

Sex, Religion, Abortion, and Justice

A Sermon by Rev. Rob Keithan

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READING

Our reading this morning is ...concise. It's from a gentleman named Butch Hancock who grew up in Texas, founded a groundbreaking progressive country group in the 1970s called the Flatlanders, and then went on to a solo career. He writes:

Life in Lubbock, Texas, taught me two things: One is that God loves you and you're going to burn in Hell. The other is that sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth and you should save it for someone you love.

Here endeth the reading.

SERMON

So, as you can imagine, I absolutely love that quote. "God loves you and you're going to burn in Hell," and "sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth and you should save it for someone you love."

I can't imagine how you could more concisely—or more humorously—capture our society's utterly conflicted relationship with religion, our society's utterly conflicted relationship with sexuality, and the fact that the two are deeply intertwined. And we know that, right? We know that sexuality and faith and life can be incredibly good and powerful, but they can also be deeply broken by judgment and shame and exploitation. So how do we make sense of this dichotomy, and what is our role as people of liberal faith?

Before I dive in to that, I want to share a little bit of my personal story. And I will say that being a white male minister in my field, I get that question a lot, of how did I become involved in reproductive health and rights and justice work. And I enjoy saying 'well, like most people I'm sure, I learned about feminism and reproductive justice from my father and my church.'

In fact my earliest memory of taking a stand on an "issue" was in 4th or 5th grade when I was defending a woman's right to make her own decisions about abortion to my Catholic friends who thought abortion was wrong and should be illegal. At the time I knew that I didn't know exactly why I believed what I believed, I just knew it wasn't right to make decisions for other people. But I've since realized that my beliefs came very clearly from two places.

It absolutely came from the role model of both my parents but particularly my father, who was and is a strong feminist. He was a strong supporter of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice when I was in high school, and frequently served as an escort at the nearest abortion clinic. My values also came from what I learned at my church, the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, which is that all people are of equal value and should have equal rights, which means that each person should get to decide what happens to their own body.

And so here I am. And not by coincidence, I think, I'm working in the issue arena that got me interested in this work in the first place: the intersection of faith and sexuality and justice.

And for me, the equation goes like this: religion has done a disproportionate amount of the damage to health sexuality in this country, so I think religion has to play a disproportionate role in the healing. And, in fact, I think that religion and religious people HAVE to be involved in the struggle if we're ever going to make the progress we want towards reproductive health, rights, and justice, because the opposition to these ideas comes from religious people and groups, and when there aren't other faith voices standing up and speaking out, we give the opposition a monopoly on morality. And so what we do—or don't do—as a faith community really and truly matters.

Now, I realize that the issues I'm talking about today, and in particular abortion, are among the most emotional and sensitive topics imaginable. I'm sure that they have touched or will touch many people in this room deeply. And I just want to say that each person's experiences and emotions around these issues are unique and your own and that's OK. I trust that this community is strong enough and respectful enough to hold it all. As Frances David, one of our Unitarian forebears said, "We need not think alike to love alike."

Ok? Ok.

I want to start by telling you that the history of collaboration between communities of faith and supporters of reproductive health, rights, and justice goes back a long time. One of the first places Margaret Sanger stopped on her first cross country speaking tour in 1916 was the First Unitarian Church of Cleveland, Ohio. Although very much an atheist herself, she was both strongly and strategically involved with organizing clergy and faith communities to speak out publicly in favor of birth control.

Fast forward from then, the 20s and 30s, to the mid-1960s. After walking too many times through New York hospitals with entire wings dedicated to women suffering or dying from unsafe abortions, Rev. Howard Moody founded the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion. The service was an underground network of clergy across the country who were willing to risk their jobs or imprisonment in order to provide pastoral care to women who were facing unintended pregnancies. And, if that woman so chose, to help her find access to an at least safe, if not legal, abortion. The service had more than 1300 members when the US Supreme Court decided Roe v. Wade in 1973.

Immediately after the decision, which limited the ways in which states could restrict access to abortion, some faith groups vowed to get it overturned. In response, a group of religious organizations including Methodists Presbyterian, Reform Jews, Unitarian Universalists and others formed a coalition to ensure that the Roe v. Wade decision stood. And since that time we have slowly but surely broadened our mission to reproductive justice. And I want to tell you a little about reproductive justice, because it's not just a new term, it's a particular approach created by women of color, and it has the potential to unlock possibilities that didn't exist before.

The reproductive justice framework was created in 1993 by a group of black women who felt that the mainstream choice movement did not sufficiently address what they or their families and communities needed to be healthy. In their view, the choice movement was too much focused on choice as a legal right. And of course having a legal right to something doesn't mean that you have actual access to it.

