

READING

From Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, President, Starr King School for the Ministry. A Sermon for the March on Washington for Women's Lives
All Souls Unitarian Church, Washington, D.C.
April 25, 2004

“We live in a world where not all our desires can come to birth – where brokenness and failure haunt us with the need for redemption or repair, where larger systems of injustice or violence put children and their parents at risk, where broken vows or unfulfilled promises break our hearts, where our inherited belief systems can collapse as inadequate, where our best efforts to love sometimes lead to naught.

How can we live in such a broken world? By protecting and exercising our power to choose. In the presence of life's heartbreaking failures and injustices, as well as its abiding beauty, it matters that we discover we need not be mere recipients, passive in the face of life, obedient to established norms or rote rituals. Our hope in an imperfect world is that we can engage in it as active, creative participants. The power to choose is the power of life...A society in which human beings accept that life and death are in their hands is a better society. Embracing creativity and responsibility is a spiritual value that applies beyond the questions of pregnancy and childbirth. To know that we have choice is to know that life is not predetermined, that we do not simply have to comply with established structures, rote patterns, or the dictates of despair. It is to know that we are not helpless in the face of overwhelming events. We all need the spiritual knowledge that life and death are in our hands, and we all need to do the hard work of ethical discernment, of accepting that life and death are ours to choose.”

Draft

PRO LIFE AND PRO CHOICE: A RELIGIOUS ALTERNATIVE
Woodinville Unitarian Universalist Church
November 5, 2006

Making choices is not an easy task.

In just a few days, voters in this country will be asked to make a choice between candidates, initiative questions and a host of other measures on ballots. Campaigns, advertisements and other methods will be available to help voters make up our minds. Each advertisement and campaign will assert with complete conviction that its message is true and has been approved by someone in authority. It didn't used to be as complicated to vote. The two party system in America was designed to create teamwork and teams. "Voting a straight ticket" was encouraged and was a statement of trust that those in authority were looking out for the voter's best interests. Instead of laboriously going through a voters packet and deciding which candidate made the most sense, all one had to do was to make one check mark on a ballot and that was it.

Traditional campaigning assumed that the whole process of selecting candidates was up to the political party. This made voting much simpler. The party would do that for us, whether Republican or Democrat or Whig or Federalist. Voters certainly had input along the way, of course. There were precinct meetings, conventions and primaries. It was all very well organized. It's still possible to vote a straight ticket in most places. The current national party in power encourages it. Splitting one's ballot to vote for the candidates of our choice is far more common. It makes the work of voting far more difficult and requires us to understand and investigate the message and the possible outcome far more carefully.

Making choices is not an easy task.

In 1979 I was living with a woman named Rachel in Ashland, Oregon. I had moved back to Ashland from a job in Eugene and we'd been together as a couple for two years. It was an intense relationship between two people in their late 20's with a lot of emotional baggage. Rachel became pregnant about August of that year. It was unplanned and we agreed a result of too much enthusiasm and too little good judgment on both our parts. I still remember Rachel coming into the house to let me know that she was pregnant. To say we were both conflicted was an understatement. I am sad to say that my first reaction was to think, "oh no." Rachel's first reaction was confusion whether we could really survive having an unplanned child.

We decided after many cups of tea and much discussion to go the abortion route. It didn't make either of us happy but we couldn't really see another course given where we were in our lives. That decision was, I think, the beginning of the end of our relationship though we stayed in touch for many years afterwards.

The abortion was medically a reasonably easy procedure. It was a terribly painful emotional process for us both but particularly for Rachel. And though Rachel and I moved on to rather bad marriages and then good relationships, I don't think either of us ever forgot that turning point in our lives. And we never forgot the twins who might have been born to us and who would be 27 years old now had they survived.

Making choices is difficult and often we never know for sure whether it was the right decision – only that it seemed to be the best one.

That huge gray area about abortion rights is still with us. Some of you may have seen on highways semi trailer trucks from a company called “Covenant Transportation”. Their trailers have a statement on the back that reads, “It's a child, not a choice.” To me that statement expresses in one sentence so much of the endless debate about abortion in the United States. “It's a child, not a choice.”

“It's a child, not a choice” is a straightforward slogan but is it really as clear as all that? I don't believe it is.

We are all too familiar with the emotional debate between those who support pro-choice and those who support a pro-life position. The pro-life position has been advanced by many in the religious community for several generations here in America and elsewhere. The main premise of the pro-life community is that at the moment of conception, the fetus is more than a collection of cells. It has been endowed at that moment with the essence of being human or, if you will, having a human soul.

