

Idolatry of Anti-choice

Delivered Sunday, December 5, 2010

At the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greater Naples in Naples, FL

By Jennifer Dant, DRE and ministerial candidate

Readings:

A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming

(Emerson)

Blessed be my brain that I may conceive of my own power,
Blessed be my breast that I may give sustenance to those I love,
Blessed be my womb that I may create what I choose to create,
Blessed be my knees that I may bend so as not to break,
Blessed be my feet that I may walk in the path of my highest will.

(Robin Morgan, Life Prayers, p. 154)

Sermon:

This is a sermon that I understood I needed to preach but resisted writing. I have a 25 year career in nursing, the majority of which was as a Women's Health Care Nurse Practitioner. I began in a Planned Parenthood affiliate in Upstate New York in 1991. I was Director of Patient Services of our local affiliate, Planned Parenthood of Collier County in Naples, Florida, from 1993-1995. I've worked in ob-gyn private practices. I have high risk labor and delivery hospital

experience where I spent twelve hour nights assisting in all types of deliveries. I was a member of a bereavement team for fetal loss which means I have prepared the bodies of dead infants and sat with grieving families as they cried over them. I am the mother of three children. I have experienced a miscarriage between two of them. As a young adult I have also had an abortion. Why then, despite all those experiences is it still hard to talk about abortion?

It is hard for me to talk about abortion. Why is that? In my support of women's reproductive rights and complete pro-choice stance....why is it still hard for me to talk about abortion? I've thought about this literally for years.....why?

The language game comes into play. Notice my sermon title choice of the words "anti-choice". If I'm pro-choice then those opposed to abortion claim pro-life. If they are pro-life am I anti-life? Of course not but these types of word manipulations are constantly flung back and forth between both ends of the choice "sides". Is it because of the subtle and not so subtle messages of our local culture? While I was Director of Patient Services of the Collier County affiliate I frequently heard, "oh you work for Planned Parenthood? But we don't do abortions here, right?" This always felt like a granting of some type of clemency. Gee, thanks. But now, folks, we do. Finally, once again, our town provides access to safe, legal abortions instead of sending women out of the county. There was a gap of twelve or so years when abortion was not available unless you had transportation to Ft Myers, Sarasota or Miami. This was a result of the one physician who had been providing abortion services quit due to the stress of opponents harassment and a lack of collegial support. But we'll get back to that later.

Here is why I think talking about abortion is difficult. It is because abortions are horrible. They are no fun. They come after difficult and painful decisions are made and they are stressful, uncomfortable and sad. In our dualistic society with the shrill and constant voice of anti-choice screaming 'murder' it seemed that if I admit conflicted feelings about abortion then somehow I am disloyal to my own beliefs about a woman's right to choice.

Too much of my thinking has been done in response to the accusations and self-righteous claims of those who do not support abortion. My framework has always been; I am either here on this end, or I am over here; on this end. And that linear and dualistic continuum, my friends, is where I now refuse to place myself.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I am asked to guard against idolatry of the mind and spirit. Idolatry is defined as the excessive or blind devotion to something. My idol detector goes off the moment something cannot be questioned. And as human beings we all do it. Unitarian Universalists, for example, get tweaked when we challenged with how truly effective some green behaviors might be. We saw some of it with the discourse around changing the language

of the Seven Principles. Emerson warns us, a person will worship something and reminds us that what we become what we are worshipping. If I cannot question and wrestle openly and honestly with my own mixed feelings about abortion then I place myself at the one of two ends of the choice spectrum. Even pro-choice camps can slip into fanaticism and idolatry of their position. A classmate was in an ethics class and they were discussing abortion. He shared his pro-choice position but when he added his personal experiences of wrestling with the issue he was immediately discounted because he was A: a male and B: he expressed conflicted feelings. He was informed that abortion is a medical procedure that is no different than pulling a tooth. Your idol detectors should be sounding their alarms right now. Only one position is acceptable and one way of thinking. And these were Unitarian Universalist seminarians on their path to ministry. It seems then that I only have two choices; Abortion, never? Idolatry. Abortion, always? It sounds ridiculous but that is how many people understand the issue. If you are pro-choice then somehow you are anti-pregnancy, anti-family or anti-baby and think everyone should have an abortion. I no longer accept that type of thinking.

