

Would Jesus dispense contraceptive pills?

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This week reminded me of the story of the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. She maneuvered through the crowd that swarmed Jesus, reached for the hem of his garment, and was healed. She wasn't supposed to touch him. According to the law, she was unclean. Yet, she did and the bleeding stopped.

A controversy over birth control has brewed in the last few days. As we know, the pill was approved in our country in the 1950s and it has changed the lives of countless women. I began to understand the importance of the birth control pill when I worked in South Louisiana. I chose to work in Cajun country, because it was difficult for churches to get pastors there. And after years of working with the urban poor, I wanted to gain a better understanding rural poverty. While there, I found myself working mostly with teenaged girls because working with teens was an important key to breaking the cycle of poverty.

Teen pregnancy keeps women in poverty. Oftentimes in difficult circumstances, young women cannot imagine a future. They may not have known many women

who went to college or had professional careers. But they do know of one satisfying option, when they begin to imagine themselves as mothers. Motherhood is extremely meaningful, but when a teenager becomes a mom, she can get trapped in poverty. And it can be a cycle that lasts for generations.

Because South Louisiana was a strong Roman Catholic area, people had large families, and birth control was eschewed. Because it was a poor area, parents had to work and very few after-school options existed for girls. Just as some areas of our country have a strong "Say No To Drugs" campaign, there were billboards on the sides of the roads with the stark warnings: "Teenage Pregnancy = Lifetime Poverty."

There are many reasons to support the use of contraception. It can help teenagers avoid the cycle of poverty. It allows women to plan their educations and careers. It can help with overpopulation and strain on our environment. Contraception helps a myriad of medical conditions.

This week has been dominated by religious voices speaking out against contraception. I suppose that shouldn't be a surprise since Christianity has been controlled by men for over 2,000 years, and there has been a strong belief in both Catholic and Protestant traditions that women were created solely for childbirth. But there are way too many voices, speaking in the name of God, who target health services for women, and especially poor women.

As people of faith, we need to make our voices on behalf of women clear.

I believe in religious freedom. I believe that Muslim women should be allowed to wear a burka if that is her choice. I believe that a Catholic woman should not use contraception if that is her choice. But I resent the loud and constant religious voice that threatens the rights of women.

There is another voice. We aren't hearing it much in this national dialogue, but there are women and men of faith who believe that women are created for more than bearing children. We support contraception and women's healthcare.

God is concerned with the health of women. God cares about teenagers who end up in a lifetime of poverty. Jesus healed the bleeding woman two thousand years ago, and I think if he walked the streets today, he just might hand her a packet of pink pills.