There are many other factors that go into access. And what these women needed for themselves and their communities was about a lot more than just access to abortion.

There are four principles that are generally share among reproductive justice advocates, which is that:

1. First, yes, people have a right not to have children, but also:
2. Second, people have a right to have children.
3. Third, people have a right to raise their children in safe and healthy environments, and,
4. Fourth: every person has a right to health and self-determination regarding their bodies and sexuality, free from oppression and shame.

I am both grateful and proud that the Unitarian Universalist Association was the first denomination to official consider reproductive justice as an approach; it's our study issue from 2012-2016. But since then other religious groups are considering or have made the change as well.

Now that I've given you some of the big picture information, I want to share a story of what this looks like.

I travel a fair amount for my job, and although I'm generally friendly to people beside on airplanes or in other places like that I don't always want to have a conversation with strangers about religion and abortion so I'm sometimes a little hesitant to say exactly what I do. But every once in a while I'm feeling up for it.

One evening I found myself in a bar in a small town in Western Pennsylvania, coming back from a trip to Ohio. It was a Monday night, so it's me and two other guys at the bar plus a handful of people at tables. The bartender was a white woman about my age, fairly outgoing. She strikes up a conversation with me that eventually comes around to asking what I do. I take a deep breath, and I say "well, I'm a minister who works from a faith perspective to support access to sexuality education, contraception, and all forms of pregnancy-related healthcare including abortion."

It feels like there's eternal pause, you know, which I'm sure was only a few seconds. But she stops what she's doing, she leans over the bar, and looks at me very closely, and says:

"Thank you. Thank you for doing that work. See, I got pregnant when I was in high school, and my Catholic step-father told me that he'd kick me out of the house if I had an abortion. I'd wanted to go to college, but now I'm here with two kids. And I'm trying to give my daughters the best sex education I can so that they don't get stuck in the same situation."

And so the reality is that the Roe v. Wade decision didn't help her at all. It didn't mean that she got a good sexuality education. It didn't mean that she had access to the most effective forms of contraception, or the self-esteem that you often need to make healthy decisions. And she didn't have actual access to abortion when she needed it, thanks in large part to religion.

Now, I will say that the state of affairs in our nation on these issues is mixed. The Affordable Care Act has increased access to contraception in new ways, the teen birth rate is the lowest it's ever been, and we're winning the fight for marriage equality. But each of these gains is a huge fight at every step, and the US teen birth rate is still far higher than most European countries. And when it comes to abortion,

we've only gone backwards. In the last five years alone, states have passed more than 200 measures reducing access to abortion.

While the overall picture includes some good news, I think that it includes enough bad news that we need to be honest with each other: our current approach isn't working. Or at least it's not working fast enough.

In my analysis, one of the main problems is that too many in the reproductive health and rights movement have focused on specific issues and resisted connecting them with others. The reproductive justice framework calls us to make these connections—to take an intersectional approach. This approach recognizes that an individual is not a woman one day, low-income the next, or white the next. Identities including gender, class, race, sexual orientation, immigration status and many others which are always present and always intersecting.

From a reproductive justice approach, you don't just talk about having good sex education in public schools, you talk about having good public schools, and the relationship between education, safe communities, and the availability of jobs that pay a living wage. You don't just talk about access to abortion, you talk about access to all forms of health care, including abortion. You talk about who has access to resources and to power, who doesn't, and why.

This is absolutely one of the most important tenets of reproductive justice: it's about power. It's about who is making decisions about who's bodies and lives. Policy change is an important part of the struggle, but it's not enough to focus on policy because that doesn't change the inequalities in our culture and our institutions that perpetuate oppression.

One of the clearest and easiest places where an intersectional, power-based approach can illuminate a new path forward is by connecting the dots between the struggle for LGBT equality and the struggle for reproductive health and rights.

Although we tend to approach them separately, they have the same root cause. With few exceptions, they are opposed by the same individuals and organizations: *people who believe that it's OK for one group to control another group by imposing their religious views*. It's a view based on fear, shame, and self-righteousness, and it follows a common formula that goes like this: regulation, judgment, punishment. Regulation: we know the one right way to be in the world. We know the right decisions to make about sexuality, and we will judge you on them. And if you're found to be outside of the norms we have created for you, you'll be punished with stigma and shame. Maybe even kicked out of your family or faith community or social circle. I call this approach moralism. It is deeply rooted in our American culture and it is deeply religious in nature.

