



University Christian Church – Austin

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Jesus' Healthcare Reform Plan

Pentecost 14, b, September 6, 2009

Mark 7:24-37

Thursday just before noon your Endowment for Creative Ministry Program Committee here at UCC gathered around a smallish table at the restaurant in Holiday Inn at Lady Bird Lake to share a meal and to continue the planing for our next UCC Forum. It was maybe the 7th meeting we've held to get this far in our process. We have not yet honed in a final title for the program, but we know it is going to focus on the Christian community's responsibility for healthcare. The idea for choosing this topic, as you would guess, is because it is such a hot topic in public conversation, a prime focus of this morning's Austin American Statesman. But just because it is hot, doesn't make it clear. In fact, trying to find a great way to set parameters on the conversation and deciding who to invite to be on our panel of speakers that afternoon, is far from easy.

But there are several aspects of the central question that are very clear. First, from the very beginning, the church of Jesus Christ has always been in the health care business. You will remember that Jesus spent about three years of ministry preaching, teaching and healing, but without a doubt, Jesus was best known among the people of his day as a healer. The crowds gathered to receive his healing power, much more so than to hear his teaching.¹

We live in a day when far too many Christians believe that feeding the hungry, healing the sick, housing the homeless, providing God's intended blessing in life to God's beloved children, is somehow just the carrot to draw the needy into the orbit of a

preacher who can lay the Word on them....thus providing the REAL salvation.

This is, I'm afraid to say, a sorry misrepresentation of Jesus' Plan. Jesus clearly believed that his healing ministry was stand-alone, essential in itself. Review this morning's scripture lesson and you'll see that face made clear.

And the earliest Christians followed Jesus' lead. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the earliest generations of Christians continued to be known as healers, providing prayerful as well as hands-on help for the physically sick. Word & Deed.

One of the early Christians great emphases was that through Jesus, the gift of salvation was made available to everyone. Did you know that the Greek word for "salvation" is literally, "health?" Then on throughout history the church of Jesus Christ became the center for healing of all sorts.ⁱⁱ

Big changes in healthcare arrived on the scene about 120 years ago, especially when Robert Koch first described well the germ theory and we began to understand a great deal more about the transmission of disease and the maintenance of health. Suddenly medicine became a scientific enterprise and a specialized one. But did the Church of Jesus Christ of the day simply step back them and say, "alright science, it's all your concern now. You take care of medicine, we'll go do other good work elsewhere... say, feeding the hungry or caring for widows." No, of course not. When you think of medicine in Austin, what hospitals come to mind? Seton, founded by Roman Catholicsⁱⁱⁱ? St. David's, founded by Episcopalians^{iv}? Both of these were clearly Christian ministries in the long American Christian tradition of reaching out a hand to serve those who are physically ill, in the Name and continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Soon after Robert Koch first espoused that radical theory that microscopic germs were the cause of much of the disease that we experience^v, important political decisions were being made that set different areas of the world on different paths in this regard.

In Germany in 1881^{vi} the Chancellor of the German Empire, Otto von Bismarck spoke to the Reichstag, inspiring them to embrace what he called, "practical Christianity," the putting of Christian values into government policy and practice, which included the establishment in Germany of universal healthcare- yes, in 1881- through an insurance program providing even the poorest of the poor access to affordable healthcare. Germany was the first major state to take this step. But over the years since, every other industrial nation has had the universal healthcare talk and with very few exceptions, has begun walking the walk.

Now it is our turn in the U.S. to look steadily into the current political conflagration here and deal with it, too.^{vii} We face the question of which way to go with a different sets of lenses focusing vision on different issues. It seems everyone has a political horse in the race. We want one party or the other to come out on top when all the dust settles. This drive to have one's side victorious at the end of the day is so much at the heart of this battle, that as committee members said at Thursday's Forum planning meeting, we haven't spent near enough time figuring out the basic of facts about healthcare in the US today... facts, that hopefully, nearly all could accede together.

One position was put forward by the General Minister and President of our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, in letter she sent in July to all our of churches throughout the U.S. And Canada. Part of her letter reads:

“You are no doubt aware of the debate on health care reform currently taking place....health care reform can happen this year. **But we, the faith community, must act to make it happen.**

Jesus' ministry was one of healing, bringing life to the dying, sight to the blind, wellness to the sick, and peace of mind to the troubled. Jesus' witness was that abundant life includes physical, mental and spiritual wellness. The call upon us is

to make this vision a reality for all.