This particular viewpoint of one part of the Christian faith is not universal in the history of religion. Not surprisingly, religious traditions differ widely. Most have conservative groups that oppose it and liberal or moderate groups that support it. Judaism alone has no stated restrictions about abortion in any of the Orthodox, Reformed or Reconstructionist branches. Most religious faiths including Hinduism, many Christian churches, Islam and Buddhism all say that abortion is appropriate when the mother's life is in danger or if the pregnancy came about as a result of rape or incest. Within the general Christian tradition, there's tremendous variation, as we know. One interesting bit of information I learned is that the Catholic Church has not until recently come down as being opposed to abortion in all cases. One article I checked said this about abortion, “**It is**

clear that, for most of its history, the Catholic Church did not consider abortion at early stages of pregnancy to be equivalent to the killing of a human being. Catholic teaching has been historically dominated by the belief in "delayed hominization" - that is, the belief that a fetus is not human until it has developed into a fully human form. Since a less than fully human body is not capable of receiving a soul and a human does not exist without the presence of both a fully human body and a soul, early abortion was historically not thought to constitute the taking of a human life."

The abortion debate probably will continue about this political, social and religious issue for years to come without resolution. My question this morning is whether there is an alternative to the "child versus choice" debate. I ask this because I know some among us here today who have struggled with life or death decisions about abortions and the grief of losing a pregnancy due to miscarriages. I expect I am not the only person in this room who has wondered whether a choice made 27 years ago was a wise one or not.

In Rebecca Parker's sermon about choice, she wrote, **"In the presence of life's heartbreaking failures and injustices...it matters that we discover we need not be mere recipients, passive in the face of life, obedient to established norms or rote rituals. Our hope in an imperfect world is that we can engage in it as active, creative participants. The power to choose is the power of life...A society in which human beings accept that life and death are in their hands is a better society...It is to know that we are not helpless in the face of overwhelming events."**

If we as human beings are to be "active, creative participants" in all of life, then choice should to play a central role. And if choice is to play a central role, then education and discernment must also be a foundation.

There are many that would say that a decision about abortion is God's will. That's fair but it also means that anyone that follows such belief should pray and meditate deeply and without being pummeled with dogma. If God's will is to keep or end a pregnancy, then it ought to come from a woman's own wisdom, intuition, conviction and awareness of the consequences.

If choosing to end a pregnancy is to be based on the mother's best decision, that choice requires moral and educational support. Questions such as these need to be asked:

What means does the mother have to raise a child?

Will that child have the capacity to live fully and with love?

Is the pregnancy a result of rape or other violence?

Are there alternatives to abortion that will help the child and the parent or family?

None of these questions can truly be answered out of holy books or church doctrines. None of these questions can be answered by slogans. They can be answered by laying out choices and letting the decision is up to the woman and her support system whether it is family, friends or organizations like Planned Parenthood.

This is where we come in to the picture. As Unitarian Universalists, we are a religion that affirms choice. We do not ask people to obey or memorize a creed. We do not demand that people believe one belief and call all others wrong. Our faith tells us that wisdom, truth, knowledge, and insight arise from many sources and revelation is never sealed.

Our approach to social justice, human relations and relationships is the same. Our gospel is that love transcends all divisions in spite of the “-ism’s” we place around them.

One example concerns sex education. Our religious faith along with other religious liberals such as the United Church of Christ has developed the “Our Whole Lives” sexual education curriculum. It is designed for children, youth and adults. It does not tiptoe around sexuality, sexual identity, and contraception. It does not focus on abstinence as a holy virtue but affirms sexuality an inherent part of human beings.

Choices in life are difficult and there are many religious communities that preach easier ways. Our Unitarian ancestors have spoken about choice for hundreds of years. We are the latest generation of women and men who hold up the flame of knowledge, discernment, and education for people to use in lighting their way through an oftentimes broken world.

Rev. Rebecca Parker is a direct descendent of the famed 19th century Unitarian minister Rev. Theodore Parker. He was a fervent supporter of freedom for slaves and was outspoken about the teachings of Jesus being more important than the doctrines of Christianity. He was determined that people who had no voice could be given a choice. Ten years before the Civil War, he said at the end of a famous sermon, “choose as you will choose, but weal (which means ‘happiness’) or woe depends upon your choice.”

A woman should have the inherent right to choose based on her own power and be given all the options available. That is the gift of being human.

A voter should have the inherent right to make wise decisions and be given all the options available. That is the gift of democracy.

A country should be able to reclaim its sanity and dignity. That is the gift of that the Founders of this Republic gave us.

Those rights depend on us not only Tuesday but in our religious faith that there's more than one answer to the eternal questions of life and death.

Let us choose as we will choose knowing that the future is in our hands.