

“For All That Is Our Life”

*A Sermon for the
March on Washington for Women’s Lives
All Souls Unitarian Church, Washington, D.C.
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The poet Mary Oliver writes:

*“To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
To love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.”*

Every woman who has ever had an abortion knows this. She has held something against her bones and she has let it go. On this Sunday, when thousands have gathered to march on Washington for women’s lives, I invite you into a time of reflection on holding on and letting go, on what it takes to live in this world that breaks our hearts with its sorrows and startles us with its beauty, and on the deep reasons – the spiritual reasons – why protecting women’s reproductive choices matters not only for individual women and their loved ones but for the quality and character of our society.

In the public debates about abortion, people’s lives are often obscured by caricatures. You know what they are: pro-life women have big hair, dress in pastel and frills and find fulfillment in baking pies for their husbands and children. But they still manage to run right wing political campaigns on the side. Pro-life men are threatened by women. They identify with the fetus and fear being aborted themselves, but they take comfort in their belief that the Bible decrees men should be the head of the household and the country. Pro-choice women, on the other hand, prefer sensible shoes, which they wear when they are out to destroy the American family. They don’t bake. They are too busy becoming lawyers and doctors and corporate executives to be bothered with the demands of children and husbands, though they still manage to run left wing political campaigns on the side.

The full texture of “all that is our life” is more complex, more difficult, and more nuanced. I hope that through this sermon you will be able to feel something of the actual texture of our lives. During ten years as a parish minister, I counseled women who had spiritual and ethical questions in connection with a pregnancy they, for one reason or another, were considering aborting. I’m going to share some composites of their stories this morning. There are also important stories that men and transgender people have to tell about how abortion has touched their lives. Though their stories will not be told in

today's sermon, may we hold men and transgender people in our hearts with the awareness that they too are concerned, and affected, and care.

The first woman who ever came to me for help in deciding about an abortion was in a severe situation. I'll call her Cheryl. It was a late afternoon in the fall when Cheryl arrived at my study at the church and stood tentatively in the doorway. She held a toddler perched on her hip. Her tired face was streaked with rain. Damp leaves and sticks clung to her tattered brown wool coat, as if she had sleeping on the ground. She didn't want to come all the way in, only wanted a word with me for a minute, but she gave in to the church secretary's hospitable offer of a hot cup of tea and open arms to take the baby for a few minutes.

Cheryl told me her worry. She was pregnant and didn't want her husband to know. "He'll beat me if he finds out" she said. They already had four children. He'd just lost his job. She was afraid of his anger, tired of him beating her and the children, and worn out from not having enough food for her family. She was worried that if she brought another child into the world, the child would be beaten like the rest, like her. Would God forgive her, she asked me, if she lied to her husband and had an abortion?

We talked it over. She resolved that an abortion would be the first step in taking her life into her own hands and making a decision that would benefit her children and herself. She let go of the pregnancy and she took hold of her power – her power to chart her own course, determine her own religious views, and act on behalf of her own well being and the well being of her children. The transformation was not easy or quick, but Cheryl made it to the other side – out of abuse, out of poverty, out of despair, and out of passive helplessness. With support from the church and other agencies, she began to make a life that had safety and hope.

From Cheryl I learned that women consider abortion because systemic injustice and violence often put us and our children at risk. We live in a broken world—a world where domestic abuse happens and where welfare systems are inadequate. In the U.S. alone 25-30% of children live in poverty. Cultural and religious messages often teach women and girls they are unimportant except when they are serving others and denying their own interests, hopes and needs.

In the midst of tragic difficulties and dehumanizing messages, the freedom to choose allows a different life. If she has choice, a woman can move beyond being a passive recipient of misfortune, injustice, violence, or failed social policies and systems. She can begin to inhabit her own life, become a decision maker who improves her circumstances, her children's lives, and her society. She can claim her creative power to repair and care for life that has been tattered and torn. She can make a way for safety and hope.

The freedom to choose opens doors for women to enter into new spaces. For Cheryl, having a choice led her to a space of community instead of isolation, of moral agency instead of passive victimhood, of courage instead of fear, of intention instead of resignation.

