductive freedom and choice. Reproductive justice, however, is distinct from reproductive freedom or reproductive choice. It is a framework that brings together reproductive rights, social justice, and human rights.

This framework was developed in 1994 by a dozen Black women who had gathered in Chicago on their way to the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. They felt that the women's rights movement, led by middle class and wealthy white women, could not fully defend and represent the needs of women of color, other marginalized women, and trans people. In discussions of reproductive health, they didn't hear discussed how black women's choices were so often constrained by things like income, housing, and the criminal justice system. They came together and formed a group called Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice.

Three years later, the organization SisterSong, based in Atlanta, was established to create a national, multi-ethnic reproductive justice movement. SisterSong defines Reproductive Justice as

² <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/reproductive-justice>

“the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.”³

This definition is significant given the long history women of color in this country have faced of forced sterilization and medical experimentation, proximity to toxic environments, bans and restrictions on immigration - all of which have meant less reproductive freedom and autonomy.

Jeryl Hayes of If/When/How, an organization that works towards reproductive justice through the law and policy landscape, describes reproductive justice as “an essential transformation of the systems and institutions that perpetuate oppression into structures that realize justice, and a future when all people can self-determine their reproductive lives, free from discrimination, coercion, or violence.”⁴

What would it mean for the people who currently face oppression, discrimination, coercion, and violence to be free of these conditions? To know true liberty and liberation?

What needs to change so that we have societal structures that realize justice and a future when all people can self-determine their reproductive lives?

At the moment, the right to access reproductive health services and especially abortion care is being restricted all across the country. While this is happening, here in Vermont we have the opportunity to create stronger legal protections of our reproductive liberties with a proposed amendment to the state constitution. You can stay on after the service and join our Coffee Hour to learn more about the Reproductive Liberty Amendment and the campaign to bring the amendment to the ballot in November.

Ensuring that liberty is protected is just one step towards realizing the full vision of liberation that recognizes the interconnection of racial justice, economic justice, gender justice, and environmental justice.

When we work to create more affordable housing, we are working towards reproductive justice. When we work to address the climate crisis, we are working towards reproductive justice. When we work to raise the minimum wage to a livable wage, we are working towards reproductive justice.

³ <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice>

⁴ <https://www.ifwhenhow.org/about/what-is-rj/>

When we work to protect and expand the right to vote, we are working towards reproductive justice.

We all want freedom.

The freedom to live and love without fear or condemnation.

The freedom to be well and whole in body, mind, and spirit.

The freedom to flourish in the brief but grace-filled lives we are so blessed to have on this precious Earth.

Our reproductive freedom is a necessary part of the wellness and flourishing that we all desire and that we all deserve.

And, our collective liberation depends upon us fighting for a world that breaks down barriers to self-determination and that ensures that every person, family, and community has what they need to flourish.

Let us ground ourselves in our theology of love and liberation and work together to make it possible that all people have the rights, respect, and resources they deserve.

So may it be.