Beloved Lord, lead us from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from alienation to oneness with You beyond all separation. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing to you, O God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen

A content advisory: in my sermon I mention medical conditions and concerns related to pregnancy and neonatology. If you notice feelings come up, I encourage you to breathe and to tune in to how to care for yourself.

At home on my wall I taped a postcard that reads, “Black women are worthy of being trusted to make their own reproductive decisions without paternalism or interference from politicians. Black women’s moral agency is God-given.” I got it at a national convention hosted by the Spiritual Alliance of Communities for Reproductive Dignity, or SaCReD. I look at it almost every day, whenever I sit down at my desk and consider what I can do today to show the love and justice of Christ to women, birthing people, and folx who are making decisions about their reproductive lives.

Is it so radical to believe that reproducing people are capable of living out our own autonomy? Is it so impossible to affirm that we can discern with our God what is the right choice for how to make a family, when, if, or by what means? I wouldn’t think so, but the freedom to do just that without political interference, which was enshrined in this country’s law for a few decades, is being erased from the lives of women and birthing people around the country. The consequence of this erasure of our freedoms is that we are

paying for our family planning choices with our lives. Birthing people who need care and cannot receive it are dying of complications of miscarriage across the country.

Have you heard the name Adriana Smith? Adriana Smith was a 30-year-old Black woman in Atlanta. In February, she went to the hospital complaining of headaches, and was given medication and sent home. Hours later, her partner discovered her gasping for breath, and called 911. She was taken to Emory Hospital, where doctors discovered she had blood clots that had gone to her brain. She was declared legally brain-dead. She was also nine weeks pregnant.

All I will say today about a nine-week pregnancy is that it is not viable. A nine-week pregnancy cannot survive outside of a human being as anything even halfway recognizable to being alive. In Massachusetts, where many of us are this morning, the state generally assesses viability at around week 24 of a pregnancy. That is, a gestating fetus could be able to live outside a womb at about six months into a 40-week pregnancy. Even at that point, a neonate–that's the word for an infant born so prematurely–will require months of intensive care to help them grow, and to cope with respiratory problems, neurological problems, brain bleeds, blindness, and all this ***if*** they manage to survive being born so early.

So Adriana Smith, diagnosed by doctors as brain dead, was nine weeks pregnant. Her mother, April Newkirk, disclosed that the hospital ignored the wishes of her family and kept Adriana's unalive body barely functional–on what we would erroneously call

“life support”. The hospital made this choice presumably to avoid prosecution under a law in Georgia that makes it nearly impossible for people to have the medical care they want and need, that is, to have abortions, and that prosecutes patients and providers who seek and provide this care. In July, Adriana Smith’s body experienced a non-consensual C-section procedure that resulted in the delivery of a severely premature baby boy, whom his family named Chance. Four days later, Adriana’s body was taken off the machines that had kept the body’s organs functioning.

Let me be clear: Adriana had died when doctors assessed that her brain was unable to tell her heart to beat, her lungs to breathe, back in February. Not when she was taken off “life support.”

One feature of Christianity is free will–that is, our relationship with Christ is mutually chosen. Christ chooses us, always and forever, all day and every day: and we also have the opportunity to choose Christ. We choose to turn ourselves toward the love that Christ offers us and that Christ bids us offer others. As followers of Christ, we are expressors of Christ’s love. Our mission is to love our enemies: to love those who challenge us, to love by a standard that Jesus sets, to love radically and indiscriminately.

I get to practice this love as a reproductive chaplain. In addition to church ministry, I provide care to people who are making decisions about their reproductive lives. I come alongside people who are considering having an abortion and help them explore how their faith offers support, instead of judgment and alienation; I

rejoice with parents who have had children, and sometimes I get to engage in ritual or sacrament with them. I grieve with women who have miscarried, and encourage them to share their anger, their grief, or their fear, with God. I accompany people who are struggling in their fertility journey, looking for spiritual direction amidst the wilderness of unmet desires and expectations. I remind birthing people that God has given them the power to make good and right decisions, and that they make the right decision, whatever that decision is, with God on their side. I do this work because God asked me to, because I love to, and because it makes me feel alive.

One of the things I say to clients when they need to hear it, is ***you know your body better than anyone else***. Often birthing people have providers who function as experts, and I reiterate that providers are experts on pregnancy, childbirth, even various medical conditions. But only one person, that pregnant person, that laboring person, is the expert on their own body and on their own life.