Moralism is part of what explains how the same politicians that are obsessed with restricting access to safe and legal abortion also oppose effectively sexuality education and increasing access to contraception. What this drives home is that what we're facing is not a common sense conversation about how to reduce the need for abortion. If you want to reduce the need for abortion, there's no better way to do that than access to sexuality education and access to contraception. But the majority of the legislature and their allies don't want sexuality education or contraception, *because ultimately reducing abortion isn't their goal*. Their goal is to impose a particular religious view of sexuality through the law, and set up a system where people can be punished—legally or otherwise—for making different choices.

That's why what we do or don't do as people of faith is so critically important. And what we have to offer as an alternative vision is powerful, and it's grounded in the dream of our American democratic tradition.

Because what we have to offer is a theology of pluralism, a theology of love, a theology of liberation. Our theology says that all people have value and should be able to make decisions about what happens to their bodies. Our theology says that bodies are good, that knowledge is good, that sexuality is good. Our theology says that there is strength and beauty in imperfection; that diversity is a blessing, a part of God's plan, even.

Now, it may seem that this struggle is mostly about other people, or issues and dynamics that happen outside the walls of the congregation. But if I've learned anything in this work, it's that our society's brokenness on sexual and reproductive health affects pretty much every one of us. Every single one of us. Because shame, and fear, and judgment are incredibly powerful forces, and without a positive, powerful vision to move us forward, we cannot avoid these obstacles to joy and health and wholeness.

So I am convinced that everyone, every single person, has much to gain from breaking the religious right's stranglehold on sexuality. And so I ask you to take a moment and reflect to yourself: what would it look like for you to love yourself more in this respect? What would it look like for you to work through any feelings of shame, or self-judgment that you may have about your body, or your sexuality? What would it look like to love yourself more?

My sense, friends, is that shame begets shame, and judgment begets judgment—if we're aiming it at others than we're also aiming it at ourselves. It's a two-way street.

So one of the first steps to make change is to be gentler with ourselves, and to recognize that some of those critical voices inside our heads, judging us for our sexuality or our decisions, are not our voices, and nor are they the voices of God or the divine. They are the voices of our society's broken relationship with sexuality.

But together, as a community, we have an opportunity to change the conversation. To change the dialogue. If you want to get more involved, the Amendment 1 fight gives you a very concrete and very urgent opportunity to do so. There will be a table after the service with more information and a chance to sign up. And know that if you do, you'll be in very good company, as other UU congregations across the state have stepped up. We have more partners in the faith community, and we also have partners in the secular community who recognize that religion can and must play a different role in this struggle.

But if the political campaign isn't for you, there's still much that everyone can do to change this conversation. It starts with loving yourself more, and it continues with being willing to name your faith support for healthy sexuality more publicly with friends and with family members. In a sense, to come out of the closet as person of faith who supports reproductive health, rights, and justice.

I want to close with a positive story of what can happen when we take an intersectional approach to this work. The setting is the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations 2008 General Assembly in Ft. Lauderdale. At that time in Florida, there were two different ballot measures that folks were going to be voting on in November. There was one aimed at restricting the rights of immigrants, and there was one aimed at preventing same-sex couples from adopting children. There's a public witness for justice at

General Assembly every year, and the planning group decided that it wanted an event that would illustrate the linkages between the two issues: immigration and equality for same gender-loving couples.

Getting folks from the immigrant community and the LGBT community to work together wasn't easy, it wasn't something that made a lot of sense initially. But to their credit those activists were willing to work with us. And in the end we had a rally to value all families, with immigrant families and gay and lesbian parents each sharing their stories of oppression and struggle. After the rally, one of the participants shared something that illustrates exactly what being open to other people's stories can mean. The woman, an immigrant, turned to one of the LGBT speakers and said: "Now I understand how you coming out of the closet is the same as us coming out of the shadows." And another added: "And I'm an immigrant and gay. So for me it's both."

Making connections between people and issues and movements unlocks a transformative, collaborative and creative power that remains hidden to us when we only work in silos. And there is too much at stake not to make these connections. If we truly want to change how the world works, we have to change how we're going about the work.

Fortunately, we have a powerful theology and a powerful vision that shows us a way forward. Working for reproductive justice, grounded in our religious calling to love, and to liberation, provides us with an incredible opportunity—especially here in Tennessee—to take our strong legacy of work for reproductive choice and transform it into what our nation deeply needs right now, which is more people, and especially people of faith, who are willing to step up and help create a culture where every single person—every single member of the human family—has the rights, respect, and resources they deserve.

May it be so.

BENEDICTION

Let us, in the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "move forward with strong and active faith," knowing that we are beautiful, that we are loved, and that we are needed. Amen.