Idolatry is dangerous. It creates self-righteousness and zealous earnestness. I've walked through many lines of anti-choice picketers when I worked in the Upper Hudson affiliate. Now that I'm back at our Collier county affiliate, it's been a revisiting of those days now that we regularly have picketers. Idolatry justifies following Planned Parenthood employees around in public, looking up license plate numbers and knowing home addresses and making death threats to medical directors. Last month a new person showed up. Instead of the usual praying and pointing crosses and crucifixes at me (maybe they should try some garlic and a wooden stake) this person was screaming. She informed me of the demons within me that I would be taking home to my family. Really? She doesn't know that as a seminarian I am required to regularly dance with those demons. But as I walked into the building she began shouting something that (forgive me for the word I'm about to use but it's the only one that fits) I got pissed. Not just rankled or annoyed or angry but really, really pissed. (outraged and incensed might work) "I'm doing God's work! This is God's work. I am doing God's work!" I turned and looked at her red, furious, out of control face. I can still picture her clenched fists as her screeching words cut through the warm morning air. I am not a deist. God is not a noun for me. It's more of a verb, maybe a creative force. I've experienced the spirit of life and love moving through and around my life. I've looked upon the face of that spirit and it's always been when looking into the face of another. I've been privileged to use my hands on behalf of that spirit and have also felt those hands upon me. And it's always been through the touch of another. This woman screamed blasphemy and defiled the sacredness of every interaction I've ever had with my patients –not just as a nurse but also as a chaplain. God's work? No. God's work is quiet and steady. The work of the Spirit is constant and faithful and experienced in relationship with one another. Hers was not God's work. Hers was idol worship. And it's the kind of false

worship that allows individuals to fly planes into sides of buildings or straight boys to drag young gay men through the streets and leave them tied to a fence post. It is the dangerous certainty which results in swastikas being spray painted on the garages of our local activists. It is the challenging of those idols that leads to a silencing of the prophetic voice through assassination or crucifixion.

Idols are False. One Unitarian Universalist minister, in speaking about idolatry, said

“The definition of idolatry is taking the partial as the whole, confusing the partial with the whole. “

In the war against a woman’s right to choose the idol is the sole focus of sentimentalizing of infants. Their signs picture sweet (usually white) round faced babies pleading not to be stripped of their cooing lives. There is no space for the whole of complexity of our human lives. Their idolatrous worship for the state of pregnancy and the belief that babies bring nothing but good things blocks the space for ambiguity, for doubt or for a real relationship with the woman. She can only be considered through her potential identity as mother and the definition of motherhood as the ultimate concern. It’s false. What is true is that abortion is a reality and always has been. The Reverend Tom Davis is an ordained United Church of Christ minister who has chaired the clergy advisory committee for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America writes in his book, *Sacred Work*, “Looking back I am struck by the lack of visible opposition to abortion access when it was illegal. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Manhattan did not make any public response to the formation of the Clergy Consultation on Abortion in 1967.” This was a group of interfaith clergy folk who decided to network and help women find access to safe abortions when it was illegal throughout our nation. He adds that neither the “Southern Baptists nor any of the other religious institutions which today vehemently oppose *Roe v. Wade* made any response to the New York Times front page article highlighting the work of the Clergy Council.” I repeat, this is when abortion was illegal, a criminal act! Let’s go back farther; A 5th century papyrus speaks of using herbs and strenuous exercise to induce abortion. Surgical techniques are described by the second and third centuries. During the Civil War era advertisements targeted women with menstrual irregularities. The language of such advertising, "irregularity," "obstruction," "menstrual suppression," and "delayed period" were understood to be euphemistic references to the state of pregnancy. And on it goes up to today’s “abortion wars”. It would take more time than we have today to go through the full history of abortion and abortion laws. And many of you here were, and still are, involved in the front lines of protecting the full scope of women’s reproductive rights. My point, in relation to the topic of idolatry, is to illustrate the falseness of an *abortion never* stance. The question is not whether it is right or wrong. History has already shown us; it just is. And will always be.

