

**“100 Years of Change”**  
*A Sermon by Dr. Stephanie May*  
*First Parish in Wayland*  
*October 16, 2016*

100 years ago today, Margaret Sanger and her sister Ethel Byrne, opened the first birth control clinic in Brooklyn.<sup>1</sup>

Around the neighborhood, they circulated a flyer in English, Yiddish, and Italian that asked,

“Mothers! Can you afford to have a large family?  
Do you want any more children?  
If not, why do you have them?  
do not kill, do not take life, but prevent  
Safe, Harmless Information can be obtained of trained nurses at  
46 Amboy Street.”<sup>2</sup>

On that first day “more than 100 women and 20 men lined up for consultations.”<sup>3</sup> They were desperate for knowledge about how to control when and if they were to have children. Then, 10 days after the clinic was opened, Sanger and Byrne were jailed and the clinic closed.

Frankly, I’m surprised it took that long. At the time, even mailing a pamphlet describing the processes of reproduction was considered a lewd and offensive act for which one could be imprisoned. Since the 1873 passage of the Comstock Laws, mailing information about or devices for birth control across state lines was a federal crime. To be clear, such knowledge and devices *were* available. Scientifically, the knowledge about the processes of reproduction grew tremendously over the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the new science and technology also promised a capacity to control reproduction that made some folks very uncomfortable.

At the top of this list of critics was Anthony Comstock, for whom the 1873 law was named. For Comstock and other critics, such efforts at intervention defied the dictates of God and morality. If sexual activity was not about procreation, then, well, people might pursue it solely for pleasure. Certainly *that* was not what God had in mind...especially if that pleasure might be found outside of marriage and the commitment to raise children in a (heterosexual) family.

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<sup>1</sup> You might recall that Byrne’s daughter, Olive, was a part of the origin story of Wonder Woman that I preached on last year. “Lessons from Wonder Woman,” May 10, 2015, <http://www.uuwayland.org/worship/sermon-archive/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/filmmore/ps\\_notice.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/filmmore/ps_notice.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/awakenings-margaret-sanger/>

Margaret Sanger had a *very* different perspective on the issue. Born in 1879, Sanger was the 6<sup>th</sup> of 11 children. Watching her mother die at the age of 50 fueled her later activism. Over her mother's coffin, she lashed out at her father, "You caused this. Mother is dead from having too many children."<sup>4</sup> When Sanger became a visiting nurse in the poor neighborhoods of New York City, she again watched as women struggled with multiple pregnancies as well as their unsafe efforts to end unwanted pregnancies.

Margaret Sanger set out to change this world. First she wrote. In 1914, she coined the term "birth control" in the newsletter she published, *The Woman Rebel*. Threatened with arrest for printing such offensive material, Sanger fled for England. After returning, her case was dropped. However, Sanger was determined to force a change. Deciding to open a birth control clinic, she approached a landlord who actually lowered the rent when he learned of Sanger's purpose.

Although Sanger and her sister, Byrne, were arrested, the publicity supported Sanger's purposes to bring awareness to the issues. Through continued public pressure and legal cases, birth control clinics became legal in New York in 1923. The wider fight to broaden legal access in other states as well as to both married and unmarried women continued for decades. In fact, not until a 1972 Supreme Court ruling, could unmarried women in Massachusetts purchase contraceptives. Some of you sitting here today remember that . . . and you remember what it was like *before* that decision.

In so many ways, we live in a different world today.

100 years of change has brought far more than legal access to contraceptives. 100 years of change has transformed the options for women . . . and for men.

With legal and affordable access to birth control, women could decide when or if to become mothers. Men could decide when or if to become fathers. Sexuality between men and women shifted to more openly embrace pleasure and not only procreation as its purpose. And, with the increased recognition that the purpose of sexuality was not limited to procreation, sexuality expressed between same sex couples slowly became accepted and even celebrated as a wider expression of the gifts of love and intimacy.

Looking back 100 years ago, I try to imagine the women and men who stood in line that day. I try to imagine their fear of another pregnancy, another child to feed. I try to imagine the hope they must have felt that this new clinic might somehow help. That there might be another possible future for their family, for themselves.

And here we are 100 years distant from that day, from those 100 women and 20 men who stood in line. That's roughly the number of people sitting here today.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/peopleevents/p\\_sanger.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/peopleevents/p_sanger.html)

Sometimes the problems in the world might feel huge. Sometimes we might wonder what difference 120 lives might make—or even just two. When Sanger and Byrne opened that clinic, access to birth control had been illegal for their entire lives. As women, they had no right to participate in the political process to change the laws. Women’s right to vote in the U.S. was still four years away.