I think our sister in today's scriptures knows this about herself. She knows better than anyone how she's been suffering, and what she needs. Scripture tells us that this woman spent twelve years trying and failing to experience healing from a bleeding disorder. Because of my devotion to reproductive justice, I imagine that this unnamed woman has a reproductive illness: uterine fibroids, endometriosis, cervical cancer, polycystic ovarian syndrome. Conditions like this put women at risk for other health conditions, so she'd likely be experiencing malnourishment, weakness, fatigue. Maybe she is a woman who miscarried, and

despite all of the doctors she has seen and all of the money that she has spent, she continues to hemorrhage, she has never been able to get the care that she needs and has a right to: her life is at risk. Because her body has not known healing, her spirit has not known peace.

In the context of this gospel, an illness like this was considered unclean, and people who were considered unclean according to community law had to announce themselves. While moving through public spaces, they had to speak in a loud voice and shout “Unclean! Unclean!” in order to let other community members know, so they could keep their distance and sustain their status.

So we know about our woman in the crowd that she’s considered unworthy to be in public, much less to be in the presence of the Teacher. She’s a woman, which compromises her status in the social and religious hierarchy, and her illness makes her a pariah. She's sick, bleeding, exhausted, hurting, frightened, and this is the only chance she has at healing.

All these things are true about her, are stacked against her, yet she reaches out her hand and she grabs hold of the cloak, the hem, the fringe of the Anointed One. She grabs a hold of the only thing she thinks can deliver her from a culture and a system that has let her down and left her to die. This is a woman who knows her needs, who knows what it means to trust her own body, and to trust the presence and the power of the Healer. She takes an enormous risk. She flouts the law she’s supposed to keep, and rather than announcing herself, she remains silent, and squeezes

in close to Jesus, and to others, getting as close as she dare, only close enough to grab a scrap of Jesus' clothing. Her risk is clear, because when Jesus feels her touch, Jesus knows he has been transformed somehow by her faith, by her risk. Let me say that again: she took a risk, she had faith in Jesus, and ***Jesus was transformed by her faith.***

What might have happened to this woman if things had gone a different way? She might have been shamed, punished, arrested, even stoned to have dismissed community laws in such a way. But this woman knew what she needed, she knew who could help her; and when she realized that she'd been discovered, she didn't run. She summoned her courage and she told Jesus and everyone in that crowd the truth. She engaged her God-given agency, her faith in the Teacher, and she experienced healing.

This woman is my hero. She knew what Christ is capable of; she knew to listen to her body more than the demands of the majority culture around her; she knew how to act in a way that would restore her to wholeness, to her vision for her life. Christ met her in that place.

We are living in a time where we are losing freedoms: the freedom to trust our bodies and our wisdom to choose what is right for us is compromised at best, and ripped from us at worst. Community , let us resist the temptation to turn away from this struggle. It is easy—when cruelty, starvation, and erasure are everywhere we turn—to tune out the calls for resistance, to consume input under the guise of pleasure that only offers numbness and ignorance. Let us turn away from the hollow

promises and rigid grasp of the state, and turn toward the love, the wisdom, and the care that God has for us, that the Holy Spirit has placed in us. Resistance is trusting the wisdom of our faith and our connection with God to live lives rooted in integrity and love. Christ had faith in a woman to choose what was right for her. Let us practice the same faith in ourselves and one another.

The love, the non-judgmental presence, and the restoration of Christ is capable of meeting every woman, every birthing person, every human being. The wholeness of Christ is present to us in our joy, our struggle, our grief, and our resilience. I pray that the faith and self-knowledge that this woman demonstrates in the Gospel would be realized in everyone struggling with choices, including reproductive health choices, and I pray and believe that Christ's resources, beyond what is legislated, beyond what any of us can ask or think, would find those in need and restore them to wholeness, remind them of their wisdom, and affirm their God-given moral agency and integrity. May we who are related to a birthing parent, who know someone grieving a miscarriage, who love someone who has had an abortion—may we be able to come alongside these people offering the witness and the love of Christ. Amen.

Beloved community, will you take a deep breath with me, and prepare yourselves to receive this benediction:
May the God-given moral agency seeded in your heart by the hands of the Creator take root and bear fruit of love and liberation, for you and for all others. May the Spirit whose name is Love bless you and keep you. May our God make Their face shine warmly upon you with grace. May Spirit

look upon you with kindness and grant you peace, this day and forevermore. Amen