And let's get back to our local physician who for years was the only one who provided abortion services to Collier county women. We had rocks thrown through our church windows in the late 90's when he held a press conference announcing his cessation of abortion services, not simply because of opposition picketing his house and making his life hell, but because he had no colleagues willing to back him up and stand behind him in the face of this harassment. In reality, many of those doctors who not only wouldn't publicly support him but spoke out against him, provided pregnancy termination for their own private patients. You see, access is everything. When you have money or insurance, you have access to privileges poor and uninsured women don't and the right to control one's own reproductive life is one of those benefits. Access is everything and *abortion never* is a myth. A physician I once worked with shared the frustration and distress over coming into his office one evening and finding his married, Catholic, anti-choice partner performing an abortion on the partner's pregnant girlfriend. Access is everything. And *abortion never* is a myth. Planned Parenthood affiliates have a form called a "Special Consent for Abortion." These consents are for the women who, after standing on a picket line in front of a clinic harassing others, come into the Planned Parenthood for an abortion. These consents are for the women who are vehemently opposed to abortion but earnestly explain why "in their case" it is necessary. And Planned Parenthood provides the same level of service with the same level of respect as they do for every other patient. *Abortion never*, a myth. Are these individuals bad and hypocritical humans? The snarky part who has been treated poorly by anti-choice zealots in the past wants to say YES and let's deny them access. But the better person in me, the one who has experienced both the giving and receiving of God's work, understands that we are all human with all our human frailties. We are imperfect creatures in a strange and frightening world.

And that is what idolatry does. It provides a sense of control. It denies the knowledge that we are vulnerable and unsure. As long as our idols have the answers, then I know what to think and what not to think. The sad part is that when we rely on false idols to cut ourselves off from the scary and unpleasant parts of ourselves we also deny the opportunity for transformations, new insights, new awareness and new ways of relating to one another. A dear friend and colleague while working for Planned Parenthood founded the Collier County Adoption Task Force many years ago. I was invited to sit on the committee and was excited that it intentionally reached out to anti-choice groups. The thinking was that while we disagree on abortion, we all agree that adoption is a wonderful possible option when it comes to unplanned and unwanted pregnancies. My experience is that many women considering their options are quick to dismiss adoption. The Adoption Task force was aimed at identifying why this was, raising public awareness about the adoption option as well as setting up networks of resources for pregnant

women wanting to place an infant for adoption. The committee would be balanced in both pro-choice and anti-choice 'camps'. Sounds great, right? Way more effective and proactive than praying on the sidewalk or yelling at women coming in to pick up birth control pills. What do you think happened? Within two years the anti-choice groups refused to sit at the table with Planned Parenthood and other pro-choice members. I believe there was a statement about working together with prochoice groups would be like sitting at the table with Nazis or the Klu Klux Klan. That is idolatry at work. Unable to stand the discomfort of ambiguity or relationship with a perceived enemy, the idolatry of the mythic *abortion never*, is used to pull away to the safety of the regulated world. The idol must be protected at all costs. I honestly don't remember whether the group disbanded or it became an anti-choice group. Either way, it was a missed opportunity not only for each of the committee members but also for the recipients of the services which, as usual, are the poorer and uninsured women and families of our county.

I was on call one weekend and the on call phone began ringing. Being "on call" means one of the medical staff carries a cell phone 24 hours a day for a week so that our post abortion patients can access services in case of emergencies. When the phone rings it always creates a little anxiety before you pick it up. You never know what is on the other end. In this case it was a woman who had been seen in the clinic for a routine follow up the day before. She was convinced her bleeding was abnormal and was scared. Along with my reassurances, there were a number of calls back and forth as she did what I asked her to do and I monitored her via the phone. A number of times it was her spouse who got on the phone with me. Nothing was working for her and her anxiety was rising. Finally I said, "You know, you always have the option of being seen in the emergency room. If you decide to go, I want you to call me first. And if you go, you need to let the staff there know that you had an abortion." She burst into tears and cried out, "I'm so ashamed, I can't tell them!" We spent a long time talking. This woman was the mother of three children, had a spouse who had a vasectomy after deciding they didn't want more children and whether it was a failed procedure or too early for the sperm to clear, had ended up pregnant again. She was in disbelief that she was in the position she was. We talked about difficult and loving decisions. How hard they are to make. I reassured her that it was okay to grieve the loss of this pregnancy, because it was a loss. And that if she was sad about it, it didn't mean she made the wrong decision. We talked about her three small children and how difficult it is with them sometimes but how much she loved them. I assured her that she was not alone; other women had the same sorts of feelings. At the end of our conversation she promised to call me if anything changed or she went to the emergency room. This was a Saturday evening and when I hadn't heard anything by Sunday afternoon I called to check in. Her husband's voice was relaxed and upbeat, "she had a great night! The bleeding slowed down, she showered and slept finally." I spoke briefly to her and her voice, too, was relaxed as

