

Abortion, One More Time

A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

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I am watching with great interest the regular news about the legislators currently on break who are busy doing exactly what they said they would do...repeal the Affordable Care Act which they insist is unpopular and too expensive....and are facing furious, frightened, constituents...their constituents... the ones who elected a president who was very frank about his disdain for this act and his intention to make it go away. Turns out that citizens, even politically conservative ones want access to health care protected and facilitated and if necessary, paid for by the government. Turns out that people remember the nightmares of unregulated health insurance....the denial of coverage, the lifetime limits reached at the age of 2 months, or after one bout with cancer, the near impossibility of getting an individual plan at any price, the price increases year after year. It took them only a few years of experience with plans that actually offered insurance to come to depend on them and they assumed that the politicians who filled the airways with their promises to repeal it were just full of hot air. And now they are scared and angry.

And what was it that made them vote Republican anyway? The single most common reason people give is "Abortion".

They were afraid that the politicians who promised to improve rather than abolish the affordable Care act that they depend on for their very lives, would bring on a Supreme Court that would continue to reaffirm Roe v. Wade, the 1972 decision which gave women the right to end an unwanted pregnancy for any reason until about the 26th week of pregnancy and the right to end it later if necessary to preserve her life or her health.

Another way to put it is that Roe v. Wade ended mandatory motherhood in the US¹. Because that's what you have if you don't have access to abortion for unwanted pregnancies. Even women who are celibate or lesbian can be raped and without access to abortion are forced to go through pregnancy and childbirth, forced to undergo the changes in their brain and body to prepare them for motherhood they didn't choose. Even girls under the age of consent are

¹ I first came across this phrase in the mid-70's by reading a book of this name, which was published by Beacon Press, the Unitarian Universalist publishing house. It is still available at Amazon.

https://www.amazon.com/Mandatory-Motherhood-True-Meaning-Right/dp/0807021776/ref=mt_paperback?_encoding=UTF8&me=

regularly victims of forced sex and would be forced to become mothers. Even the best forms of birth control fail regularly, especially for women in their 20's and women approaching menopause and women who need antibiotics and women who are bigger than average. Anyway, 99% effective in each year of use is actually terrible odds over 35 years of use. Those who say, "Just put the baby up for adoption and go on with your life." are ignorant of those brain and body changes. If you bring a baby to term, you are a mother, and even if you have a choice to give the baby up for adoption.... A 50 year old married, working woman would probably not feel she would have that choice... you don't forget. For almost all women, mandatory pregnancy means mandatory motherhood. That's a fact of life.

And since in most of human history motherhood was mandatory, it is also the source of patriarchy. The widely assumed notion that men are more important, more reliable, and more privileged than women comes from the fact that through most of human history, women were weakened, sickened, and often killed by the fertility they couldn't control. Patriarchy is not about men's bigger muscles. It is about men taking advantage of women debilitated by pregnancy and childbirth and child raising. And it is as surely threatened by an end to mandatory motherhood as it is threatened by the idea that not all men need women and not all women need men, and by the idea that gender was never 100% binary, man OR woman...and seems to be getting more fluid in these later days.

Lots of issues in our changing world have captured the ire of those who liked the "The great white fathers know best" patriarchy that they believe is the best and natural and foundational way of this nation. The "white" part of the equation is important, and it figures into the abortion debate in an ugly but peripheral way. Mostly the issue of abortion is about the patriarchy; about men wanting, needing, legislating control over women.

That's not all it is about. It is also about the hard-wired human impulse to care for infants, an evolutionary necessity. Our species is born helpless and stays nearly helpless for 10 years, and doesn't really finish developing for 25. For most of our existence on this planet, we were the endangered species. We've got genes for caring for babies...not just our own babies but ANY critter with a big round head and great big eyes. Even cartoon characters drawn in that way trigger our care. This characteristic and others that give us the patience and will to care for the helpless is hormone driven and women have more of it than men, and one of the things that happens as a pregnancy proceeds is that the brain is further wired in that direction. Of course women who have not been pregnant and men also have these hormones and impulses and they also care, especially once they have infants in their care. It just comes more naturally to most mothers.

