"Lessons from Wonder Woman"

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
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I was born in October 1972. This means two things. It means that with the exception of my first three months, birth control and abortion have been legal all of my life. It also means that as a little girl, I watched Wonder Woman on TV. Until recently, I did not know that these two things—birth control and Wonder Woman—were connected.

Harvard historian, Jill Lepore tells the story of this connection in her new book. Published last October, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* tells a rather wild and surprising story about the origins of Wonder Woman.[1]

Created by William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman took her place among comic book legends Batman and Superman in the 1940's. Superheroes were a new creation and each week thousands of issues of comic books were pouring off the presses. Superman first appeared in 1938, Batman in 1939, and Wonder Woman in 1941. The first woman to be accepted into the famed Justice League, Wonder Woman was a trailblazer as a woman. And this trailblazing was no accident. Rather, Wonder Woman was the very deliberate creation of a ***female*** superhero by a man steeped in early 20th century feminism.

Before we get too far into the story of Wonder Woman, I suspect you may be wondering why in the world am I preaching about Wonder Woman . . . and on Mother's Day of all days!? To be honest, I went looking for a topic for Mother's Day that would enable me to address the holiday with integrity as a feminist, a mother, and a minister.

I love my mother and I love being a mother. But I also believe that too often Mother's Day can over-sentimentalize mothers in a way that leaves many feeling uncomfortable, sad, or even angry. Not all of us do have good relationships with mothers—or had experiences of good mothering. Nor are all women mothers—either because of their choice or because of difficult, painful circumstances. Moreover, in a way, we are all mothers—all of us engaged in the work of mothering, of parenting and helping to nurture children and youth, friends, and even ourselves.

My own experience as a mother has been complicated. I married relatively young at 24—although in my home state of Michigan that's not so young for marrying! Very shortly after marrying, I became pregnant with my son who was born days before my 25th birthday. From the beginning, my marriage was strained and difficult. By my son's 2nd birthday, I had left his father and began to rebuild my life as a single mom.

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[1] Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, (New York: Alred Knopf, 2015). For an extended article about the book, see Jill Lepore, "The Last Amazon: Wonder Woman

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In my opinion, being a single mom is, quite frankly, really hard. Over the years, my parents, my friends, and, for the last eleven years, my partner Bill have given me tremendous support. Such an experience is one of the reasons I believe so deeply in the importance of community and connections. Yet, I have been the sole *parent* for nearly all of my son's life.

It's been hard. Maybe it would have been easier if I had been less ambitious. Twice I moved cross-country with my son for grad school—first to seminary and then to grad school for my doctorate. Both times I moved alone to a place with no friends and very little money. Yet, I was determined to be a mother *and* have challenging, meaningful work.

In my earliest days as a single mom, I struggled with the emotional weight of feeling that in the eyes of some we were a "broken" family. Our culture—and often many religions—sends the message that the ideal family is a heterosexual, married, two-parent household. But, here we were—just him and me. Then one day we were watching the kids show Barney. Barney the purple dinosaur would sing this song: "I love you. You love me. We're a happy family. With a great big hug and kiss from me to you. Won't you say you love me too." One day the lyrics struck me: I love you. You love me. We're a happy family. Family did not need to be defined by marital status or whether two parents were in the household. Family was defined by love. My son and I were not a broken family. We are a family.

My personal questions about concepts of the ideal family led me into the academic study of gender studies and feminism. So much of women's struggle for equal rights has been about the role of women in the family—and whether or not they might have a role in society beyond the family.[2] In the U.S., 19th century activists like Elisabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony fought for a broad range of rights for women, including the right of married women to their wages and their property as well as the right to divorce. Yet, options outside of marriage were also challenging—often denied the right to education and profitable jobs, how could she possibly support herself well? And, without the right to vote and political power, what hope did women have of changing their world? Faced with such options, the nineteenth century activists for women's rights argued that women were like slaves—devoid of rights and freedoms.

By the early 20th century, women had begun to gain some rights—such as the right to keep their property even after marrying and, in 1920, the right to vote. More women were being educated and entering professional work. Yet, still it was a world where combining mothering and working was frowned upon. Logistically being a working mother was nearly impossible in a world without daycare centers or affordable options for childcare. Of course, many low-income women and women of color had to work regardless of how good or how poor her options were for childcare.

So if you wanted to or needed to work...it was best to not have children. But, in the early 20th century, birth control was illegal. Without the ability or knowledge of how to control

[2] For an excellent history of feminism and its roots, see Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

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whether or not to have children, women—especially married women—were subject to their bodies and their pregnancies.

Living in this era, Margaret Sanger, a Unitarian, was determined to change the world. Lepore tells the story in her book.[3] Sanger and her sister, Ethel Byrne, opened a birth control clinic in New York City in 1916. Women lined up around the corner to hear what Sanger and Byrne could teach them. When the more radical Byrne was arrested, she nearly died from a hunger strike in prison. Sanger secured her release only by promising that Byrne would never again speak out about birth control. After this event, Sanger became silent about her sister Ethel Byrne, whose existence then faded from public memory.