she thanked me for my help. All I had done was been present. I listened and responded to the fears and anxieties caused by the cultural climate of anti-choice idolatry. I simply gave her permission to be both relieved and sad. To grieve the loss and affirmed her family's decision. Together we explored the complex and complicated lives that all women share.

And in that space, between the sad and the relieved, between the profane and the profound, between the uncertainty and the knowing is where the spirit of life and love are found. That is where God's work gets done. I sit with families as they make decisions about terminating life support for loved ones. I talk with people who make decisions to stop treatments and allow their natural end to occur. These are quality of life issue that individuals make after considering the totality of their circumstances. They are heart wrenching and gut punching while at the same time beautiful and loving as we fragile humans reckon with the realities of our complicated lives. I can tell you that women weighing their options in the wake of an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy, or with a pregnancy with fetal complications, take their decision making no less seriously. And sometimes we make difficult decisions that we know are right but are no less painful or complicated. Idolatrous thought would have us believe that difficult decisions should be made easy by a one way only approach. But human beings are wonderfully complicated. And life is mostly out of our control, fragile and fleeting. Our lives are bittersweet and sweetbitter. Life as an interconnected and complicated web is way more fun to explore than the black/ white, right/wrong dualistic thinking of those who need false idols. And when we stumble and fall, which we all do, webs make better nets to catch us than straight lines do.

That is why the woman screaming at me that she was doing God's work had such a profound effect on me. She's wrong. Each of you who dons the yellow escort vest every week and walks beside a patient entering the clinic; you're doing god's work. And the staff that risks harassment and harm to provide safe and effective health care to the poor and working women of Collier County; they are doing God's work. And for each and every donor who writes a check in support of women's reproductive rights; you are doing god's work. And for every one of us that votes against the false idols of anti-choice; we do God's work.

And our work is not finished. As long as Viagra and men's sexual health are covered by Medicare and insurance while women's access to birth control and abortion are made difficult; our work is not done. As long as women with money and private insurance can quietly slip into private doctor's offices while poorer women must cross angry picket lines; our work is not done. As long as religious institutions that support women's reproductive rights remain silent and polite; our work is not done. As long as there are pro-choice voters out there not voting because they think it doesn't matter; our work is not done.

Blessed be our brains; that we may own our own power.
Blessed be our hearts; that we may be brave and present for those we love.
Blessed be our spirits; that we may create a world of justice for all.
Blessed be our knees; that we may stand tall beside one another in all of life's messiness.
Blessed be this community; that we may walk in the path of our highest good.

Blessed be, blessed be and amen.

Ritual:

I light this candle for all the difficult decisions made in the dark recesses of our hearts. The ones we may be afraid to share. The decisions about pregnancies and relationships, marriages and loved ones and addictions and abuses, mistakes and failures. This candle represents the bringing to light those wounds and fears held in secret. When brought into the light, we learn we are not alone or unique with our secrets.

This is the candle of forgiveness. We know our decisions affect other people. And sometimes those effects are unpleasant to those we love. Sometimes painful and sometimes harmful even while being necessary. Other people's decisions affect us also. May the steady warmth of this flame comfort us as we learn to let go, to forgive and to reconcile whatever that may mean to you.

This steady burning of the third candle is the flame of life and of love. It is the spark recognized within each of us. It is where the hands and face of the divine are found. Look upon one another. The steady burning flame of community, connection, compassion and understanding is within each one of us. Study it, meditate upon it, keep the flame pictured in your mind. The steady burning is now there, ready to be called upon in times of need. It is a reminder that you are not alone. You have the strength to reach out to others and you have the space to respond when others reach out to you.