

WINGS OF THE DOVE  
WHEN WE ARE WELL

Texts on Sunday, October 14, 2012

*2 Kings 5: 1-14; Luke 5: 15-26*

**L**AST SUMMER, just prior to the Olympics, the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, was interviewed by an American journalist. “You’re a conservative,” prodded the journalist. “Can you explain your support for socialized medicine?” Now, there you have that classic American tunnel vision on display—the assumption that the labels “conservative” and “liberal” refer to immutable differences on any policy. Not so! In our recent reflection on environmental issues, we saw that the true conservatives are those protecting the ancient order of things; and that those eager for more fossil fuel consumption are radicals. Here, at all events, was the conservative mayor’s response regarding health care in England. “Americans always look at our system with disbelief and disapproval, but we make it work. Nobody goes untreated, no matter how poor or rich they are. I understand the arguments against it, but it’s something that everybody buys into, everybody believes in, and it works. It shows that there is really something that binds us together.”

Imagine Jesus being interviewed by the same journalist. “Jesus, you’re the founder of a large conservative religious movement in America. How do you explain your support of healing for all?” The Human One replies: “Pharisees always look at our system with disbelief and disapproval, but God makes it work. Nobody goes untreated, no matter how poor or rich they are, no matter how sinful or unforgiven. I understand the arguments against this, but it’s something that everybody believes in—except you Pharisees—and it shows that there is really something that binds us together.”

There beats the heart of this series of sermons: There is really something that binds us together. When we are well, we are really “we”—rich and poor, liberal and conservative, male and female, Christian and Jew and Muslim and more. This is a spiritual insight. It comes to the faithful exactly when they are practicing freedom from excess attachment to their own fears and hungry hopes. A spiritually free person can make progress through political swamps because she can *both* feel the passions that animate the left and the right wings *and* she can put living words and actions to “something that binds us together” deeper than our differences. Spiritual progress helps stuck people leave their positions to imagine solutions.

Today, we are going to feel our way with America’s towering health care crisis. In this, we are certainly politically stuck, but we are jammed up in many other dimensions as well. Costs are out of control, our weight and our diets are out of control, fear of death and disability has control of us, for we have lost the

courage of being humbly human; we want to live forever. To cap it off, unlike the rest of the industrialized world, many Americans refuse to consider health care a right, rather than a privilege—until they fall seriously ill and find that even their insurance policy is sick and unable to help them. As a people, we are not well, though we are living longer into living unwell.

Our problems with health care are rooted in spiritual, not physical, disease. When we are spiritually well, we accept our humanity as a union of heaven and earth, of the divine and the dust we are and to which we must return; we have some peace with our body. But when by every stratagem at our disposal, we deny our dust and our death, scrambling away from our nature like a terrified beast, then we know neither heaven nor earth. When we don't know what our life is for, except for more and more, we cannot possibly control medical costs. We pay doctors not to heal, but to treat, regardless of outcomes. (By contrast, we pay good sums to car mechanics—but only for outcomes, because we know what our cars are for.) In other nations, doctors receive salaries, as they do at the Mayo Clinic, so that they can focus on the healing of the whole person, not on the money he represents. But in our patterns, any amount of money can be demanded and any amount of care sought, all to keep us from dealing with our death. It's a racket. The system says, in effect, "Your money or your life!" And because we don't know what our life is for, we pay the money. But we don't get the life we need.

It is not a coincidence that when we do not know our end, we end by seeking endless treatments. A *Wall Street Journal* study earlier this year found that in 2009, about a quarter of all hospital costs were spent on patients whose stay ended with their death. Apparently, Christian belief offers no sure guidance at the end. A study shows that on average, Christians and their families demand significantly *more* heroic measures in the last stages of life than do those with no religious belief. Have fantasies about the joys of heaven kept some believers from serious talk about life-and-death until it is too late? Does sudden terror impel them to rev the engines of the medical machine to try to drive back to the shores of the only life they really believe in, their bodily life? Does religion sometimes collude in the denial of death, keeping a person in faithless sleep, distrusting any reality except the material? How often the scriptures tell us that in meeting the religious, "Jesus marveled at their unbelief!"

In our weak attention to preventive health care, we see another sign of a spiritual disease. Only look at the welter of TV ads for heartburn drugs. Now, heartburn is mostly caused by foods that our brains love but our bodies hate. Do we change our diet to help our health? No. We pop a pill to make it painless in the short run to keep on eating what will hurt us in the long run. Here's the frame for the American spiritual disease: *Mask my symptoms, delay my discomfort, but do not ask me to change my life. And when the crisis comes,*

get me a technical solution, because I do not have the will or the supportive community to help me undertake deep-going changes in my self—my fears, my longings—to do what I must to care for my body.

