



**UU Women's Federation Sermon Award 2017**

**Honorable Mention**

**"Roe v. Wade: A Complicated Unitarian Universalist  
History of Reproductive Justice"**

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## “Roe v. Wade: A Complicated Unitarian Universalist History of Reproductive Justice”

There's a story in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus, not yet followed by his disciples, comes upon Simon Peter and Andrew. They're fishermen. They're fishing and Jesus says “come with me and I will make you fishers of people.” And the scripture says “*Immediately* they dropped their nets and followed him.” And then he comes upon John and James and their father and he says “Come with me.” And again the scripture says “*Immediately* they dropped their nets and followed him.” Immediately? They didn't wonder? They didn't say, “Who's this guy?” I don't believe that. I don't think I've ever dropped my nets and followed anything immediately. Not in my entire life. We human beings like to make our history neater and prettier than it actually is, which I think is what the writer of the Gospel of Matthew is doing here. We like to pretend we've always been where we are today. So this morning, we are going to look at some of the complicated history of Unitarian Universalists and the work for reproductive choice and reproductive justice.

Today is the day after an historic Women's March on Washington - I see those yellow shirts! I know some of y'all were out in the streets! And today is Roe v. Wade Sunday, a celebration of the 1973 legalization of abortion and the culmination of a lot of work for a woman's right to choose. Why is this a religious matter? The Reverend Doctor Rebecca Parker, Unitarian Universalist minister, theologian, and professor, writes - “The realm of the religious always exceeds our efforts to contain it.” My Unitarian Universalist faith teaches me that bodies are good. Can you say that with me? Bodies are good. Can you say that again? Say – “my body is good.” Good. Now, the business of the church - of the fellowship - of the congregation - of the religious movement - is the uplifting of what is sacred above all else. It is the centering and recentering of what is holy, and what is saving. Unitarian Universalism centers relationships. We center congregational life. We center the vision of justice. We hold at the center of our faith the goodness of life, the preciousness of life, the desperate need to make life here on earth matter. We believe that life here matters. We are not callous or objective or reasonable or simply strategic about life. We are faithful to it.

We also are the first religious denomination to support the legalization of abortion - which means the ending of a potential human life. I believe this is right. And it's right because every child who is born deserves to be wanted, and nourished, and supported. The right to terminate a pregnancy does not negate the goodness or the sacredness or the preciousness of life. The right to terminate a pregnancy is based in the idea that a person with a uterus is also a person with a brain. That the person who is pregnant is the only person with the power over their own pregnancy.

Making abortion legal doesn't mean we no longer believe in the preciousness of life. It means we believe that pregnant people do not deserve to die when seeking abortions. Because as long as there has been pregnancy, there have been attempts to end it when conditions aren't right for the birth and caring of a child. But abortions used to have a higher price tag and a higher death rate. Let's look at the history of the Unitarian Universalist Association's statements about reproductive choice.

The Unitarian Universalist Association passed a statement in 1963 - a General Resolution called the "Reform of Abortion Statutes." This statement was the first of its kind in support of reproductive choice, seven years before any other denomination passed a statement, and ten years before *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal. The Clergy Consultation Service on Abortions helped women get safe abortions and counseling before *Roe v. Wade* was passed, and UUs were deeply involved.

In 1971, the General Resolution called the "National Health Plan" was passed. This statement included full coverage for abortion, family planning, and pre and post natal care. The case that would become *Roe v. Wade* started in Dallas, Texas. Linda Coffee, one of the attorneys working on the case, knew of the First Unitarian Church of Dallas as a place on the leading edge of social reform. At that church she found strong supporters, particularly among the Women's Alliance.

1978 saw a general resolution in favor of Medicaid funds for abortion, recognizing that rights don't mean much without access. The Hyde Amendment, passed in 1977 and still

standing, explicitly denies federal funding for abortion, effectively leaving poor women where they were before 1973.

There's a statement in 1980 called "A Religious Statement on Abortion" that calls for support to all forms of reproductive health care and justice by advocating for comprehensive sexuality education.

A 2007 Statement of Conscience called "Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society" argues for the separation of church and state, picking up on the religious right's attempts to undermine progressive issues by relying on our nation's so-called Christian values.