Disciples have been involved in the work of healing at home and abroad for generations. The General Assembly has twice spoken out on the need of health care for all....^{viii}

I am writing because I believe this is the moment of a generation when **the United States can finally make decent, affordable health care accessible for all**. The moral vision is there. The policy expertise is in place. It's the political will that needs our support. Our legislators need our encouragement in the hard work of reform. I urge you whichever of the possible options you might support to contact your Senators and Representatives and ask them to achieve affordable, accessible, accountable, and inclusive health care this year.

And then she concludes her letter with: "What we do together now can make a difference for all of us, and especially for those who do not have access to affordable health care, who stand in greatest need of our prayers, our support, and our advocacy.

Thank you for your prayerful consideration and action."^{ix}

Now, I happen to agree with Rev. Watkins' view of what is called for. But we are Disciples and we live in a big tent church, indeed. We don't have a Pope who speaks for us, and certainly no one expects to agree with their pastor in all such issues. We are each charged with the admonition from Philippians 2:12b-13 : to "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling..." so, predictably, numbers of Disciples pastors and lay members from across the U.S. have begun emailing rebuttals to Dr. Watkin's views about Christian responsibility for healthcare reform.

Interestingly, those Disciples of Christ members find their case expressed well by Roman Catholic bishop of Sioux City, Iowa, R. Walter Nickless, whose writing includes

these excerpts, “.... the Catholic Church does not teach that “health care” as such, without distinction, is a natural right. The “natural right” of health care is the divine bounty of food, water, and air without which all of us quickly die. ... The remainder of health care is a political, not a natural, right, the Catholic Church does not teach that government should directly provide health care... health care should not be subject to federal monopolization. Preserving patient choice (through a flourishing private sector) is the only way to prevent a health care monopoly from denying care arbitrarily.... therefore any legislation that undermines the viability of the private sector is suspect.”

Then Bishop Nickless concludes, “I encourage all of you to make your voice heard to our representatives in Congress. ^x

On both the left and the right, Christians in America agree that Healthcare IS our business, just as it was Jesus’ business.

Now, if we can also be generous enough in spirit to recognize that both Rev. Watkins and Bishop Nickless are sincere Christians, who both strive to live out Christ's call in the world, what shall make of this deep division of perspectives? How shall we answer the question of just what is Jesus' Healthcare Reform Plan for the U.S. today?

Let me suggest a few characteristics of what I believe to an adequate response on our part:

First: there is no need & ultimately no positive value in assuming that our side of the issue is God's side. Claiming the moral high ground is easy, for each side. But claiming my way is the only right way, clearly God's way, just slams the door shut against any ongoing dialogue. And as Christians, I don't think we can ever faithfully close the door on a chance to dialogue with those who differ in perspective.

Second: let's recognize that in the all the heat that is generated in this discussion, there is the chance for significant light to be shared, as well. The aim of our Nov. Forum here at UCC will not be to have some folks changing their own political position on the

argument. No, our goal is that participants have a new-found understanding of why faithful Christians on the other side of the divide hold to their position, rather than believing that they are just selfish or stupid, stubborn or irresponsible. When we can understand the other's view and see how it is reasonable to hold that view, we have made a great step towards reconciliation, a goal that it seems all Christians should be ready to embrace.

Third: and this is essential, once we do deeply understand the others' views that differ from our own, that does not obviate on our own need to act. Rev. Watkins and Bishop Nickless both encourage their readers to contact their congressional representatives and actively stand up for their view of the cause. This is a case where both the American political system and the Christian moral imperative align congruently; each of us has the responsibility to advocate our position actively in the world.

Active involvement is our charge today, remembering all the while that in the Bible the prophets of old who spoke the true heart of God to the people of their day, including Jesus, more often than not, lost the political struggle for their day. Just because one side wins the political struggle does not mean that that side was blessed by God. Some, including Jesus, found themselves on the politically losing side and paid for the loss with their lives.

The real difference between the prophet's way and the more common way of standing up and speaking out, is that the prophets- who oozed the compassion of God- never ceased to love those who differed from them. The prophets continued to engage the struggle for justice for all without demonizing the other side or calling or thinking them fools.

I know that this is a difficult spiritual path to walk, indeed. But I suggest that it is the only, truly faithful option open to those who claim to be followers of the Prince of

Peace.

