

## FOR THE HEALING OF THE NATIONS

Text on March 21, 2010

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Mark 6: 1-13

*And Jesus could do no works of power there, except to cure a few sick people. And he was amazed at their unbelief.*

The connection between healing and faith, though well documented, is generally filed under “the placebo effect,” which is, that your medicine works better when you believe in it. But today, as Americans are poised at the second-most startling political cliff-hanger of the young century, let us think about the relationship of faithfulness to American health care.

It’s in the book! For a hundred years, scholars have peered into the past to see what Jesus’ life and sense of purpose were really like, apart from the church’s picture of him. They report many things, but most agree that Jesus intended to preach God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. We say “kingdom come” like a curse word for *never!* Jesus meant it breaking forth now. The sign of the power of *God-now* was showing up in his healing of diseases. In Jesus, God was hip-deep in health care reform. It was a spiritual issue. It became a political issue. John’s gospel says that it was Lazarus talking about his short stint in the grave that finally decided authorities on plans to execute Jesus as a criminal. When a nation can’t get its healing powers working for all the people, of course its dysfunction will eventually become a political issue—that is, a human power struggle. But it is not equally obvious that the people of a nation as sick as ours are first of all in a spiritual struggle. Our inability to do deeds of health care power is the manifest symptom, but unbelief is the real cause.

Before we take a spiritual inventory of our national unbelief, I want to be clear that demonizing parties in the disputes we face cannot be our aim. The spiritual sickness of this nation is in all of us together. The Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister tells a personal story that sheds light on the understanding I think we must take. For long years after she entered her order, she disdained her fellow sisters for their petty emotional needs and fidgeting with feeble efforts to master themselves. In a certain year, however, she was sent to a South American mission. There, she ministered with people who pick fruits . . . and earn in a day the price that we pay for a bowlful of them. Sr. Joan suddenly felt herself involved, as an American, in a system of oppression—of evil—from which she could not extricate herself. On return to the States, would she not eat those fruits? Or send guilt money south? For the first time, Chittister felt what it is to have no power adequate to cease from an evil in which she was implicated. She was not after all different from the sisters who could not control their cravings and cruelties. Her arrogance toward them drained away.

May ours too. Seeing that in our nation’s health care culture, we are all implicated as parties and beneficiaries in a vast system of greed and ignorance—and need and talent and hope—we will act better before God and in concert with others to change what is evil. We can work for change, but we cannot become “the righteous.” Let us endeavor to not spend precious emotional energies on ridicule for those who see these issues differently from ourselves, or in disdain for those who care for themselves poorly. We are one house. That appalling difficulty the Congress is having in deciding on health care reform perfectly reflects this house, Americans as a whole and the grave difficulties we have in deciding who we are and whose we are—the spiritual questions. No one is righteous, no one is above this crisis. No plan and no technology will solve these problems whose roots go deep in our culture. We must begin by seeing our own unbelief.

First, we are a people in whom the love of money has landed with diabolical power. The health care conversation out there avoids this issue. Costs rise wildly partly because compensation is wild and unregulated. In much of the industrialized world, doctors accept salaries. Here, some of the most effective care systems, such as the Mayo Clinic and Kaiser Permanente in California, pay all their

medical professionals salaries. This frees the healers to relate to humans as whole beings, not fee segments. But as a whole, our nation cannot determine what a reasonable living is. We have no capacity to say No to excessive incomes in any of the fields we fear. Translated into spiritual terms, this means we are confused as to what human life is for. What is the point? From our Lord Jesus—as from the Lord Yahweh and Krishna and Buddha and more—we know that unless love for the other is our high purpose, love of our self and our own power becomes life's sole goal. This is part of the American disease. That mind-boggling gulf that separates our wealthy professional classes from the lowly wage earners is unknown anywhere else on earth except in some brutal banana republics. Medicine is pulled irrevocably into the vortex of our tragic confusion about human purpose. Fees are paid for service, regardless of outcome. Some cents of every dollar meant for healing is spent for profit to insurance companies, whom we pay and pay because we are horrified at losing our footing on the steep climb. To where? The issue is spiritual. It is political. What is a human life for? Just more and more?