And most recently, the 2012-2016 Congregational Study/Action Issue was "Reproductive Justice: Expanding Our Social Justice Calling." This is the first mention of reproductive justice - a profound shift from reproductive rights.<sup>1</sup>

The term "reproductive justice" comes from a women of color-led organization called SisterSong. Based on the human right to parent when and how one desires to, 'reproductive justice' is about the reproductive and sexual wholeness of all people and communities. Reproductive choice, as a frame for understanding the world, is based on the idea of a woman's right to privacy, which is a right that only some of us are able to access or benefit from. What use is privacy when you need and deserve state funded healthcare? What use is the right when you don't have money? Reproductive justice, however, calls us to understanding, again and again that no one is free until we're all free. This difference between choice and justice is, in practice, enormous. Choice is effectively deregulation – that a person with a uterus has a right to privacy. I believe in that, but it isn't enough. Justice, on the other hand, is the idea that government has an active role to play in redressing wrongs – in making a world where all people are safe and free. And we are so, so far from that world.

I was born in Bethesda, Maryland in 1990. My mother was born in segregated

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<sup>1</sup> These dates are drawn from the "Sermon Guide on Reproductive Justice and the Anniversary of Roe v. Wade," by Jessica Halperin and Rev. Rob Keithan.

Columbia, South Carolina in 1956. I grew up with rights and privileges that my mother had to fight for - and that my grandmothers never even dreamed about. I am grateful to those who came before me, and I am grateful to those of you who fought so that I would live in a safer world. I am proud to be a Unitarian Universalist. I am proud to come from a church that taught me OWL - standing for Our Whole Lives, which is the UU and United Church of Christ's affirming, values-based, scientifically accurate, comprehensive sex education curriculum. Unequivocally my religious upbringing has taught me that my body is mine, and that my body is good. And in a culture that still would tell me that my body is bad, wrong, dirty, used – and that it belongs to whichever man wants it – that faithful message is life changing. I mean it changed my life. And for some people that message is life-saving. I am so grateful. But I also have an obligation to make our world and our movement safe for those who come after me.

So let's look at our history again. The reproductive rights movement, epitomized by *Roe v. Wade*, is intimately tied up with the women's movements of the past centuries. And those movements are embedded in an ugly history of racism that we cannot footnote. Women didn't get the right to vote in 1920. White women did. Women don't make 77 cents to a man's dollar. White women do. Susan B. Anthony's arguments that white women should have the right to vote was based in the idea that white women were worth more than black people, and deserved the vote before black men. It breaks my heart that we white women flock in droves to put stickers on the grave of Susan B. Anthony, but we do not flock in droves to protest the killing of black women by police. Margaret Sanger, storied founder of Planned Parenthood, argued for birth control in part as population control, specifically to weed out "undesirables." And she didn't make that up. Eugenics, the scientific study of racial characteristics and superiority, was wildly popular among white people. And it wasn't only white conservatives.

There are a lot of arguments about whether or not Sanger actually believed in eugenics or whether she just used the language of eugenics as a tactic, and those debates really miss the point. As Gloria Steinem writes, "[Sanger] adopted the mainstream eugenics language of the day, partly as a tactic, since many eugenicists opposed birth control on

the grounds that the educated would use it more...Her misjudgments should cause us to wonder what parallel errors we are making now and to question any tactics that fail to embody the ends we hope to achieve.”

*We should question any tactics that fail to embody the ends we hope to achieve.* This guidance from Steinem is religious guidance to me. We know that trickle-down justifications for tax cuts for the wealthy are lies. The gap between the wealthiest and the poorest grows ever wider. The scripture doesn't say “justice shall trickle down like waters and righteousness only for those who patiently wait their turn.” By the way, in case you don't know what it does say, it's - justice shall roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Social change - I mean real social change, where we bind up the broken, protect the vulnerable, value all life, nurture our planet, take the side of the least of these - that kind of change doesn't trickle-down. It does happen slowly. But the tactics of our movement have to be our movement. Relationship across difference has to be our movement. Centering the needs of the most vulnerable has to be our movement. Amplifying the voices of the excluded has to be our movement.