Well, enough of unwellness. Our Bible overflows with stories of healing. We might think this ordinary. Why wouldn't God send his messengers to calm our worst fears of death and disease? But our tradition holds a far more precious treasure than simple salves for our sorrows which but leave us in our sins.

From Luke's story today, notice that even though "many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases, [Jesus] would withdraw to deserted places and pray." What can this mean? It shows that, in itself, the life in our body is not Jesus' first concern. If it were, he would have set up a clinic in every town. I am reminded of a member of my first church, who was both proud and secretive about the fact she was an atheist. She smoked packs of cigarettes daily, and now she lay in her hospital death bed. She said to me, "What a stupid man Jesus was! Think of all the people he could have saved if he hadn't let himself die that stupid death!" To bring light to blindness like hers is exactly why Jesus withdrew from the crowds who wanted to be cured—to draw them up higher and higher; to communicate something essential about the meaning of our life, and of his. Jesus does not fly on the right wing that prizes bare life in the body above all things. But neither does Jesus fly on the left wing that prizes "quality of life." When Jesus comes to heal, he does so not to stretch the span of life a little, but for a sign and a symbol. He says, "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home."

Now, like many, you may grow anxious when any connection is made between sin and sickness. So many Christians abuse the word sin, as well as the people they call sinners, that you may have grown a callus on your ear for the word sin. This morning, I hope that you might open your heart and your mind in a new way to this depth dimension in Jesus' words, for guilt is never far from our thoughts. Some self-loathing sits secretly in everybody. The only people who deny their guilt absolutely, even in the prayer room, are those too afraid of their fate and their future to become honest about their past. But here, in the middle of this story, connecting healing and forgiveness, receive this.

Jesus is never interested in merely healing an individual in his body. Jesus is never interested in healing you alone, apart from others. Jesus does not make a separate peace with anyone. Jesus is healing cosmically, all at once, everyone, eternally. But not everyone sees this. Faith is a name for seeing this. When Jesus sees faith at work in the friends who are putting their pal and his pallet through the roof; when he says, *Friend, your sins are forgiven you!* he is not pronouncing a verdict for a man, but stating the cosmic fact of release from all burdens. He is proclaiming this word which your God dearly desires that

you also accept, that in Christ you see yourself free from your burdens, ready to be filled with love. When Jesus sees his brothers and sisters receiving the good news of kingdom come, *then* is when he says, *Your sins are forgiven! Your faith has saved you!* For Jesus heals for a sign of the presence of God, that we might know what our life is.

When you are sick; when disease of mind or body diverts or distorts the project of your life, this negation can threaten to unmake your personality, your integrity, your good. God cares about the risk of your losing yourself. God knows that every one will run this risk and pass down this walk. Not one escapes. Therefore, the whole meaning of health is laid out in confrontation with the certainty of our death. Therefore, healing matters, as a sign of God's presence.

Time and again, the scriptures show us that healing takes place in a community. Utterly contrary to our sick health care system, which puts people through impersonal treatments and splits the body into a thousand parts for study, Jesus heals in community, and sends men and women into relationship. Think of Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army. His healing is not an isolated magic act of Elisha. Why, were it not for the voice of the young captive Israelite girl, received by her masters; and later, were it not for Naaman's servants saying, "Father, please, do this simple thing"—were it not for these communities of care surrounding the leprous leader, he could not have responded to the powers of healing. When we are well, healing restores the integrity of our relationship with the whole community.

A sign of America's deep disease is that so many of our citizens do not feel that we belong together. Our body is broken. This is why we are unwell. The consequences of the disease of separation are manifest in all the injustices that keep the dove of peace from flight. They show up also in the unwellness of our people, and in the tragically impersonal way our medicine breaks us apart.

But when we are well, our communities help us remember what our life is for. They know us, and help us with our growth. If we Christians hold our treasure well, we can teach even the youngest the healing truth in the apostle's promise, turning us from death to life: "For you have already died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Col. 3.3) Dear friends, never doubt that the hope you have in Christ, which keeps you free from the vain hungers and fears that drive so many from paths of love and justice, is God's gift through you to all whom you touch. For by your faith, you are made well. By your faith, you are called to reveal that there is really something that binds us together.