And there's very little as round headed or big eyed as a fetus, as we now see them in the beautiful ultrasounds, floating in their little space ship wombs. Nurturing these helpless

creatures goes to the core of who we are as human beings. A human thing. Maybe not a human being yet, but clearly human potential. Take your philosophical pick. It's not going to matter, in the end, you'll see. But we want to preserve in humanity, the impulse to care, to preserve, and to protect human life. This is a good thing.

It's just not the only good thing. The other thing about these achingly beautiful creatures is that they are not floating around in little space ships they are floating around in somebody else's body. And whatever we want to say about the right to life that fetus has by virtue of its humanity, its potential, or it's innocence or its genes, it does not have the right to commandeer somebody else's body, because human beings... and we have no doubt about the humanity or the human rights of the pregnant woman, do we? Do we? Human beings have a right to their own bodily integrity...a right to privacy, as the Supreme Court put it.

This right to privacy, bodily integrity, and to choose who to give one's body to is fundamental to freedom. Every patient who dies awaiting an organ transplant....and plenty do....dies because they cannot commandeer another person's body, not even a drop of blood.

This has been tested in court over the years. A typical case would be something like a child in need of, say, a kidney transplant, without which she will die, and the matching tissue she needs is rare. Her mother is willing but the tissue doesn't match. She asks the girl's father, her now estranged ex-husband, to be tested. He refuses. She takes him to court. The court reluctantly cannot issue the order. It is so obvious to us that a man cannot be compelled to give even the smallest part of his body even to save the life of his own child. We can condemn him as a cad but to compel him would take away something essential to his humanity: his basic freedom. The courts always say that a persons' fundamental and sacred right to freedom means nothing if it does not mean the right to decide whether or not to donate a part of one's body to someone else. They always say that the human right to life does not extend to the right to appropriate somebody else's body. According to the thinking of the current administration, you don't even have a right to life if you can't pay for the care you need.

That's why all the rhetoric about when human life begins is a big red herring. It doesn't matter when human life begins. Whatever you think a fetus is, it doesn't have the right to use somebody else's body, even though it will die without.

All the case law I'm aware of involves men. And, naturally, all the cases where the law compelled a woman to continue to give over her body to a fetus were cases about women. It's not JUST sexism that is going on. It is also that pregnancy comes all too naturally and is so often a joyous event and is, by so many considered a woman's unique contribution to the ongoing life of the species. With all that good feeling in the background, it is apparently impossible for most people to grasp that an unwillingly pregnant woman has been invaded by an uninvited

guest and being asked/or required to do something that in all other cases would be voluntary and heroic ...support another life with their very body.

There are a lot of reasons that we don't see this. But most of it is patriarchy. Patriarchy which has given almost all the blame and shame of the negative consequences of sexuality to women, and Patriarchy which knows to the core of its bones, that if women can't control their fertility they can't control their lives, and if they can't control their lives, they can't really be treated as the equals of men, who imagine that they ARE the masters of their fate.

It is no accident that the great flash points of the culture wars have been abortion, Gay Rights, and now Transgender rights. Abortion rights empower women to control their lives and live fully in the world, not just in the home and that is uber threatening. The normalization of the lives of women who choose to form families and enjoy their sexuality without men, and the normalization of men who, in the patriarchal model "choose to act like women" is uber threatening to the patriarchy. And the idea that gender, maleness and femaleness is not a biological given assigned by at birth but is ambiguous, or emotional, or changeable that's the most recent blow to patriarchy.

When you add to that the assaults on white privilege and white power from a growing population of people of color, and the assaults on Christian privilege from both a shrinking population of Christians and a growing population of persons deeply committed to other gods you have...

You have where we are now. And I think that Patriarchy's war is going to be fought on two fronts: abortion and immigration, because those are the two situations where the victims...unwillingly pregnant women and undocumented immigrants...can be blamed for their predicament and are considered morally suspect by lots of people. And in both cases an actual solving of the problem will cause unintended consequences that will clarify the situation. We actually do need immigrants and ought to regularize their status. We actually do need access to abortion...men and women, liberals and conservatives, rich and poor.