Mary Catherine's story was different. It tumbled out all in a rush when she and I sat down to talk in the coffee shop by her high school where she'd asked me to meet her. She and her boyfriend had great plans. They were going to go to college. She wanted to become an architecture, he a teacher. She was the oldest in her Catholic family, and the first girl to ever have a chance to go to college. She'd been awarded a full tuition scholarship. She hadn't planned on getting pregnant now. She'd been using birth control and felt guilty about it – since her church taught her it was wrong – but she loved her boyfriend and they didn't really see any reason to wait to have sex. But the birth control failed. Now she was pregnant. Her family was telling her they should get married, she should have the baby, and she should forget about going to college. So should he. The purpose of her life was to bear and care for children. Period. The purpose of her boyfriend's life was to earn enough money to take care of her and their family. Period.

"I've always loved my church," she said, "I don't want to turn away from my faith or my family. But I don't want to have a baby now. I want to go to college and I want my boyfriend to be able to go to college, too. I don't want caring for children to be the sum total of my life. I'm thinking of having an abortion but I know it means I will go to hell and I'm afraid."

Unwanted pregnancy can be an occasion for a woman to become a theologian.¹ Mary Catherine and I began to grapple together about her religious questions. We talked about the beginning of life. Her belief was that from the moment of conception she was carrying a child – not just a random mess of cells multiplying and dividing, but a new being entrusted to her care. Could it be morally justifiable for her to end the life she carried with her?

"You have the power to give birth, to bring a beginning life to term," I responded. "You also have the power to give birth to your own life, to bring the fullness of your life into being. What if both lives cannot come to birth? Which life will you hold on to and which one will you let go?"

"But," she countered, "even if its legal to have an abortion, abortion is against God's will. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, 'Your will be done.' Mary did the bidding of God. Who am I to do otherwise?"

Sometimes it helps to know Greek. "The Greek words of the Lord's prayer can be translated a different way," I said. "The word we translate 'will' also means 'desire' or 'longing' and the word we translate 'be done' also means 'be born.' The prayer can be, 'May your desires, O God, come to birth.'" Mary Catherine said she'd try praying "May your desires, O God, come to birth."

When I saw her the next week she said, "I prayed about it. I think God wants me to have whole life. My life is part of God's creation, part of what God desires and has brought to birth. I think God will still love me even if I let this pregnancy go."

She had an abortion. I saw her afterwards. "It was hard," she said. "I had nightmares about hell the night before. I was scared. But I kept praying all through the procedure, 'May your desires, O God, come to birth.' While I was on the operating table,

I suddenly felt as if a cloak of love and warmth surrounded me and held me. It was like there were angels in the room. I knew God was with me and blessed me.”

For Mary Catherine the difficult decision to have an abortion was an occasion for spiritual growth. She formed her own relationship to the faith in which she had been raised. Without abandoning it or discarding her Catholicism, she claimed her own power to think theologically and to discern spiritually what God asked of her. “Dare to love God without mediator or veil,” Ralph Waldo Emerson said. In doing so, Mary Catherine also came to embrace her own life as precious to God.

Not everyone I counseled about abortion talked to me in person. I especially remember an unnamed woman who phoned me. She was ashamed of the situation she was in and didn’t want to face anyone. The nameless woman had had an abortion in the past that she deeply regretted. She felt she had sinned and was depressed for months afterwards. She vowed that she would never get pregnant again without planning for it. But now she was once again facing an unplanned pregnancy. She was furious with herself for getting pregnant and felt she deserved to be punished. The worst punishment she could imagine was to abort the pregnancy. She felt if she sacrificed the child she was carrying she would have performed adequate penance for her failure.

The unnamed woman’s belief system about guilt, punishment and self-sacrifice was intense. She had deeply internalized the religious idea that pain and suffering could atone for sin. She would chose abortion, she said, like Jesus accepted the humiliation and pain of the cross, believing that imitation of Christ’s suffering could redeem her. I told her I hoped she might come to see that it was not necessary to punish herself. She could make a different choice. But she slammed down the phone. I lost her.

It isn’t always easy to hold on to each other, to sustain the conversations that need to be had when we are talking about abortion. And it isn’t always easy to move through the deep questions that abortion presses upon us.