In doing so, they certainly knew they were at risk for arrest. They knew that jail and court, publicity and controversy lay ahead. They could not have been certain of the outcome. They could not know that decades later birth control would be legal nationally and Sanger’s dream of a “magic pill” that a woman could take daily would be selling to millions of women globally.

But perhaps they would not be surprised that birth control would still be controversial, that it would still face politicians and moral activists trying to limit options.

Telling Sanger’s story from the vantage point of 100 years later is pretty fun and easy. We can see the change and we can celebrate the success. What is much harder is to look around at where we are today and to ask . . . what about now?

What about now? Almost a year ago I noted this 100-year anniversary on my calendar with the intention to mark it in a sermon. Because we are a congregation and a religious tradition committed to teaching comprehensive sexuality education as an expression of our values, this sermon topic seemed clear to me.

What I didn’t know is that it would fall amidst a national conversation about what constitutes sexual assault. Nor did I know that it would fall after a summer that saw a young man, Brock Turner, serve a mere three months for sexually assaulting an unconscious woman.<sup>5</sup>

As I reflected on this, I realized that I should have known there would have been *something*. For is there a year or a month or a day that goes by in which someone is not sexually assaulted? Or, has there been a month, or a year, or a decade in the last century when some aspect of birth control has not been legally contested?

Maybe you’re thinking that sexual assaults and birth control are two different things. Certainly in significant ways they are different. And yet, I believe that they are connected by assumptions about what it means to be a man or a woman.

Too often what it means to “be a man” has been understood as having strength . . . to have strength *over* another. To know what you want. To take it. To be the one in charge. In control. Such a man is not allowed to “be weak”, to show emotion, to express fear or loneliness, grief or anxiety. Such a man is expected to hide, to dangerously *deny* such

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/02/us/brock-turner-release-jail/>

feelings as one strides boldly through life. Such a man demonstrates his virility through his ability to “win” women.

Couple this with a view of woman as one who is softer and more caring by nature. A woman destined to be a caretaker of the children she is expected to bear. To her man, she is expected to be a helpmate, following his lead, doing as he wishes. A good woman is one who is faithful, who is under control. Be a good girl, do as you’re asked, is the message from the earliest of days.

Sanger’s advocacy for birth control did more than make certain information and devices legal. She rebelled against the very idea that women—and men—could be forced into a life that they did not want. The lasting impact of her advocacy led to people having more options about what their lives, their children’s lives could be.

While birth control alone has not transformed the possibilities for men and women, it has been a significant factor. Because pregnancy could be delayed or even avoided, more education, work, or life experience could be pursued. Because pregnancies could be limited, more resources could be devoted to fewer children or other values. Women’s lives did not need to revolve around pregnancies. Men’s lives did not need to revolve around providing for his wife and children. Life and love and children and sexuality could take shape upon a wider landscape of possibilities.

Life and love and children and sexuality could move nearer to a place of justice and equality. We do hear echoes of older, unequal expectations of gender when men assume they can simply take what they want from a woman or woman accept such actions as inevitable. But such echoes now compete against models of gender that resist and even denounce the old assumptions. We see examples of all genders caring for those they love, for each other, for their children. We see all genders pursuing meaningful work, succeeding in positions of leadership, and providing for themselves and others. We see all genders respecting one another, seeking relationships of mutuality, and assuming a culture of consent.

We are not there 100% today. But we are not in the same place that we were 100 hundred years ago. Speaking with a parent last Sunday about raising kids, he shared with me what he had been told, “the days are long, but the years are short.” This struck a chord with me personally as my son has recently begun college, but it also stuck with me as I reflected on Sanger. I imagine that the 10 days the clinic was open were long as they talked with so many seeking information and hope. I imagine the weeks in jail were long as were the months of legal proceedings. Yet, in the 100 years since that day, so much has changed, even as so much remains contested and conflicted.

Sanger herself has a complicated legacy. She participated actively in eugenicist conversations and organizations. For those seeking to perfect the human race, her advocacy of birth control had particular resonance. Often such conversations followed lines of race and class in who was worthier to live. Throughout the last 100 years, there are

multiple examples of black and brown persons being used in experiments to advance birth control technologies as well as those who were sterilized or forced to use birth control. As activists of color remind us, reproductive justice not only means choices of *not* having children, it also means the right *to* have children and to have adequate means to support and educate them.

We continue to live and love within a complicated landscape of entangled dynamics of race, class, gender and sexuality. However, thanks to Sanger, Byrne, and countless others, the landscape of options is much wider than it was 100 years ago. Today, we must continue to seek to name and live out models of justice and equity, of possibilities and hope. We must do so *because* the old models of inequality and disrespect have not ceased to exist. In the face of sexist, homophobic, racist, and transphobic discourses that seek to limit the possibilities of human lives and love, let us celebrate those who fight for a more just and free world.

So may it be.  
Amen.