

“Choices”

First Unitarian Church of St. Louis

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I remember in my childhood hearing that there are 3 things one never discusses in polite company: religion, sex, and politics. I am apparently not a part of polite society, because my work is all about the intersection of these three. It's all I ever talk about, and I often wonder what other people could find interesting to talk about if not these.

I understand that people get uncomfortable when talking about such personal and emotionally-charged issues. I get uncomfortable, too, if someone sounds like they've got the final word on a very complex subject. So let me state clearly that I don't expect all of you to agree with me. Your life has not followed the same path as mine; we have seen and heard different things that have led us to our current understandings of life. It is my job today to tell you a little of what I have seen and heard.

I will start with a value statement: I believe that “the ability to make one's own decisions is the very basis of human dignity.” Or to put it in the negative “Human dignity cannot exist where choices have been removed.”

Think for a moment about your own sense of dignity. What would threaten it? To endure a barrage of medical tests while feeling that the doctors never speak directly to you? To have your home invaded by military personnel? To have your secrets exposed to the public? To be told exactly what job you have to do for the rest of your life?

And what would it take to restore your dignity? You would have to find a way of declaring that you are in control of your own life and that you will not let others make decisions on your behalf.

This is so true in our private, sexual and reproductive lives. Everyone wants the freedom to make their own decisions, including the decisions about who to love, who to enjoy a sexual relationship with, and whether or when to begin a family.

Reproductive freedom, or the lack of it, affects both men and women, but it often impacts women in far more critical ways. This is, of course, because women are the child-bearers and expected to be the child-raisers. It is because our society still maintains a double standard in its moral judgments of the sexual activity of men and of women. The double standard is exceptionally prevalent wherever religion is strong and conservative.

It is also because of this: every single woman faces questions and concerns and fears and choices about her reproductive health from the onset of puberty until well beyond her menopausal years. The average amount of time that a woman spends either trying to get pregnant or being pregnant is a total of 7 ½ years. She spends another 30 years trying very hard NOT to get pregnant. Reproductive choices are not for an occasional woman in some unusual circumstance; it is for every woman, every day of her adult life.

The history of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice is a moving story of people putting their faith into action for the good of women and families. In the 1960's, clergy were horrified by the injury and death being suffered by women undergoing illegal abortions. Clergy became convinced of their own moral responsibility to help women locate safe abortion providers.

In 1967, the first Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion was organized at Judson Memorial Church in New York City. Ministers and rabbis saved women's lives by referring them to safe doctors. In 1970, it was a group of clergy who opened the first abortion clinic. Many religious organizations in the 60's and early 70's proclaimed their support for a woman's right to choose abortion. The Unitarian Universalist Association was the first in 1963, and then came the Jewish National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods in 1965, the Division of Social Ministries of the American Baptist Churches in 1968, the Southern Baptist Convention in 1971, and the United Presbyterian Church USA in 1972. Many of them lobbied for the legalization of abortion. They consistently pointed out that where religions disagree, no one religious view should be legislated.

By 1973, when the Supreme Court handed down its landmark abortion decision, *Roe V. Wade*, at least 20 national religious organizations had either expressed support for the liberalization of abortion laws or indicated that they viewed abortion as a matter of personal choice. But they knew that this did not end the struggle. They founded the Religious Coalition for

Abortion Rights in that same year. RCAR was assumed to be a short-term coalition, whose intent was to defeat a proposed constitutional amendment to outlaw abortion. The founders did not realize how long the struggle would continue.

Today's anti-abortion groups want us to forget this history. They would have us believe that if abortion is made illegal, then it will stop. In fact, if abortion becomes illegal, women will suffer and die. Today, legal abortion is 11 times safer than childbirth, and less than 1% of women who have an abortion experience complications.

So many people carry around a stereotype of a woman who has an abortion. They believe she is young, unmarried, promiscuous, and irresponsible about birth control. But that description is true of a very small number of women in the waiting room at an abortion clinic.

At my office, I receive phone calls from desperate women, and each story is unique and defies any stereotype. Let me tell you about some of them:

A 38 year old woman called. She has children who are 23 years old, 20 years old, and 15 months old. She is pregnant again. She is Catholic. Her husband is an alcoholic. They got married when she was 15, and she didn't finish her education or develop any job skills. Now, she was ready to commit suicide. The promise that life would get better never came true.

