

Choosing Life
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I have waited a long time to preach this sermon. Issues of reproductive rights, ethics, and choices are some of the most hotly debated in our culture. Witness the ferocity of the debate about access to contraception that we have recently come through as a nation. These are issues that pit choice against life, the right to religious freedom against the right to access certain kinds of medical care. Once this debate is opened up, it isn't long before people are being called murderers, sluts, tyrants, selfish, narrow-minded, cruel, evil.

Easier by far just to stay out of the fray, to keep issues as hot as this one out of the pulpit, to drop the subject before it burns.

And yet, in the middle of these shouting matches and exchanges of sound bites, here we all are, trying to make sense of the issues, trying to think through the ethical challenges, trying to live lives of faith that are relevant in our world. Here we are, trying to listen, trying to learn to respond, trying to come to an understanding of how to bring our values into the public arena. And so, it seems time to stop my silence on these issues and to speak to you of where I have come in my own questing, in case it might be helpful.

As I begin, I want to reaffirm the Principle of the right of conscience, and the freedom of both pulpit and pew in Unitarian Universalism. I speak from my own heart and mind and conscience, deeply committed to the idea that each of you has a heart, and a mind, and a conscience, and that we may be led in different directions on these or any issues.

Among the ethical issues faced by individuals in our society, the decision about whether to have an abortion is probably one of the most complicated and difficult. But you would never know that to listen to the rhetoric in the public debate about the legality and availability of abortions. The whole complex of issues has been boiled down into two camps: pro-life, or pro-choice.

I am in favor of life. I believe that life is of deep value. I believe in protecting, nurturing, and supporting life. I am also in favor of choice. I believe that people ought to have choices in their lives. I am troubled by the many forms of coercion, oppression, and limiting that go on in our society. I believe in each person's sovereignty over the course of his or her own life, and I believe that the most important place where this value operates is in the right of each person to make choices about their body.

But to listen to the rhetoric, there are only two camps. Pro-life, which is anti-choice; and pro-choice, which is anti-life. The simplistic rhetoric doesn't end there. Each side has its other narratives that are employed to make things seem simpler than they are. An abortion is always a gut-wrenching decision accompanied by guilt and shame and grief. Or abortion is a simple medical procedure with no particular emotional content. Life begins at conception - or even when an egg is fertilized in a lab but not yet in a womb.

Life begins at birth, and it is not real life before that. Any time the debate heats up, these narratives grow more rigid, more intense.

And in the middle of this morass, as Barbara Gerlach reminds us in this morning's reading, are real people trying to make difficult choices about their lives and families. Real women with unexpected, unplanned, physically dangerous, or violently begun pregnancies trying to make decisions about how to move forward. Real partners and families of these women trying to support them and trying to deal with their own complicated emotions. Real women who feel coerced into having abortions by parents or economic circumstances. Real women who are prevented from having a wanted abortion by parents or economic circumstances.

The truth of the matter, it seems to me, is that this is messy. Neither narrative is the whole story. There is no neat and easy answer to the complex issues that surround unwanted or dangerous pregnancy and abortion.

For me, these are some of the questions I wish that we were asking that we are not. What if there is not one moment when life begins? What if the beginning of life is instead an emerging? A slow and steady process, with no clear line of demarcation? What if biological life - the movement of breath and heartbeat, of neurons in the brain and sensation in the body - what if biological life is not the only kind of life that matters? What if abundant life also matters? In other words, in the context of this debate, what if the mother's quality of life, her ability for rich and abundant life, her psychological and spiritual well-being matter and should count in the decision-making process? What if sometimes something causes feelings of great grief or even guilt but is still the right choice? All of these questions complicate the simplistic pro-life vs. pro-choice story we are so often told.

There are other questions, too, that don't get asked enough. Questions like, why do women choose to have abortions? Is it because they don't want to have this child, or because they feel they can't? Is it because we, as a society, have failed to provide the kinds of emotional, psychological, and financial support that would make women feel that they can carry a pregnancy or raise a child? How many unwanted pregnancies are due to sexual violence? How many are due to inadequate sexuality education? How many are due to lack of access to contraception? How many to contraceptive failure? These questions so rarely enter the debate, and I have not yet encountered rigorously researched answers, even though that would seem possible for these rather concrete questions.

