

Reproductive Justice Redux, March 15, 2015
Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

Sermon: Reproductive (Justice) Redux

(c) Rev. Stocker

I grew up in the middle class. Despite a few economic downturns here and there, I have pretty much stayed there my entire life. In contrast, my parents both grew up poor. Their arrival in the middle class came from grit and luck, both. They worked hard and saved diligently, they had white skin, and they were befriended by the right people.

In my father's case, he got a scholarship to attend MIT. His resulting degree in chemical engineering provided entry into work as a fire inspector, which then developed into a lifelong career in fire insurance rating.

My mother was unofficially adopted by the elderly couple for whom my grandmother served as a maid. That couple, who had no children of their own, treated my mother like a granddaughter in many ways. When it came time for my mother to attend college, they paid her way. My mother's degree provided entry into teaching high school English, a profession she kept up until she was married. (In those days, women had to resign from their teaching posts when they married, because you know what married women might get themselves up to, and it would have been unseemly for a pregnant teacher to preside in a classroom of impressionable youth.)

In my parents' day, one middle class income was enough to provide for a family. Things were much different then in lots of ways.

Like many young women, when I came of age, I wondered and dreamed about becoming a mother. Those dreams involved all kinds of things, but I never harbored any great worry that my children would grow up with any kind of deprivation. I assumed

they would have food, shelter, health care, safety, love, and education just as I had had. And that is pretty much how it turned out, in my case.

But, in today's world, that is not how it turns out in countless cases. So when I turn my attention to today's topic, reproductive justice, I do so understanding that my own experience – and that of my son's – was privileged. My experience differs vastly from the experience of so many – most of the rest of the world, actually, where creating and raising a family can be a harrowing and diminishing experience, particularly for women and their children.

This sermon is a continuation of thoughts I delivered to you a couple of years ago in a sermon title “Whose Body?” In that sermon, I said: *Forty years ago, I never could have imagined I would ever have to hear another sermon on reproductive rights, much less preach one. But times have changed. Perhaps those changes issue an invitation to us – to go deeper into a problem that is complex, a problem that does not have one easy answer.*

The sermon *Whose Body* focused more on abortion, specifically. I considered decisions about continuing a pregnancy, asking whose body matters from four different viewpoints: the mother, the child, the father, and the earth.

Today I want to move on – to the topic of reproductive justice – a much more comprehensive topic than abortion rights. As we delve into the topic, we join UU congregations all over the country who are currently studying reproductive justice with the goal of releasing a “statement of conscience” to express our denomination's position. Statements of conscience like this one are voted on at the annual meeting of the UUA – General Assembly (GA).

What is reproductive justice? The term originates from women of color and it signals a new movement away from the confining and polarizing argument about access to abortion. Instead, the work of reproductive justice is to build a society where people have access to the education, economic security, and safety they need to make choices about creating families (or not).

Reproductive justice insists that women need basic education and security, equally shared across all sectors of society, by which to determine when or if to have children. Reproductive justice insists all parents have the opportunities they need to raise their children after they are born.

To be sure, access to safe abortion is important within that framework, but it is only a tiny piece of the puzzle. Far more important is the entire social fabric needed to help people make healthy decisions for themselves and their families – before conception, during pregnancy, and after birth. That means mending the social fabric as it currently exists so that all people are held safely within it.

Here is how Sister Song: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective describes it:

The reproductive justice framework – the right to have children, not have children, and to parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments – is based on the human right to make personal decisions about one’s life, and the obligation of government and society to ensure that the conditions are suitable for implementing one’s decisions is important for women of color.

It represents a shift for women advocating for control of their bodies, from a narrower focus on legal access and individual choice (the focus of mainstream organizations) to a broader analysis of racial, economic, cultural, and structural constraints on our power.

Reproductive Justice addresses the social reality of inequality, specifically, the inequality of opportunities that we have to control our reproductive destiny. Our options for making choices have to be safe, affordable and accessible...(http://www.sistersong.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=141&Itemid=81)

Reproductive justice is not simply about the issues of privacy raised by pro-choice arguments. The public implications of those choices are at the heart of the movement. If you live in poverty, for instance, your ability to gain adequate housing, sustenance, and health care during pregnancy and to provide for you and your child during pregnancy and after birth is circumscribed. And, the likelihood is that you will remain impoverished no matter how hard you work and how much you scrape together to save. Statistically, your child is destined for a life of poverty, too. Gone are the days like the ones my parents lived through, when, with hard work (and white skin) you might have been able to move into the middle class.

Should you desire an abortion, in many areas of this country a clinic where you can safely obtain one is so far away, and the cost is so prohibitive that the procedure is accessible to you in name only but not in actual fact.

