

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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Love One Another

Rev. Susie Maxwell

Let us pray . . .

When I was 25, my period was quite late. My boyfriend and his mother had very strong opinions that I should have an abortion. I felt differently. “The doctor will just give you your period back,” said my boyfriend’s mother.

All kinds of thoughts overwhelmed me, but the one thought that never even entered my mind was my ability to access a safe, legal, and supportive abortion.

Turns out my period was just that, quite late — and the stress and anxiety my then-boyfriend and his mother were causing me didn’t help. And honestly? Because I was easily manipulated when I was younger, I

probably would have terminated a pregnancy. I am thankful I did not have to enter that difficult decision.

But I know women who have had to enter that hard place, and have had to terminate a pregnancy, leaving them with grief, guilt, and shame. And I've known women who entered that place and it wasn't hard at all. It was a blessing and a relief.

But with all the women I know who have needed to end a pregnancy, no matter how they felt, of the women I know, not one of them feared whether or not they would have to find accessible, safe, legal, and supportive services. But there are so many women I don't know. And for far too many women, that's not their reality.

When I think about the best moments in my life, those moments revolve around my own agency to make my own choices. My worst moments are when I've had no options, no resources, or no support.

The American Civil Liberties Union or ACLU reports that forced pregnancy impacts anybody seeking reproductive and bodily freedom, but not everyone is impacted equally when abortion is banned or pushed out of reach. The burden falls hardest on people who already face systemic racism and discrimination in this country, including people of color, people who are undocumented, people with disabilities, and

LGBTQ+ people, as well as people who are young, have low-incomes, or live in rural areas. In other words, when they too find themselves up against few to no options, no resources, or no support. Fighting (for them) is essential to the fight for racial, economic, gender, and reproductive justice.

As I hope you read in the e-letter for today's worship, the UCC refers to the definition of reproductive justice as expressed by SisterSong, which was born out of the needs of women of color and other marginalized women:

Reproductive justice refers to the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.

And to this, I'll lift up the words of Amy Johnson, UCC minister for sexuality education reminding us that "Reproductive justice is so much more than abortion."

Christianity has a long history of being part of the problem and being part of the solution with strong opinions on both sides of the aisle when it comes to reproductive justice *because* Christianity concerns itself with concepts like sin, guilt, justice, morality, life, love, protection and so forth. And because of all differing ways pastors and priests interpret and

teach Scripture, we find ourselves differing with each other on what's right and what's wrong.

Pelvic theology is the particular type of theology that brings God into arguments around gender, sexual activity, birth control, abortion and all other manner of topics that directly relate to what we do or don't do with genitalia, sex, and power. And of course, when it comes to abortion, you can find Scriptural support for both sides of the argument, here's a sampling and most of them are taken out of context, misinterpreted and misused:

Psalm 139:13-16 talks of God knitting someone in his mother's womb.

Jeremiah 1:4-10 God talks about sanctifying Jeremiah before he came out of the womb.

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 and Job 10:18-19 both make an argument about how it would be better not to be born than to live a miserable life.

In Numbers 3:15 babies younger than age 1 month were not counted as part of the census and in Leviticus 27:6, they had no monetary value placed on them.

In Genesis 2:7 Adam is not alive until there is breath.

And of course, there's the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill."

(pause)

And you can bet that as passionately as someone feels on one side of the aisle, someone else feels as passionately on the other side, and sometimes it feels like the two shall never meet.

I think the biggest problem at the center of all these arguments is answering *who holds the authoritative power to make these deeply personal decisions?*

As people of faith, we trust that there are very few people who have the authority to tell others how to live their lives. For Christians, Jesus is one of those few who had the authority to tell us how to live. As people of faith and followers of the teachings of Jesus, it's pretty clear what we are to do when it comes to others. We all heard Barbara read Jesus' resounding note across all four Gospels: We are to love one another.

Jesus is silent on abortion but he was not silent with his constant message that we are to love one another — in the same way you'd love yourself. In the same way you would want to be loved, and supported, and guided, and nurtured, and cared for.

Loving one another means standing with another in their time of need.

Loving one another means putting yourself in another's shoes.

Loving one another means being uncomfortable at times.

Loving one another means working to end inequality and injustices.

Beloveds, the guiding faith principle for the UCC has been one of compassion — of loving one another. And as Rev. Loey Powell who is a retired UCC national staff member and advocate for gender justice writes,

The United Church of Christ upholds the principle of religious liberty, understanding that there are many differing beliefs rooted in faith about when protectable human life begins. Some believe it begins at conception while others believe that it begins when the first breath is taken. It is a violation of the First Amendment to impose one religious perspective on this very complicated, personal matter.

That last claim of Powells seems not to matter because we all know that people impose their religious or other perspectives all the time. Even the UCC does — the UCC is loud and proud on reproductive justice. And

whether we say these things out loud or not, we all have opinions about all issues arising from our pelvic regions.

The topic of reproductive justice — like many controversial topics — is going to be divisive until the end of time. And I don't assume that all of you here are in alignment with the UCC when it comes to abortion, but I am guessing if you are here, you are in alignment with the UCC when it comes to working for justice.

As I reflected on this sermon, it dawned on me that I have never talked about abortion and reproductive justice before, and I've been preaching here for 6 years. To those of you who have felt my silence or the absence of words like abortion and reproductive justice from this pulpit, forgive me. It wasn't from shying away from the topics, but so much gets by me because of the day to day pace of this weird job I have and this weird realm into which we place all our hopes, all our fears, all our faith, all our expectations, all our projections, all our doubt, and all our prayers.

And if any of you are carrying guilt or any weird feelings from deeply personal decisions you needed to make for your own life, my prayer is that you can let them go. I don't believe the sin was ever in any decision to do what you felt was right for your life. The sin is in our collective and on-going disconnect, disagreements, and judgements that prevent and stall equal access to reproductive justice.

The sin is in telling another how to live their life.

Reproductive justice falls within the larger realm of justice as a way of being and living. And justice gets defined and lived out within the systems in which we all function and participate.

So maybe the real work of reproductive justice begins by seeing within each of ourselves and our lives where we benefit from the systems we all share. And from there, learn where those systems fail to serve everybody equally. And from there, act in any way you feel called to help change those broken places.

Justice begins when we start truly loving another, treating another in *the exact same way* we would want to be loved and treated.

So, justice begins when we get to know our neighbors or another Centre Streeter. Not too late to send a valentine . . .

And justice begins as we open our eyes to the facts of systemic, gender, racial, geographical and economic inequality.

Justice begins when we put ourselves in another's shoes and try to understand their position.

Justice begins when we reach out to those in our own faith community and wider community and stop pretending that we all enjoy the same rights. Because we don't.

The work of of any justice — especially reproductive justice — is ongoing work.

And it's hard work. Jesus never said otherwise. Saying *follow me*, he lived out the hard work of teaching justice and loving others all the way to the cross.

So as we begin a new week, with God always giving us a new start at any given moment in our lives, my prayer is that you search your heart to find one small place where you can help create a hopeful change for another in the direction of justice.

Amen