



1025 VERMONT AVE NW
SUITE 1130
WASHINGTON
DC 20005
202 628 7700
FAX 202 628 7716

WORDS OF HOPE

A SERMON FOR THE NATIONAL DAY OF APPRECIATION FOR ABORTION PROVIDERS

Today, we honor women and men who face harassment, intimidation, threats, stalking, bombs, arson, and even murder—and yet heroically continue their work.

Today, we honor the dedicated, embattled health professionals who provide abortion services and other reproductive health care to women despite violent anti-abortion politics and terrorism. These caregivers risk their lives on a daily basis not for ideological reasons but because they are conscientious professionals committed to ensuring that the full range of gynecological medicine is available to women.

Today, the hard-won right of women to control their own bodies is at risk, under attack by religious extremists, political forces, and violent radicals. The debate on abortion is so polarized that the simplest truths often are lost. The truth that a woman's body does not belong to the government. That a woman's body does not belong to a church or religion. That a woman's body does not belong to somebody else's conscience. That a woman's body belongs to that woman. We live in an imperfect world and abortion is always a sad choice. But a woman has the right to make that choice within the sacred precincts of her own soul. We honor abortion providers for enabling us to exercise that right safely and in dignity.

We remember the years before the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, when many women died or suffered terrible infections from illegal, unsafe abortions. Some of us remember mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and wives who died or were badly injured, perhaps never able to

have children again. This is what one of these heroic providers says about why he provides abortions:

I save lives. I hope never again to have to remove the uterus of a 16-year-old because of gas gangrene and to know that she will never have a family.

And this is what a remarkable group called Medical Students for Choice says:

Abortion services are unavailable in 84 percent of the counties in the United States. One third of American women live in these counties. What is the reality of a woman obtaining a safe abortion in a state that has only one doctor who provides them?

So we honor those who fearlessly serve women today and those who have resolved to ensure legal abortion services in the future. Without them, a woman's ability to have control over her body and to make reproductive choices based on her own religious beliefs and conscience would be meaningless.

This is the sixth anniversary of the murder of Dr. David Gunn in Pensacola, Florida. Dr. Gunn was the first doctor killed in this horrifying period of intensified anti-abortion violence across North America. He was a man of great good humor and tremendous courage who performed abortions because the need was great and he loved to help people. He drove hundreds of miles each week to help women in Florida, Alabama, and Georgia. We remember also Dr. Wayne Patterson, Dr. John Britton, Leann Nichols, Shannon Lowney, James Barrett, and Dr. Barnett Slepian, seven in all, all killed helping women.

The latest victim, Dr. Slepian, was felled by a sniper's bullet this past October 23 (1998), as he stood in his kitchen, talking with his wife and sons. Barnett Slepian was a man of medicine, a healer. He provided comfort to the women of Buffalo. He delivered their babies, he brought joy to countless infertile couples, he saved the lives of women. As part of complete health care, he performed abortions. And for this he was assassinated.

Amazingly, the clinic where he worked did not close its doors. The dedication of the people at this clinic in Buffalo is mirrored by the dedication of clinic staff in Pensacola, Brookline,

Birmingham, in every clinic that continues to provide full reproductive health services in the face of shootings, bombings, arson, and acid attacks.

One of those dedicated providers is Dr. Morris Wortman, the director of a reproductive health clinic in Rochester, NY, just an hour from Buffalo. After Dr. Slepian's assassination, he refused to quit or hide. Instead, he published an article in Newsweek magazine, where the world could see it. "I won't let fear stop me," he wrote.

The women who come to me are hurting in a way that I, as a man, cannot even imagine. They are often ashamed to ask for help or a friendly smile and are genuinely surprised when greeted by a nurse or physician who doesn't judge them....Is there any chance I will stop doing abortions? No, not as long as I have something important to offer women in this community.

People like Dr. Wortman—who daily put their lives on the line for their patients—deserve our admiration and our support. But even more than this, they deserve to feel our presence, standing beside them, and to hear our voices, raised on their behalf.

The Bible tells us, "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds." Well, our pro-choice neighbors are bleeding—doctors, nurses, and clinic staff are bleeding. We must not stand idly by, we must speak out. We must take a public stand against violence, and for choice. We must tell our elected officials and our law enforcement officers that we expect them to uphold our constitutional right of reproductive choice and to safeguard the lives of those who work to provide that choice. Most of all, we must speak out, in every venue and at every opportunity, and proclaim that we are pro-choice, not in spite of our faith, but *because of our faith*.

For we, those who are religious and pro-choice, have been silent too long. The radical minority has rushed into the void created by that silence, filling the void with violent rhetoric, sloganeering and lies aimed at abortion, the women who seek them, and the medical personnel who provide them. It is this rhetoric which has created the atmosphere that says, "Violence is permitted, even unto murder."

This atmosphere, this culture of violence, must stop, and must stop now. I call upon those who are pro-choice to stand up and proclaim themselves, so all can see our numbers and feel our

strength and know we do not sanction violence. I call upon all who are pro-life to live by that name, to be truly PRO-LIFE, to abhor violence and disown all who perpetrate it.

Enough is enough! Intimidation of doctors' children, around-the-clock phone threats, arson, acid throwing, bombing, screaming at women exercising their legal rights, obstructing clinic doorways. Even a horrifying website called the Nuremberg Files that crosses off doctors' names when they are killed. Enough is enough!

But this is a sermon of tribute and of hope. What is there to hope for in this time of brutality? Well, for one thing, we are here today, speaking and thinking about the difficult issue of abortion. We have not been silenced by the forces of right-wing bigotry and religious political terrorism. We are acknowledging that we are committed to the right and moral obligation of women to make difficult choices. We are lifting up doctors and clinics that are meeting the needs of women—even in a time of madness and violence. We are religious people condemning the arrogance of those who presume to speak alone for God. We seek sanity, non-violence, and dialogue. There is hope.

The National Day of Appreciation for Abortion Providers turns a day of mourning into a source of strength. Let our spirits join together in the name of justice, human rights, and common decency to face down the forces of hatred, bigotry, and oppression.

Let us speak freely about our beliefs. That we are for women—and men and children and families and doctors—who struggle to do God's will in the face for the very real complexities of their lives. That we honor women's health care clinics and abortion providers, because without them moral choices would not be possible. That we are pro-choice not in spite of our faith but because of it. And that the great majority of Americans believe a woman must have the right to choose.



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PRAYER FOR PROVIDERS OF WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE

Gracious Provider of Care and Protection, we remember and stand with health care professionals who furnish health care for women. We give thanks for their commitment to protect the privacy of their patients and to treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve.

We give thanks especially for the doctors and nurses and other health care workers who serve the reproductive health care needs of women. Who train women to use contraception safely and responsibly, who educate teenagers about intercourse and its consequences, who counsel women at risk to conceive children with genetic and hereditary problems, who explore options with women who have problem pregnancies, who refer women to responsible adoption agencies, who support women through abortion services, who recognize the rights of women to make reproductive choices.

We pray for an end to the rhetoric and violent acts that target health care providers, and pray for the day when health care providers, women and their families, can exercise their rights to reproductive choice in security and peace. Let us pause now for a moment of silence to remember all who have lost their lives and who have been injured in attacks all across our country.

(Silence)

Help us, Gracious God, to stand together with these courageous and caring people who continue to do your holy work.