

## Beyond the Partisan Divide

# Sermon: Apples and Oranges in the Choice Wars

by Reverend Megan Foley

In order to do this sermon topic justice it is important to acknowledge my own “social location” within the subject of abortion. It is important to tell you what I’ve experienced and, probably even more importantly, what I have not experienced, in the particular time period in which I have lived.

Your “social location” is a description of the particular social setting in which you exist. Your social location makes all the difference in how you see the world. A white, middle-class man who came of age just in time to be enrolled in World War II, for example, comes from an entirely different social location from the white, middle class man who comes of age just in time to be eligible for the Vietnam draft, if only because of the different nature of those two wars. And because of the difference in social location, their opinion about whether the Vietnam War was worthwhile is likely to be entirely different from each other’s, right? Just that variation in experience, due to the entirely dissimilar world situation into which each was born, changes things like outlook and opinion and personality and all sorts of the behavior that stems from that. And all the more so if there are additional variations in class, in race, in gender, nationality...

So with that in mind, I need to tell you some of my own background, before I tread into the explosive free-for-all that serves as an abortion debate in this country.

It is important that you know that I was born just two years before Roe v. Wade was passed, Roe v. Wade being the Supreme Court case that led to the constitutional amendment that made abortion legal nationwide. That means that abortion has been legal all over my country for almost my whole life.

You also need to know that I was a child when many of our culture’s most significant strides towards gender equality were made, and so I am a beneficiary of all of that effort without having had to do much of that work myself. Feminists fought many battles against sexism during the seventies so that women in the next generations wouldn’t have to, and I am one of those fortunate in the next generations. I am enormously grateful for those women who fought those battles for me, but that is not the same thing as having fought them myself, or having experienced the world before they were fought. That’s important to know.

I also think it’s germane to this discussion for you to know that thanks to a combination of luck and education and resources, I have never had an abortion myself nor considered having one, although I am close to some women who have. I have never been in a situation where I was not

in control of my sexuality, nor have I been abused by a family member, or put in sexual situations while underage. These experiences, or lack thereof, color my perception of the abortion debate absolutely, and I would not bother telling you all this if I didn't think it really mattered.

These backgrounds, all of our backgrounds, matter in the discussion over the morality, and therefore the legality, of abortion. They matter a lot.

You also need to know that I have lived my entire adult life in that often- secular, "latte liberal" culture that is so often derided by right wing commentators. And in that culture, the voices you hear about abortion are pro-choice ones. I came of age in the 1980s, during the abortion clinic bombings that killed doctors and nurses and women, and all the voices around me fell strongly on the side of the abortion providers and the women seeking abortions, and against the protesters and the bombers.

And that's the side I fell on, too.

Then I became a Unitarian Universalist, a Unitarian Universalist minister. Unitarian Universalism has been promoting abortion rights for decades. When I searched for official statements of conscience that were created and voted upon by UUs at General Assembly, I found eighteen different official statements and resolutions that at least mentioned abortion rights as part of their platform. In 1968, five years before the passage of *Roe v. Wade*, UUs voted as a body to "abolish existing abortion laws ... leaving the decision as to an abortion to the doctor and his patient." So I find myself in a pro-choice tribe these days, too.

And this tribe, this staunchly pro-choice tribe that I have fallen into as a result of my social location and my reactions to life experiences and my profession, makes up one side of a fiery debate that always has the potential to explode, and often does. This sermon is not really equipped to deal with recent legislation across the country that attempts to restrict women's access to abortion. But it is equipped to continue the conversation about the vitriol that seems intractably embedded in the debate, vitriol that we're seeing again rise to the surface of the conversation.

The first angle I want to talk about is what it's like to be entrenched on one side of this dispute, the way that I feel that I am, the way I think many UUs are. It is the nature of a polarized debate that there are two poles, one Yes and one No, one black and one white. There is no gray, no maybe, no "This in some situations, but That in other situations." Just two sides, two poles. That is what "polarized" means.

If you think about it, it is very strange for Unitarian Universalists to be enmeshed in a polarized debate, because if nothing else, we are a religion that prides itself on being willing to wade out into the gray water of life and leave the poles behind. We UUs value nuance, and individual voices speaking their minds, and above all the right of conscience in determining the right path. I can see how it happened, historically speaking, that we took this strong stance on behalf of reproductive choice. But I wonder if the rigidity of our own stance is as much of a threat to us as the other side seems to be.

We often think about polarization in terms of the other guy, the one who has such strident views threatening our own. But polarization is just as tough on our side. I can't tell you how many times I've tried to start a conversation, a real one, about when an embryo becomes a fetus, becomes a baby, becomes a person, and have been shut down because that's not okay for us to talk about. Even starting to talk about it, it seems, sends us down a slippery slope that leads to our rights being taken away.

What's even more frightening than that is how many times those conversations are never started in liberal circles, in UU circles, because people who are seeking their own opinion in the nuance or gray areas in the situation are given the message that conversation and questioning are not welcome. If only one position is acceptable, then all the other positions need to be shut down. But how un-Unitarian Universalist is that? In what other situation are we expected to swallow the party line, even if it is correct?

So this is my first critique of the UU side of the abortion discussion: We don't leave enough room for the right of conscience, for the individual to come to their own truth.

To be pro-choice is an important stance for UUs, a stance that extends beyond the abortion debate. Pro-choice means that everyone gives the topic some thought and comes to the conclusion that is right for them, even when their choice leads them away from the mainstream voice. We UUs ought to be, always and forever, pro-choice.

