

Reproductive Justice
A Sermon by Dr. Andrew Tripp
Unity Church of North Easton
February 4th, 2024

I remember clearly the Obstetrician talking to us when we were in Mount Auburn after a few days of induction that had gone poorly. We were discussing Lynn having a caesarean section instead of continuing on in the induction for Rory and he had to share the risks as part of the procedure with us. He let us know about maternal mortality rates, how even with great healthcare at a great hospital people giving birth have a risk for death and in general people are less likely to die when not pregnant. Looking into maternal and infant mortality rates, globally a woman dies every two minutes in childbirth. The rates of maternal mortality are on a sharp decline globally, dropping a third in the last twenty years. Unfortunately, during that time, America has seen an increase in maternal mortality. In the last twenty years it has nearly doubled.

Our maternal mortality rate is nearly three times as high as the average of other industrialized nations. Justice for people who are pregnant or giving birth is a human right. The stories of maternal mortality after Roe was overturned are horror stories of purely needless human suffering and death. Legislation written by politicians who are ignorant of medical science preclude healthcare that provides for and sustains life.

I find it ironic that people believe the lie in the name of the pro-life language. Being pro-life would imply healthcare for people who are pregnant, funding access to well-baby visits, support for appropriate nutrition, education, and support for those nursing, for babies, infants, and children, and a support for childcare so parents can navigate life, jobs, and their own healthcare. Instead, political policies developed by so called pro-life people lead to rising maternal healthcare, diminished obstetric access especially in poor, rural areas that often predominate those states where abortion has been criminalized.

The topic hits home for me. Lynn actively shares this story to magnify the issue and I have checked in with her to receive permission to share. Two weeks after Rory was born Lynn had significant hemorrhaging and we had a rushed trip to the emergency room in the early hours of the morning the Friday after Thanksgiving so she could have an emergency D&C to stop the bleeding. In many states in our nation such access no longer exists, and I live in a world where I may have been a single father had we lived in Texas, Oklahoma, Idaho, North or South Dakota,

Reproductive Justice
A Sermon by Dr. Andrew Tripp
Unity Church of North Easton
February 4th, 2024

Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, West. Virginia, or Alabama. Later in our robust New England access to reproductive healthcare we learned of significant scarring and were warned of possibilities of ectopic pregnancy which could further threaten Lynn's life.

We decided when Rory was born to only live in areas where the lives of those who are pregnant, and the lives of children were part of state and local law and policy. Our experience with healthcare in these last seven years has shown us how important that decision was. We are lucky, we are privileged to be able to afford to live in New England. Maternal mortality rates, even in those states that do not respect the dignity of the lives of those pregnant and their unborn or newborn children, disproportionately fall on class and racial lines. Women of color have disproportionately high rates of maternal mortality in America, with African American women having a rate of maternal mortality three times the rate of white women.

We are in Black History Month, and we should think of the histories of access to healthcare, medical racism, and the reason the numbers are the way they are becomes obvious. Access to appropriate obstetric and gynecological healthcare, not just abortion options, was significantly supported by Planned Parenthood. I have heard far too many ignorant people say Planned Parenthood was racist for the amount of abortion care it provided to African Americans, when in reality it was one of the few conduits of obstetric and gynecological healthcare for those without sufficient means for high quality insurance and care. Attacking Planned Parenthood wasn't only an attack on abortion access, it was an attack on cancer screenings, mental healthcare, prenatal and postpartum services. Attacking those services is the opposite of someone being a supporter of life.

Rev. Dr. William Barber used to talk about the harsh divide between reproductive justice groups and anti-abortion groups, and how the anti-abortion groups claimed to have the religious monopoly in the conversation. He also put forth a great critique that the reproductive justice groups often ignored religion. When getting the groups to talk to one another, there were shared values about human life and human dignity, and both would be in favor of policies whose end result led to a reduced need for abortions. Appropriate prenatal and postpartum

Reproductive Justice
A Sermon by Dr. Andrew Tripp
Unity Church of North Easton
February 4th, 2024

services, nutrition programs, childcare access, these all promote life, dignity, and possibility of human flourishing.