Why? Because when a woman is unwillingly pregnant, her right to freedom, which is nothing if is not the right to decide if she wants to offer her body to a developing fetus, clashes with the absolute need of that fetus to use her body to sustain its life. And the unbelievable ignorance of a remarkable number of lawmakers to the contrary, this happens even in cases of rape, even when the woman has used the best possible birth control, even when she is married, 50, responsible....all the traits lawmakers wish would go away. Even if it was a good idea to punish promiscuous, irresponsible young women for their sins, we would not sentence them, or their boyfriends...to donate much needed kidneys to save lives.

The right to life and the right to liberty clash regularly, and actually, when they clash it is almost always Liberty, not Life, that wins out. Give me Liberty or Give me Death, right? It is sort of a national anthem in America...the basis of the best wars ever fought. England was not threatening our lives when we went to war in 1776. It was a war for independence, for freedom, not a war for survival that all those men died in. The Civil war, the costliest war in American history, in terms of loss of life, was either fought for the freedom of slaves or the freedom of southern states, depending on which side is writing the history, but both sides were fighting, dying, and killing for freedom.

We have spent almost all of the fight about abortion arguing over whether a fetus should be accorded full human rights, as if that would automatically mean that abortion should be prohibited. Both sides have participated in this. The pro-life side has only cared about the life of the fetus and, tellingly, has only cared about the life of the fetus to not be aborted, not to live as a 2 year old or a 10 year old or a 70 year old. The pro-choice side picked a bad word, a frivolous word, to message their intuition that mandatory motherhood is not good for anybody and is a horrifying intrusion on the human right of a woman to her own body. Choice:...that's for what color of shoes, what kind of vacation, what sauce for your taco.

What they meant to say is that the right to life does not in any other instance mean the right to appropriate another person's body. Human beings, if they are to be called free, must be free to offer or refuse to use their bodies to serve another.

The incredible, inconvenient, painful, life-changing, miraculous whole-body donation of my freedom and body to the baby inside me that is pregnancy is taken for granted by most people as just the way things are supposed to be, and they think that Roe V. Wade somehow violated the way things should be when actually, it was a carefully drawn compromise in what is a fundamentally insoluble conflict of the human rights to freedom and life. —a humane necessity

Women who are unwillingly pregnant may end the pregnancy up to 26 weeks. After that, barring some tragic development, they must carry the baby to term. If anybody were actually willing to risk compromise, that time should probably be shortened, because the age of viability has gone down in 40 years and there are moral and practical and humanitarian reasons that abortions after the age of viability are compelling.

Women who are unwillingly pregnant know what is happening to them, what they are giving up, how big the deal this is, the affront to their personhood, this violation of their freedom. That is why they have been willing to do everything from swallow ergot and die in dreadful pain to cross borders and risk infections, jail, and shame to end their unwanted pregnancies. Those women know that a pregnancy is like a kidney donation. They know that if they can't do it in love, they shouldn't have to do it. And also, like anyone ever asked to give more than they

could who had to say no to a legitimate need of another, they feel a twinge, or more, of sadness and shame about their predicament and their decision. So we don't talk about this much and the reality that this happens a LOT is left out of public discourse. I don't want to leave it out of this one. This is not an academic sermon about something that happens to other people that we should look upon humanely. This is something that has happened or will happen to 1 in 3 women during their fertile years. Me. You. Your daughter, your girlfriend. Your wife, your mother. And those of your catholic and conservative and evangelical friends in almost equal measure.

Which is why, conservatives should take a good look at the damage they are now taking on as they attempt to dismantle the supposedly Hated, Disastrous, Affordable Care Act. They are suddenly realizing that the people needed that law. And that remanding the whole thing to the states might mean energizing a lot of change in state houses that will be to their detriment. That will be also the cost of dismantling Roe V. Wade...although there is the added benefit that even rich people with Cadillac health care plans still become accidentally pregnant and don't in their heart of hearts, believe in Mandatory Motherhood.

Neither do I. Neither do you. Mandatory Motherhood is an assault on our basic humanity, on the integrity of motherhood itself, which is a gift of the heart and not forced labor, and on the basic freedom that we understand makes us human.