My own experience with abortion deepened my understanding of how difficult the struggle can be. Let me tell you my story.² It was my husband who proposed that we start a family. We both had finished graduate school. He was busy composing music and I was settled in the parish. We’d been trying for six months.

I knew I was pregnant the day after Easter. The double-blossom cherry was blooming. The spring rain filled the air with damp fragrance. I felt the life beginning inside of me as if it were an enormous gift. My heart was full of joy. But I had not been paying to how life was going for my husband. Struggles were haunting him and I wasn’t very emotionally present to him. Our marriage was in trouble, but I wasn’t seeing it.

When I told my husband the news that I was pregnant, the blood drained from his face. We were sitting across from one another at a favorite restaurant. I had taken his hands in mine to tell him. But he pulled back and let go of my hands. “I’m not ready to be a father,” he said. “I can’t do this. I’m not sure I want to stay with you. The only way I can imagine our marriage having a chance is for you to have an abortion.” I felt his words

as if they were a physical blow –swift, precise, unexpected. “This is my decision to make,” I said, claiming the only ground I could find to stand on.

I chose abortion to save myself from shame, loss, and fears of suicide; to save a child from coming into the world without a father; to save a marriage; and to save the father from something he feared, something he said I could protect him from.

It was a willing sacrifice, I thought. An enactment of love for my husband and hope for our future. But our future did not unfold as I’d hoped. My husband and I didn’t speak of the abortion. We tried to repair the rift in our marriage, but within a few months, he took an apartment across town and before long we divorced.

I had believed self-sacrifice was the highest form of love and that it could save us. But nothing was redeemed or saved by my sacrifice of the pregnancy. I had just enacted a rote gesture. Everything I most loved had slipped out of my hands. I felt there was nothing left to hold on to – not my marriage, not my child, not my faith.

I spiraled into grief and self-directed anger. One night I came to the end of my will to live. I just wanted the anguish to stop. It was a cold, clear night. I lived at the top of a hill above a lake and sometime after midnight I left my house and started walking down the hill. The water would be cold enough. I could walk into it, then swim, then let go, sink down into the darkness and go home to God. The thought was comforting. I had no second thoughts. I was set on my course.

At the bottom of the hill, I had only a small grassy rise to cross before I came to the water’s edge. I crested the familiar rise and began the descent to the welcoming water when I was caught short by a barrier that hadn’t been there before. It looked like a long line of oddly shaped sawhorses, laid out to the left and to the right, the width of the grassy field. In the dark I couldn’t see a way to get around either end, but it looked like I could climb over the middle. I quickened my pace, impelled by the grief that wouldn’t let go of me. As I got closer, the dark forms before my eyes seemed to be moving. I squinted to understand what I was seeing.

The odd bunched shapes were a line of human beings bundled up in parkas and hats. The stick shapes weren’t sawhorses. They were telescopes. It was the Seattle Astronomy Club. Before I could make my way through the line, one of them looked up from his eye class and, presuming me to be an astronomer, said with enthusiasm, “I’ve got it focused perfectly on Jupiter. Come, take a look.” I didn’t want to be rude or give away my reason for being there, so I bent down and looked through the telescope. There was Jupiter, banded red and glowing! “Isn’t it great?” he said. It was great. Jupiter was beautiful through the telescope.

I couldn’t kill myself in the presence of these people who had gotten up in the middle of a cold night, with their home-built Radio Shack telescopes, to look at the planets and the stars.

Music we had sung in church came back to me,
“Sure on this shining night,
I weep for wonder,
Kindness must watch for me,
This side the ground...”³

The beauty of the night sky, the dew wet grass at my feet, and the Seattle Astronomy Club kept me in this world.

It would be wrong to think of this moment as one in which joy triumphed over despair, good came out of bad, or love of life defeated desire for death. I did not defeat negative feelings of anguish and despair because I saw something more lovely and good. My heart was still breaking with grief, but I became able to feel more. I was able to place that grief within a larger heart, within a wider embrace that could hold sorrow and joy, loss and illumination, death and life.

I’ve told you four stories about abortion. Each story involves a conflict, a struggle, an impasse, in which a woman had to choose her way in the midst of some kind of risk to what she loved, hoped for, and desired. We live in a world where not all our desires can come to birth – where brokenness and failure haunt us with the need for redemption or repair, where larger systems of injustice or violence put children and their parents at risk, where broken vows or unfulfilled promises break our hearts, where our inherited belief systems can collapse as inadequate, where our best efforts to love sometimes lead to naught.