And so, when I look at so many pictures of the marches yesterday, I'm filled with hope and I'm also worried. My colleague, Caelyn Randall, writes:

Among the most popular protest slogans today were those that invoked Trump's “tiny hands.” There are SO MANY reasons to protest and SO MANY smart arguments to be made without appealing to ableist norms that define what male-identified people should look like. All bodies are good bodies.

I love those hats. And they're also pink. It's hard not to read an ocean of pink pussy hats as being representative of the concerns of white cisgender women. And history tells us that the concerns of white cisgender women have often come at the expense of others.

The exclusion of transgender people from feminist movements has a long and ugly history. The exclusion of Black women and other women of color from white feminist

movements has a long and ugly history. The exclusion of disabled people from justice movements in general has a long and ugly history. And we cannot afford to repeat that history. If we do, it's going to lead, as it has in the past, to people like me getting one step closer to the top of the pyramid and then getting comfortable. It's going to lead to people like me working to elect a woman president but not working to abolish private prisons. It's going to lead to people like me trying to get to the top - and in the system we have, that means we have to trample on those below us.

The Women's March on Washington issued a Unity Statement grounded in a reproductive justice framework. They wrote: "We believe that Women's Rights are Human Rights and Human Rights are Women's Rights. We must create a society in which women - including Black women, Native women, poor women, immigrant women, disabled women, Muslim women, lesbian queer and trans women - are free and able to care for and nurture their families, however they are formed, in safe and healthy environments free from structural impediments."

That declaration gives me hope, and it gives me something to work for. Friends, we are each other's business. I mentioned some signs and some attitudes about the march that gave me pause. Here are some signs that brought me hope:

This is very bad

Justice in the courts, justice at the polls

Trust Black Women

Black Lives Matter

Intersectionality or bust - I'm with her, zir, and them

Dissent is patriotic

So bad even introverts are here

My body my choice

Queer joy is resistance

I didn't come from your rib, you came from my vagina

Very small protest - sad!

ACA saved my life  
No justice no peace  
Love your neighbor  
Jesus was a refugee  
Aqui estamos y no nos vamos  
If our work ends tonight then today is just a parade

A reproductive justice framework takes an intersectional approach which teaches me to celebrate our interconnectedness and to lean on it. To hold it like my life depends on it. My Unitarian Universalist tradition teaches me those things too. Our theology - our talk about what is sacred - is based in the idea that we are profoundly dependent on one another. Reproductive justice does not pit important justice issues against each other - rather, it acknowledges how deeply intertwined we all are.

If this history of racism and transphobia in women's resistance movements is not news to you, and if it has hurt you, bless you for staying in the fight. If it is news to you, welcome to the work. We are always invited to listen to those who have been left out. We all have a religious imperative to listen to those who have been left out. I have never dropped my nets immediately and followed and I don't want to make my history sound prettier than it is. But now, if you haven't already, now is the time to drop those nets.

Good people, it is okay to be tired. It is good to rest. But it is not okay to secure one's own safety and then sit back, which is all too common. And I know it can be hard, especially for those of you who dropped your nets to fight for justice a long time ago. Especially when it looks like some of your work might actually be undone. I saw signs from the march yesterday held by elder women, saying "I can't believe I'm still protesting this shit." But I also saw people bringing their children and teaching them to raise their voices. I saw Facebook posts from fathers who stayed home and babysat while their partners went out to the streets. My friend's husband, who is a transgender man, cooked chili for 200 people. I saw calls for connection all over, reminders that such a march is a public opportunity to commit to the long haul, to get someone's number or



email, to reach out to people who want to fight but aren't organized. If our work ends tonight then today is just a parade.

Yesterday's energy showed me that there are people yearning for communities to hold them in this fight. Can we be those communities? Can we hold people for the fight? These aren't rhetorical questions – I don't do rhetorical questions in church. Can we be those communities? Can we hold people for the fight? Because bodies are sacred. Fighting for a world in which all people are safe and free is a sacred duty. I feel so honored to be in this fight with you, and with our Unitarian Universalist movement, and with all sorts of other people who hunger for justice with all their tender hearts. I believe that Unitarian Universalists can learn and change. I believe that we can shift from comfortable liberalism to liberation work. I believe that we can take the side of the most marginalized. I believe that we can dig deep, hold each other, and take a hard look at our history – our successes and our failures. I, and other leaders of my generation, need you to prove me right. May it be so, and amen.