



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“Our Bodies, Our Futures: The 50th Anniversary of Roe V. Wade”

Delivered 22 January 2023

Rev. Jen Raffensperger

***Important Note:** The following text was transcribed via Zoom and cleaned up in order to more accurately present the sermon as delivered on this day. The text as I originally wrote it is also available. Given the enormous impact of the two reflections presented prior to my sermon and of the mass shooting that had occurred the night before in Monterey Park, California, I chose to deliver a different message than the one I had written. Whatever your own beliefs, I knew that Spirit was calling me to something else that morning.*

(From Zoom transcript)

Thank you, Joanne. Thank you, Donna, not just for your words today, but for the commitment - the fire of commitment that you have allowed to burn, and has motivated you to speak, not just from place of fear - a valid place - but from a place of love; thank you

I don't need to rehash the entire timeline.

January 22, 1973: Roe vs Wade. June 24, 2022: Dobbs vs Jackson Women's Health.

When the news of the Dobbs decision came down. I was attending General Assembly in Portland, Oregon, with many, many Unitarian Universalists, and many clergy. We hastily called a meeting of the clergy who had committed to being a part of an organization to support Reproductive Justice access to the needed maternal care that would now be denied to the faithful and even the unfaithful because everyone has this right to make these hard choices, to

struggle with them, to fight with themselves, to fight with their idea of God, to fight with everything they've been taught and believed to try to make the choice that would be a best for them.

The fear and uncertainty that day was also buoyed by the fire of commitment. We've heard powerful personal testimony. So I want to spend just a few minutes this morning focusing on this phrase we've been using: reproductive justice. Many of you may have heard of different labels: Pro-choice, reproductive rights, all of these have been valuable ways we have named some of this work in the 50 years since Roe, and of course the time before that. Reproductive justice specifically is a framework that has been put into place by Black women activists who were the ones who officially came up with the term Reproductive Justice. I'm going a little off-book, so pardon me while I look around a little. In 1994, there was a meeting in Cairo, Egypt, the International Conference on Population and Development. That conference it was decided - the entire world agreed - that the individual right to plan your own family must be central to global development. In Chicago, Illinois, before that conference a group of Black and Indigenous and other women of color met to try to define their own commitment to what we now call reproductive justice. They came up with that term. There is an organization, the SisterSong Collective for action, which is based out of Atlanta, that was formed in 1997, again by Black women leaders to form this national multi-ethnic movement for reproductive justice.

So the Reproductive Justice definition given on the SisterSong website, so that, you know, is “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, to have children, to not have children, and to parent the children that we have in safe and sustainable communities.” That is a lot more than just whether or not someone can get an abortion, although if you remove access to safe legal abortion, you put a huge impediment to that kind of choice and thriving. A little bit further down on SisterSong’s webpage, they quote Audre Lorde, “there is no such thing as a single issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives.”

Whenever I see a quote, especially by a thinker I admire, I like to track down where that was said in context. And Audre Lorde said that line as a part of a speech called “Learning from the ‘60s” which she presented during Malcolm X Weekend at Harvard University in February of 1982. So later in that same speech she goes into a little bit more depth about the ways we are interconnected and so I'm going to share a portion of her speech now.

“Within each one of us there is some piece of humanness that knows we are not being served by the machine which orchestrates crisis after crisis and is grinding all our futures into dust. If we are to keep the enormity of the forces aligned against us from establishing a false hierarchy of oppression, we must school ourselves to recognize that any attack against Blacks, any attack against women, is an attack against all of us who recognize that our interests are not being served by the systems we support. Each one of us here is a link in the connection between anti-poor legislation, gay shootings, the burning of synagogues, street harassment, attacks against women, and resurgent violence against Black people. I ask myself as well as each one of you, exactly what alteration in the particular fabric of my everyday life does this connection call for? Survival is not a theory. In what way do I contribute to the subjugation of any part of those who I define as my people? Insight must illuminate the particulars of our lives: who labors to make the bread we waste, or the energy it takes to make nuclear poisons which will not biodegrade for one thousand years; or who goes blind assembling the microtransistors in our inexpensive calculators?”

Again, Audre Lorde said those words in 1982.

If I stood up and plagiarized that speech today, nobody would know, except maybe the part about calculators. Replace them with iPhones.

None of this specifically says anything about the right to an abortion, the right to prenatal care, the right to comprehensive sex education, which has been shown in every community where it is implemented, a reduction in the

number of abortions which are needed. If you have access to education, you have access to contraception, you can make the choices that you need that sometimes allow you to avoid the situation where an abortion may be needed. If it's avoidable, which it is not always.

SisterSong very specifically also names the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed in 1948 by the United Nations. It's longer than I can go into today. But all throughout it is the right to live a life with access to clean water, that was added really late, healthcare and personal dignity.

Too many of us have come from a culture of shame. For some people, this might be the first time you've ever heard this talked about in a church, and for that I am deeply sorry.

Because, like our reading said, you are loved.

The word God sometimes - in Unitarian universalist spaces - complicates things for people. That's why I borrow from the recovery community "the God of your understanding," the thing which connects us that is larger than all of us, that to which we feel a tug on the web when another is broken or suffers.

Gun violence is antithetical to reproductive justice.

I had an example in here of Tamir Rice, a child. Every person killed behind gun violence is someone's child. We are not just talking about one decision made by 5 people, as you so rightly note. But the way all of our decisions burn within us, become something that is too heavy to carry, that makes us lash out against our siblings, which is all of us.

Survival is not a theory. Audre Lorde's intersectional assessment was made a dozen years before the formalization of the reproductive justice network, and less than a dozen years after Roe. But her reminder that we are all connected, that injustice done to any of us keeps all of us from living in a world where it is truly possible to be free.

So today we've granted a lot of grief over the changes in the last fifty years, changes that we have seen wrought in our own society by those who are not at peace in their hearts. We named this grief. We want to allow ourselves, dare ourselves to imagine a world where everyone has equal access, not just to surviving, but to thriving. A world where everyone knows that none of us are free until all of us are free.

That world will only come to be once we put our dreams into action. Let our ideas take on the life of their own, pray with our feet, and each of us fights for the rights being denied to any of us.

So may it be.