One young woman was struggling to care for three small children. She couldn't afford to refill her prescription for birth control pills. She loves her kids, but already she can't put enough food on the table. She asks me, "What have I done that's so terrible that God wants to punish me like this?"

One woman called to tell me that her developmentally disabled daughter was raped and is now pregnant. The girl prefers to play with dolls. "Why would God allow such a terrible thing to happen to such an innocent child?"

There was the woman who went to a party and was given the date-rape drug and has no idea who impregnated her. The happily married woman excitedly expecting her first child who is told that the fetus has a serious problem: it has no developing brain. The tearful young woman who discovers she has cervical cancer and cannot continue to carry her pregnancy if she is to receive treatment.

And every single one of these women has called me because her religious upbringing has caused her to feel that she has done something terribly wrong, that God is out to get her, and that her own life is worth nothing compared to that of a fetus. Everyone of them has been stripped of her choices and her dignity.

I often ask myself “Who would ever worship such a god?” This kind of god is one whose anger can only be appeased by ritual and sacrifice. And it seems clear that the sacrifice demanded is nothing less than the woman herself. I imagine that most of us here rejected that idea of god long ago. But here we are in the 21st century, and the image of an angry god maintains power over millions of people around us.

So why don't we just teach women how to use birth control so that abortion can be a thing of the past? The Religious Coalition strongly supports wider use of birth control. But please realize, in the most of the cases I just described, contraception wasn't the issue at all. We must be very clear about this: abortion would be necessary even if everyone used birth control correctly. But it certainly could eliminate a large number of abortions. Nevertheless, today, just like 30 years ago, the anti-abortion forces in our state and nation are also anti-birth control and anti-sex education.

The Religious Coalition has come to understand over the years that the struggle is for something even greater than the right to choose an abortion. Women must have the right to bear children on their own terms, without undue hardship. In 1993, we became the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. This is a commitment to support reproductive healthcare for the sake of healthy families. In the state of Missouri, a woman faces hardships no matter what her choices. Consider these facts:

- During 2003, the state family planning program that gives contraceptives to low income women was completely eliminated.
- State funding for children's emergency services has been decimated over the past four years.
- Only 64% of the jobs in Missouri offer health insurance, and 27% of the full-time jobs pay below the poverty level. Women's jobs are less likely to offer health insurance than are men's, and they are more likely to pay poverty wages.
- 21% of people who lose their jobs do so because of lack of childcare or pregnancy.

- A parent who makes more than \$6.50 an hour cannot receive childcare subsidies.

Do you hear the contradictions? What choices do women have, really? Whether a woman wants to become a parent or have an abortion, the state makes it difficult. Why is it that the legislators who place heavy restrictions upon abortion access are the same ones who slash the funds for children who are already born?

In the Missouri legislature right now there are bills filed that will do the following:

- Remove “medically accurate” sex education from our public schools and replace it an abstinence program that teaches that sex is only to be done in the context of marriage between a man and a woman.
- Shut down two of the three medical clinics in Missouri that provide abortion services.
- Outlaw contraceptives for minors.
- Allow pharmacists the right to refuse to fill contraceptive prescriptions.

If our choices for contraceptives and for planning our own families are removed, our dignity is lost.

All we have to do is to look around the world. Where laws regarding contraceptive use and abortion are very strict, those countries have the highest abortion rates. Where laws provide for full access, abortion rates are lowest. Where people have the dignity of making their own choices, they can be trusted to make the very best decisions for themselves and their families.

In an ideal world, every pregnancy would be the result of love in a committed relationship. Every child would be born healthy and welcomed into this world by happy, healthy parents. Every child would receive adequate health care and childcare.

In an ideal world, no woman would lose her job because of being pregnant or because she has a sick child. Every child in the adoptive system would find a permanent, loving home. Justice demands that we should all work

hard toward this ideal. But justice also compels us to find ways to help people who don't live in that ideal world.

Do you want to reduce the number of abortions? Good sex education and family planning for every single person would be a good start. Universal health care would prevent some abortions. Child care subsidies would prevent some abortions. Teaching our boys to respect women would prevent a lot of abortions. Teaching our girls that they are valuable members of society who deserve a good education would prevent a lot of abortions.

In an ideal world, every woman who desperately wants a child would become pregnant, and every woman who can't care for a child would be infertile.

Until that day comes, I urge you as citizens, as people of faith, to do everything in your power to demand that all people be granted the choices they need to live with basic human dignity. Amen.