If you live in poverty, you are less likely to be able to afford a safe neighborhood in which to live and raise your family. You are more likely to live near contaminated soil and water. You are less likely to have options for affordable childcare. You are less likely to have access to fresh, healthy food. You are less likely to have educational opportunities that might translate into higher paying work.

If you are a person of color and poor, you are more likely to live in a place like Ferguson, Missouri, where you and your family are targeted, oppressed, and sometimes killed by the very police who are supposed to protect you. Reproductive justice asserts

that things like education, food security, safety, and health care are basic needs that should be equally available to all.

Sister Song says: *One of the key problems addressed by Reproductive Justice is the isolation of abortion from other social justice issues that concern communities of color: issues of economic justice, the environment, immigrants' rights, disability rights, discrimination based on race and sexual orientation, and a host of other community-centered concerns. These issues directly affect an individual woman's decision-making process. (ibid.)*

SisterSong specifically (and the work of reproductive justice generally) shifts “*the focus to reproductive oppression—the control and exploitation of women, girls, and individuals through our bodies, sexuality, labor, and reproduction—rather than a narrow focus on protecting the legal right to abortion...*” (ibid.)

I find this more inclusive, comprehensive work compelling. So many times I have heard people express their puzzlement over the fact that often people who want to end legal abortion often also want to eliminate or curtail programs to help families bringing children into the world. The work of reproductive justice folds the decision-making regarding pregnancy into the vast array of other decisions people need to make about whether or not to create families. The work encompasses concerns for safety of pregnant, aborting mothers, concerns for mothers who choose to keep their children, and concerns for the children themselves.

Unitarian Universalists have their own spiritual and theological angle to contribute to the conversation. Since the early 1970s, when we created a course for teens called About Your Sexuality, we have been advocates of sexuality education. Since then, the course has morphed into Our Whole Lives (OWL), which our church offers to teens every two or three years. At root in both courses is the belief that our bodies are sacred gifts; our

sexuality a powerful expression of those gifts. For UUs, it is not enough simply to teach our children the facts of life – how babies are made, the physical act of childbirth, the responsibility of birth control, or the mechanics of lovemaking. Those teachings need to be anchored in a spirit of wonder, awe, and gratitude for the bodies we have and respect for the bodies of others. We celebrate the diversity of bodies and orientations and the possibilities for relationships, intimacy, love, and growth.

Responsible education teaches young people they are beautiful, they have choices, and their choices have consequences. Responsible education locates those choices in the expression of the sacred, however we name it. For UUs the gift of life inspires reverence and awe, drawing sustenance from “that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” Life that is revered must be protected, supported, nourished. We recognize all people have inherent worth and dignity. Oppression anywhere harms the oppressed and the privileged alike, for we are interdependent, bound together in the fabric of one people, one society, one earth. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” Martin Luther King, Jr., reminded us.

Our principles lift up the right of conscience, seeing each person as a moral agent who discerns right and wrong and chooses accordingly. But for the right of conscience to be truly exercised, the choices need to be real choices. The choice I had to bring my son into a world of opportunity, safety, and support needs to be available to all mothers (and fathers) who seek to raise families.

As a people of faith, we fold together our theology of sacred sexuality; our reverence for life, including the inherent worth and dignity of all; and our belief in the right of conscience into active work for justice. For us, it is unsatisfying to view life as some kind of staging area for some greater things to come after death. Instead, we set our sights on *this* world and *this* life, doing what we can to build the kin-dom of God here on

earth.

My social location has afforded me enormous privilege. Today I seek the same opportunities for all. In my ministry, I see what happens when families scape by without the opportunities my family and I have enjoyed. The mother who calls me seeking help to find lodging for herself and her teenaged son who has an anxiety disorder. Because he is a teenager, the shelters insist he sleep in the men's quarters, but he cannot so easily or comfortably be separated from his mother. So they have nowhere to go. Or the grandfather raising his little disabled grandson while working low-wage jobs... always behind on the rent, always going just a bit hungry so his grandson can eat. Or the homeless mother desperate for a Hannaford card so that she can buy diapers and toilet paper to get her babies through the weekend. Those are just a smattering of the very real stories of very real people I encounter working as your minister.

I ask you: In this country, how is it possible we have built a culture where children grow up with such grinding despair and hopelessness? Where children are hungry? Where mothers are desperate for diapers and toilet paper for their families? Where a mother and son must be separated to get a roof over their heads?

How can our society be anything but stronger if we build a culture that helps women to make healthy, well-educated decisions about when to create families? How can we be anything but stronger if we can free people from burdens of oppression? How can we be anything but stronger if we help people can grow, unencumbered, into their best selves, the beautiful products of creation God or the spirit of life or the blessing of love intends them to be?

This day – an all days – may we open ourselves to the wonder of the great mystery of life, seeking ways to build the fabric that will support growth for everyone, linking hands with those who work to create a world of justice for all.