How can we live in such a broken world? By protecting and exercising our power to choose. In the presence of life’s heartbreaking failures and injustices, as well as its abiding beauty, it matters that we discover we need not be mere recipients, passive in the face of life, obedient to established norms or rote rituals. Our hope in an imperfect world is that we can engage in it as active, creative participants. The power to choose is the power of life.

In the stories I’ve told you, something died and something was born. A situation of violence and abuse was left and a life of greater safety begun. Compliance to an established role was abandoned and ownership of a life purpose was claimed. A pregnancy and a marriage were lost, a larger heart was born and an awareness that life’s deepest pains need not be suffered in isolation. In all that is our life, death and life are woven into a fine weave. Both life and death are in our hands, are ours to choose. What we let go of, what we let die, and what we take on, what we choose to bring to birth shapes the character of our lives. To accept responsibility for the fact that life and death are in our hands is to enter into full personhood – to move beyond passivity into active responsibility and creativity.

In any situation of impasse, conflict, tragedy – when all doors seem closed – it matters that we ask ourselves: What choice can I make in this situation that will allow something of value to come to birth? How will I choose life in this moment? Every

choice we make that brings greater life to birth is a blessed choice. Even when we fail and our choices don't bring about the outcome we so deeply desired, life presents us again and again with the opportunity to choose life – as it did for me on a cold clear night, with the stars gleaming over head.

And what about the nameless woman? She found me almost two years later. She came to church and waited in line at the end of the service to talk with me. “You won't recognize me” she said when she grasped my hands, “but you might remember me. I only talked to you on the phone. I was pregnant ...” “You wanted to punish yourself,” I said, finishing her sentence. “You told me I had a choice,” she said. From behind her in line, a man stepped forward, holding a little girl in his arms. “I wanted you to meet our daughter. Her name is Jenny.” Jenny's father handed her to me and I lifted the child into my arms. “So this is what you chose,” I said. “How wonderful.”

Why does it matter that women's reproductive choices be protected? Because we live in a broken world where life is at risk in many ways. The power to choose is the power of life in the midst of brokenness. Without choice, tragedy, impasse, and despair are the last word. With choice, creativity, responsibility, and possibility enter the conversation. With choice, human beings enter into fuller personhood, becoming creative agents in the world who can transform life in the direction of greater justice, safety, and joy.

A society in which human beings accept that life and death are in their hands is a better society. Embracing creativity and responsibility is a spiritual value that applies beyond the questions of pregnancy and childbirth. To know that we have choice is to know that life is not predetermined, that we do not simply have to comply with established structures, rote patterns, or the dictates of despair. It is to know that we are not helpless in the face of overwhelming events. We all need the spiritual knowledge that life and death are in our hands, and we all need to do the hard work of ethical discernment, of accepting that life and death are ours to choose.

Why should we march to keep abortion safe and legal? Because where there is choice there is life. Where there is life there is hope. And where there is hope we find ourselves holding bundles of joy in our arms.

Each of us bears in our own bodies the powers of holding on of letting go. The rhythm is in our breathing, in our coming together and going forth, in all our acts of love. Let us embrace all that is our lives, and use our power to bless the world.

¹ The pastoral theologian Rosemary Chinnici (a member of the faculty at Starr King School for the Ministry sksm.edu) says that most people have a time in life when their inherited faith comes up against their life experience in a way that creates a crisis. Dr. Chinnici calls this experience “religious impasse.” At moments of religious impasse people have three choices: they can comply with their belief system and deny their own hopes and needs; they can abandon their faith for its inadequacies and cut their life loose from the ties of religious community; or they can become a theologian. Becoming a theologian means engaging in the arduous and creative task of reworking your beliefs in

light of your experience. It is in such engagement that faith traditions grow and change, and individuals become active shapers of religious heritage – not passive recipients of received truth.

² This story is excerpted from “Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us,” by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001)

³ Samuel Barber has set these lines by James Agee to music. The anthem is called “Sure On This Shining Night.”