As Unitarian Universalists, our Principles might cause us to ask yet another set of questions. What does it mean to honor the inherent worth and dignity of each person? How do we extend justice, equity, and compassion in this debate? What does it mean to honor another's right of conscience? Where will the search for truth and meaning take us?

After asking all these questions, here are the places I have come to rest, at least for the moment. I believe that life does not start at some discrete, easily identified moment, but gradually emerges.

I believe deeply in comprehensive sexuality education and in universal access to contraception, covered by insurance. I believe that we have not done nearly enough about the epidemic of sexual violence and coercion in our society. I believe that increasing sexuality education and access to contraception, and work to eliminate sexual violence and coercion must be societal priorities, and that this might go a long way to lowering the rate of unwanted pregnancy.

I also believe that in the richest nation on earth we ought to be able to make sure that every wanted child has their basic human needs met, so that no woman would have to terminate a wanted pregnancy because of economic restraint. We have the ability to take care of our citizens. We have chosen not to do so. That needs to change.

I believe that if we ever accomplish all of this, there will still be a need for legal and safe abortion. I believe that the life, health, and wellbeing of women matters, and ought to count in the decision-making around carrying or aborting a pregnancy. I believe that there will always been women who need to make a decision to end a pregnancy to protect their own lives, either literally or to protect the abundance and richness, the fullness of their lives, their own wellbeing. I believe that is a choice that must always be available. I also believe that real support and counseling that honors women's own decision-making and moral agency is vitally important.

And I believe that people of good will and loving hearts can come to different conclusions in this difficult territory. I believe that it is of paramount importance that we do not demonize those who come to different conclusions. Hateful speech, name-calling, and physical violence are all absolutely inappropriate in this, or any other debate. They are also, unfortunately, regular parts of our political landscape. Perhaps we can work together to learn ways to have discussions and debates that do not include these tools. I hope so.

Of course, it is not just a decision not to have a child that is controversial. Some of the rhetoric around decisions to have children is also troubling. Some friends of mine, who are both women and are married to each other, related this story to me a few years ago. They were with a group of young adult couples, in which they were the only same-sex couple. The conversation turned to decision-making about having children. My friends were talking about how they wanted to have a child but didn't think they could afford to. Someone else at the gathering said that everyone thinks they can't afford to raise children, but somehow you figure it out. My friends replied that they didn't mean they couldn't afford to raise a child. They were worried about the cost of getting pregnant as a lesbian couple. The conversation just stopped as everyone else in the room realized the added layer of complexity to my friends' situation.

This reality isn't limited to lesbian couples, of course. There are straight couples who also find that they need assistance to get pregnant. Or straight couples or gay male couples in which it is impossible for someone in the couple to carry a pregnancy.

At present, couples in any of these situations have a host of options: Surrogacy, In-Vitro Fertilization or other medical interventions, and adoption.

I distinctly remember a particular conversation in a class in college, though I've now forgotten everything else about the course, including what course it was. The conversation was about medical interventions that can help couples with various fertility challenges have biological children. One of my classmates was arguing rather forcefully that the use of reproductive interventions and technology was selfish in a world with children who need adoptive homes.

I remember at the time thinking that there was a double-standard being invoked. For those who can have biological children without assistance or intervention, the selfishness idea is much less present. But for those - like me - who know that having biological children will take a little extra work and help, we should somehow make a different choice or be considered selfish. I have felt that I need to justify my own desire to bear children, while I know that straight women who do not want to bear children are often asked to justify that desire.

We want to have and to raise children for all kinds of reasons that are difficult or impossible to put into words. The desire to reproduce is built into us as a species, as all species on earth. Some of us want to have biological children for reasons we can't explain. Others want to adopt children. Others want both. None of these desires are selfish. All of them are deep-seeded and real and of value.

I believe in life and hope and joy and in passing these on to the next generation. I believe in celebrating each child that is brought into a family by birth or adoption. I believe in supporting real families in real ways.

I also believe in the right of every person to make decisions about what will happen to and with their body. I believe in every woman's right to make her own decision if she is faced with an unwanted or dangerous pregnancy. I believe that people in tough places need real support.

These are the values, commitments, and principles that I bring to the many discussions about reproductive rights that are happening all around us all the time. I invite you to think about yours. What do you value? To what are you committed? What are your principles, and how do they come to play in these discussions?

May we find ways