But Ethel Byrne had a daughter Olive. And Olive Byrne would go on to college, supported by Sanger's wealthy husband. Steeped in the progressive spirit of her mother and famous aunt, Olive Byrne helped to spread information about birth control to her fellow students. And, in 1925, Byrne became fascinated by the emerging science of psychology and her psychology professor, Dr. William Moulton Marston—future creator of Wonder Woman.

Beginning in 1925, Marston and Byrne forged a lifelong bond of affection and collaboration. As a gift, Marston gave Byrne a pair of close-fitted, wide-banded bracelets—the kind of bracelets that Wonder Woman would also wear.

Yet, Sanger and Byrne are only part of the story. Marston was married to a woman he had known since childhood, Elizabeth Holloway. Married after each graduated from college, both went on to earn law degrees and then advanced degrees in psychology. They did research together, wrote books together, and seemed to have a mutual deep regard for one another as professionals. For much of their married life, Holloway was, in fact, the steady breadwinner, while Marston engaged in a string of various endeavors, including promoting the lie detector he invented.

Marston and Holloway had four children—two of their own and two adopted. So how did Holloway, mother of four, manage a full-time professional job? She had Olive Byrne. Byrne became caretaker and second mother to the children while Holloway worked and Marston engaged his projects. Well, at least, this was the story told to the public and to the children. In fact, those two adopted children? They were Marston and Byrnes. So, in effect, they were living what today we might refer to as a polyamorous relationship.

So there are indeed a lot of secrets in Wonder Woman's origins. She was created by a man who lived with and loved strong, educated, professional women. As a team, Marston, Byrne, and Holloway created an unconventional family that enabled each of them to pursue both productive labor and loving relationships. Even Byrne wrote as a columnist for the magazine Family Circle while also caring for the children.

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[3] Lepore, *Wonder Woman*. All references to the life of Marston, Byrne, and Holloway are my synthesis of the book. For the story of Byrne, Sanger, and the birth control clinic, see chapter 11.

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Byrne and Holloway, Sanger and other early 20th century feminists are the women who inspired Wonder Woman. She was a superhero designed to express Marston's belief that women could be strong and free even though they faced a society and villains who threatened to chain and enslave them. As Lepore shows, every villain in the original comics attempts to limit the freedoms and rights of women. In Marston's hands, Wonder Woman was just as strong and capable as Superman or Batman. Again and again she is bound and chained and again and again she escapes by her own wit and power.

I loved Wonder Woman as a child. Reading Lepore's book reminded me why—connecting me with my childhood self who watched the 1970's TV show. Wonder Woman was an image of female strength. She was a role model of a woman who could *do* the rescuing, who could *stop* the villian, who could make a bad situation right by compelling the truth with her lasso.

Reading the book as an adult, a single mom, and a feminist, I learned new lessons from Wonder Woman. I learned that Wonder Woman was born from an unconventional family—a family that differed from the married, two-parent norm. I learned that Wonder Woman emerged in an era when it was a question if mothers could in fact *both* work *and* parent. While Wonder Woman herself would eschew marriage and family in order to devote herself to her cause, the family who created her supported one another to pursue both parenting and productive labor.

If you read the book, you'll learn that Marston, Byrne, Holloway, and other characters in the story have complex motives and complicated lives. Like we all do. I'm telling some of their story not to idealize them, but to remind us of a long history of women and men fighting for new ways to successfully combine love and intimacy, parenting choices and paid work. Yet, their solution also had a cost—a cost of lifelong secrets about how they lived and who they counted as family.

We're not done with this fight. Families of all kinds continue to struggle with the balance of parenting and working. Statistics have long shown that social dynamics of race, class, gender, and marital status impact the economic resources and subsequent levels of stress in different families. Just last week a study showed how the county in which a child grows up has lasting impacts on adult earnings. All families do not have the same resources for providing opportunities for their children.

In a global context, the U.S. still falls far behind other industrialized nations in supporting families. We require ZERO days of paid maternity leave. We are, in fact, the *only* developed nation that offers no paid maternity leave.

The U.S. also continues to struggle with providing safe, affordable birth control to women. As we've seen repeatedly in recent years, challenge after challenge has been brought against the new Health Care law to block the requirement for employers to include birth control in their health plans. Birth control.

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As Unitarian Universalists, we claim Margaret Sanger as one of our prophetic women who helped to change the world. Indeed, her courageous fight to legalize birth control transformed the lives of most U.S. women in the 20th century. She was both a figurative "Wonder Woman" as well as one of the *actual* inspirations for the original Wonder Woman.

While the Wonder Woman of comic books and TV shows may be an image of fiction, the women and men who inspired and created her were real and faced real challenges as feminists and as a family.

Today, we still need feminist heroes who will champion the right of women to choose when or if they want to be mothers. We still need feminist heroes who will help us explore new and more effective ways of combining parenting and working. May we be those heroes—whether that means supporting the fight to make birth control affordable and accessible or welcoming families of all kinds into our congregation.

So may it be. Amen.

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