I bet some of you are wondering why this sermon is so political, and wondering where is the spirituality in the topic. There is an important spirituality about bodies and flesh. A lot of Christianity has devoted itself to a denigration of the flesh. Playing off the story of Gethsemane where Jesus is in prayerful vigil while his disciples fell asleep he chides Peter with the line the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Our flesh was where our desires, our baser nature, our debased animal while our spirit was more noble, pure, holy. This bifurcation of our experience led to a sense that our sensory experiences, our hungers, tastes, comforts, those were all somehow sinful in their temptation.

Some take the body/spirit divide further than others, but it plays into a misguided purity culture. In places that have religious connections with bodily purity and the sinfulness of the fleshly desires, the notion has a creepy feel of possession where a daughter belongs to her father until he passes her off to her husband who then has possession of her. The legal underpinnings of Dobbs is based on the legal arguments of this line of thinking. Unlike such purity and possession spiritualities, there are spiritualities centered on the spiritual succession of the Genesis account where creation was made and declared good. Our bodies, our flesh, it is good. Our comforts and pleasures are not inherently wrong or debased. As we approach Valentine's Day and we hear people refer to a chocolate dessert being so good it is sinful, we have in the back of our mind a voice saying, nuh-uh, that pleasure, that enjoyment, it isn't wrong or depraved, it is good. There is a delight and a joy in a rich and full experience of human life.

If we are to value human life, human dignity, it is to value our host of experiences. Think of the flourishing in the world that medically supported family planning provided. Women have the capacity to plan careers in ways previous generations couldn't be afforded. When my mother-in-law told her principal she was pregnant when she was first teaching she was fired and replaced in short order. She returned to teaching only after Lynn who is her youngest was school aged some fifteen years later. When interviewing for that job the superintendent asked her what she had been doing in the intervening years, obtuse to the work of raising her five children. To this day there are science and engineering programs that

Reproductive Justice
A Sermon by Dr. Andrew Tripp
Unity Church of North Easton
February 4th, 2024

discriminate against women since they think they will leave the field once they marry and have children. Reproductive justice ensures that the half of the world that may bear children have a voice and a say in their bodies and their autonomy.

We believe in a flourishing of human good, of surviving and making the most out of this gift of life that has been given to us. Diminishing and subjugating the lives of half of the world is an act of deliberate evil. Raising boys to have what they want while raising girls to fear their bodies is at odds with human dignity, with justice, with moral propriety. If the scholastic achievement of humanity was doubled by allowing for the presence of women in learning through history was allowed think of the changes we would experience. Think of the artistic and cultural progress that would exist if women through time had enough bodily autonomy and control over their health that they could have committed to their achievement and passions instead of chained to a deadly reproductive cycle.

Reproductive justice is about love. It's about well and truly loving the half of the world that can bear children. It's about respecting the inherent worth and dignity of half the world by affording them equal bodily autonomy. It's about loving them enough to stop politicizing their reproductive systems while ignoring the other half of the population's. It's also a commitment to the goodness of creation that we safeguard and respect its health and well-being. There is something profoundly biblical about the richest and most developed country this world has ever known caring so little for the health and wellbeing of its people. There is something biblical about the rich and the powerful being so unjust to the poor and the suffering. When Jesus and the prophets spoke out against hypocrites, they were often speaking out against those displaying a public piety whose inner life was one of infidelity. The words of Jesus demand that when we pray, we do it in private, not in public for all to see and add to our acclaim. Our faith is not an outward purity veneer over debased internal desires. Rather our faith is an approach to cultivating a goodness in this world which includes appropriate goodness of our senses as part of our celebration of this good creation and working toward mutual flourishing of goodness for the generations to come.

Reproductive justice is not a battle of our present now versus a dystopian world in the likes of the Handmaid's Tale, where women are possessions and pregnancy is owed for male masters. There are shades of that in purity cultures these days, but

Reproductive Justice

A Sermon by Dr. Andrew Tripp

Unity Church of North Easton

February 4th, 2024

it is not such a caricature to make us realize the problems of today in the here and now are great. Our mothers, grandmother, great grandmothers worked for rights that now are denied to our young people. The stories of poor and rural women in Texas not having access to healthcare we take for granted is heart wrenching knowing their lives should be saved by quality healthcare. Our love for them and our love for human dignity calls on us to engage with the work for reproductive justice. That work is about just access to the full spectrum of reproductive healthcare. Our work to restore justice that was such a fight to obtain needs to keep going so our children and their children don't live in a world with less justice than the world in which we grew up and lived.