But, to be truly pro-choice on abortion carries with it the option for deciding that abortion is morally wrong. Right? If we encourage everyone to find their own truth, it just seems statistically likely that at least some of us will come to a truth that abortion is morally wrong. And it concerns me that I don't hear people saying that in UU circles, ever.

What happens to you if your conscience leads you to this conclusion? Are you no longer a UU, because UUs are "supposed" to be pro-choice? Do we only promote a liberal process when it concludes in a liberal outcome? If everyone's voice was able to be heard in this debate, then we would be hearing more diversity in the conversation. The fact that we are almost entirely hearing one side makes me feel that other voices are being squelched.

So that's my first critique of the abortion debate: Our side doesn't leave enough room for the individual search for truth and meaning that we claim is so important to us.

My second critique of the abortion debate has to do with the basic essence of the thing we're arguing about. I called this sermon "Apples and Oranges in the Choice Wars." I called it that because of my growing belief that in all the anger and heat, anger and heat generated as much by the left as by the right, we have lost sight of something critical. We have forgotten to ask: Are we, who are engaged in the argument over abortion rights from a pro-choice position, are we even arguing about the same thing that our opponents are arguing about?

I would like to propose that every indication suggests that the two "sides" in the abortion debate are not arguing about the same thing at all. Our historically liberal side is arguing apples, and

the other side is talking about oranges. We are always talking past each other. And if we keep it up, the two sides that claim to disagree are never going to get anywhere in coming to a common understanding or a way forward that works for everybody.

So what's the apple in this argument, and what's the orange? Look at it this way. Our UU commitment to the individual right of conscience, the individual option to search for one's own truth, only holds if the stakes don't get too high, right? There are situations that are clearly wrong, from a UU standpoint, and in those situations we don't allow for every person to come to their own conclusions and then act from those conclusions. Our commitment to the individual right of conscience has a limit.

And that limit includes murder. It does. If we knew of babies being murdered, we would not be talking about the right of conscience. We'd be talking about stopping it. So the pro-choice stance, which Unitarian Universalism has adopted, not only stems from our commitment to each person having a choice. It also rides on the fact that we do not believe, as a group, that abortion is murder.

To have our neighbors from other religions stand on the street in front of Leroy Carhart's clinic in Germantown to protest what they consider to be murder is not incomprehensible. These people are not crazy, not irrational, nor is their thinking completely foreign to ours. If we thought abortion was murder, then we'd be out there too. And that fact ought to completely change the way we think and talk with folks on the other side of the abortion debate.

I'd like to suggest that the pro-choice catch phrase "Keep Your Laws off My Body" is the apple of this argument. And the anti-choice catch phrase "Abortion is Murder" is the orange. And those two camps are not talking about the same thing, not at all.

In fact, in my opinion, "Keep Your Laws off My Body" is an entirely insufficient response to "Abortion Is Murder." To respond in that way to someone saying that abortion is murder just shows that we have failed to listen. Because we pro-choicers, no matter how pro-choice we might be, we would not condone laws that sanctioned murder. But we forget to mention the obvious in this debate.

"Keep Your Laws off My Body" is an entirely appropriate response in a dispute on the right of individual conscience. But it is an inappropriate response in the case of murder. It is the fact that pro-choice people tend NOT to believe that abortion IS murder that allows them to then move into a discussion about individual choices. If you did believe that abortion was murder, you would never be able to move to a debate over choices. We wouldn't be able to move there, either.

It is my opinion that the real debate over abortion in this country ought to be whether abortion is murder or not. If we take up the question of whether abortion is or is not murder, then we'll at least be talking about the same thing. I would not expect the two sides to agree. But when everyone agrees on the topic that's on the table then at least there is hope.

Hope that the other side's views might be seen as rational given their social location. Hope that those who hold opposing views would be seen as human beings, people who may have come to faulty conclusions, in our opinions, but who are still people like us at the end of the day. If we're talking about the same thing, we could at least hope that minds could be changed, if they need to be.

But when you're arguing apples and oranges, you're never going to get anywhere at all, except for more black and white, more us versus them, until people really get hurt.

Unitarian Universalists could move into a new position in this debate, a position that is rarely attempted and woefully needed. UUs could be the ones to listen, to really hear the other side, knowing as we do how important it is that people's considered opinions, their individual truths, are heard, no matter what the content of those opinions might be. How could the debate change if there was someone who was willing to talk to both sides, for real?

Politically liberal UUs would also do well to loosen their hold on the pro-choice side of the debate, allowing more space for those of us who are firmly in this camp to do our own exploration of our opinions and beliefs anyway, and respecting the individual truths that emerge from that search.

If the real question on the table, the real question whose answer will move us forward, is whether or not abortion is murder, we need folks who will respond not with "that's ridiculous!" but rather, "I don't think it is, and here's why." We pro-choicers need the freedom to explore our own truths, even if there is a danger that those truths might move us away from our cherished political positions. It is our Unitarian Universalist religious mandate to create the free setting for those choices to be explored.

And as always, we UUs are called upon to remember the humanity of everyone who is engaged in the discussion. We must not fall victim to the notion that the side we don't agree with is crazy or unjustified or out to get us or irrational. It just isn't true that the other side has a position that is impossible for us to understand. It's untrue, and it's hurtful, not only in this situation but in all situations. We UUs believe that all voices matter, even when we don't agree. We believe that we human beings are in this life together, on this earth together, and we do best when we learn to get along well enough to promote the common good for all of us.

Let us pledge to give up our apples, and encourage the giving up of oranges. Let us find a common fruit to talk about—grapefruit, lemon, just be sure it's the same one—and let us begin again from there. It will be hard work. It will demand a lot from us. But it is a path with a potential that the one we are on does not have.

Amen.