The second spiritual disease in health care is closely related to the first. We are afraid of death and disability, perhaps more than any nation. As a whole, we are unable to hold conversations with our loved ones about how our end should come. You may not have stumbled at this—but we are one house; we must see how it is with the American family. Last summer, when some fragrance wafted from the congressional health reform bill, indicating that doctors would be compensated for the service of discussing end-of-life questions with their patients, the spiritual disease in our people converted that idea into terror over “death panels.” Death terrifies us.

Does Christianity help? A recent study showed that on the whole, Christians and their families demand significantly more heroic measures in the last stages of life than do those having no religious belief structure. Have forced fantasies about the joys of heaven kept the religious from serious talk about life-and-death until it is too late? Does their sudden terror impel them to rev the engines of the medical system to try to get back to these known shores. Is religion sometimes an excuse for clinging to bodily life, unfaithful to the limit and the purpose of our life? Jesus marveled at their unbelief.

However that may be, where there are no advance directives, medical personnel in this culture are often legally obligated to do what they can do to keep the body from dying. Thus, over half (55%) of Medicare spending pays for acute hospital care in the last two years of life. We pay and pay to try to haul the dying from their deathbeds, because we cannot accept that life has its limit and its purpose. That purpose was to love—not just to live. Getting clear about letting go is a spiritual calling you owe to yourself, to your loved ones, and to your God.

A third spiritual disease affecting our delivery of health care has to do with our inability to say no to our cravings. Only look at the jumble of TV ads for drugs to stop heartburn. Let's be simple. Heartburn is usually caused by eating foods we can't digest well. Do we want to change foods? No. We want a pill to make it not painful *in the short run* to eat foods that are bad for us. This is but one tiny example of an American disease: *Stop my symptoms, delay my discomfort, but do not ask me to change my lifestyle.*

This spiritual disease also has its root in confusion about what our life is for, but this one shows up everywhere in “the American way of life”—in our profligate use of energy, in our credit card debt, in our financial gambling practices. Somewhere Wendell Berry defines violence as taking the shortest route to an objective without considering the consequences. On that reading, we are an extremely violent people. Yet the tragedy of our violence seems peculiarly acute when it is our own bodies we violate, mistreating them like private possessions whose dysfunctions are our personal affair. It is not so. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you,” asks the apostle Paul, “which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” Seriousness about how we treat ourselves and about preventive care is a spiritual issue. It belongs in the conversation among soul friends in a church

that would heed Jesus' call to heal the sick. *What do you need to change? How is that going? How can I help you?*

A fourth and final spiritual disease which affects our nation's health has to do with who has access to the healer. Americans love to say we have the best system in the world and that unlike the other nations, we will never tolerate the rationing of health care. This is deceitful talk. We cut off millions from their healers: the working poor, the undocumented workers whom we have called here to serve us, people with "pre-existing" conditions, those with severe disabilities. Most Americans are insured—or think we are, anyway—so we, who are many, fear change to serve "the forty million few."

Do we not remember the root of justice on which this nation is founded? In Federalist Paper 51, James Madison wrote that where "the stronger faction can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may truly be said to reign, as [it does] in . . . nature where the weaker is not secured against the violence of the stronger." The requirement of a just society, in his words, is "to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other." We are one house, one people, one economy, one ecology. This is the first insight of spiritual humanity. Whoever resists the vision is cowering in unbelief.

Now, spiritual disease is not unusual in society, but normal; still, it is not safe. No empire has ever lasted beyond a few hundred years. No magic shield of protection keeps our civilization from injustice and collapse. And no crisis affecting a whole house and culture was ever overcome merely by changing the machinery of laws. No, but hearts must turn and repent; old ways, and the people who cling to old ways, must die. In a time of crisis, men who believed in God's power to heal their broken nation rewrote Moses' last words to his people in the wilderness: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore, choose life!" Friends, let us go out like disciples who have been given authority over the unclean spirits that infect us and our whole people. Taking only what we need—not our pride, nor our fear, nor insurance against our fear—let us go give voice to the possibility that America repent of its violent nature. Let us go down and set our people free from false beliefs about what this life is for, that we may all learn the spiritual gift of letting go, that love may abound, for only love abides. "And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them."

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