Amen.

i Jesus, himself, didn't denigrate the diseases of the body as unimportant to one's spiritual health. Time and again, he provided wholeness and health to those who were in pain, in distress, in the darkness of blindness, in the confusion of a troubled mind and spirit. Today's lesson is typical. Jesus heals the daughter of woman who is a foreigner, a woman of some other religious faith. At first it appears Jesus will refuse to heal the daughter because his main mission is to help save Israel. But when she answers quickly, humbly, and cleverly, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs," Jesus heals the daughter. He doesn't require her to sit through a Torah lesson and to submit to the 10 commandments. Jesus' healing was ministry itself, not simply a way to catch people's attention so he could teach them with words.

Likewise, in the passage on the healing of the deaf and dumb man, Jesus spends absolutely no time at all teaching about the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God, the single utterance of Jesus is "Ephphatha," so we must understand, that ministry of physical healing itself, not as some come-on, is the noble goal of Jesus that day.

ii -Once Christian monasticism had established itself in Europe, within the walls of the monastery the monks grew herbs with supposed healing properties that the monasteries provided to the whole village or city, not so that they could draw the locals in to be converted, but because this caring for others itself was itself a noble goal, as it had been for Jesus as well.

- iii <http://famvin.org/en/archive/seton-health-care-net> SETON Healthcare Network was founded by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, a Catholic organization that dates back to 17th century France. SETON originated in Austin in 1902, after a group of citizens asked the Daughters to build a hospital to care for the sick. This 40-bed hospital, originally the Seton Infirmary, would eventually lead to the building of Seton Medical Center in 1975. In the last century, SETON Healthcare Network has grown from one hospital to a network of more than 20 hospitals and healthcare facilities across Central Texas.

- In November 1999, the Daughters of Charity National Health System merged with the Sisters of St. Joseph health system in Michigan, forming Ascension Health, which has 87,000 employees and hundreds of institutions in 15 states and the District of Columbia. It is the largest not-for-profit healthcare system in the United States.

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http://www.google.com/search?q=St.+David's+Healthcare+history&hl=en&rlz=1C1GGLS_enUS342US343&sa=X&tbo=p&tbs=tl:1.tlul:1800.tlth:2009.tl:1920.tlh:1939&ei=YIqiSsW3MsS_tgeB7rjcDw&oi=timeline_histogram_main&ct=timeline_histogram&cd=7 St. David's officials say the hospital remains the charity it was when **St. David's Episcopal Church** founded it in 1924. The hospital, which is no longer affiliated with the church, continues to take all patients regardless of their ability to pay

v http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germ_theory_of_disease John Snow contributed to the formation of the germ theory when he traced the source of the 1854 cholera outbreak in the central neighbourhood of Birmingham. The statistical analysis of the affected cases showed that the outbreak was not consistent with the miasma theory which was prevalent at the time. Contrary to the miasma model, he identified drinking water as the vessel for transmission of the disease. He found that cases occurred in the homes which obtained their water from the **Broad Street pump**, which was at the geographical center of the outbreak.

Italian physician **Francesco Redi** provided early evidence against **spontaneous generation**. He devised an experiment in 1668 where he used three jars. He placed a meat loaf in each of the three jars. He had one of the jars open, another one tightly sealed, and the last one covered with gauze. After a few days, he observed that the meat loaf in the open jar was covered by maggots, and the jar covered with gauze had maggots on the surface of the gauze. However, the tightly sealed jar had no maggots inside or outside it. He also noticed that the maggots were only found on surfaces that were accessible by flies. From this he concluded that spontaneous generation is not a plausible theory. **Louis Pasteur** further demonstrated between 1860 and 1864 that **fermentation** and the growth of microorganisms in **nutrient broths** did not proceed by spontaneous generation. He exposed freshly boiled broth to air in vessels that contained a filter to stop all particles passing through to the growth medium: and even with no filter at all, with air being admitted via a long tortuous tube that would not pass dust particles. Nothing grew in the broths, therefore the living organisms that grew in such broths came from outside, as spores on dust, rather than being generated within the broth.

Robert Koch was the first scientist to devise a series of proofs used to verify the germ theory of disease[1]. **Koch's Postulates** were published in 1890, and derived from his work demonstrating that anthrax was caused by the bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*. These postulates are still used today to help determine if a newly discovered disease is caused by a microorganism.

In the 1870's [Joseph Lister](#) was instrumental in developing practical applications of the germ theory of disease with respect to surgical techniques.

vi http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_von_Bismarck#Bismarck.27s_social_legislation

The 1880s were a period when Germany started on its long road towards the [welfare state](#) it is today. The [Social Democratic](#), [National Liberal](#) and [Center](#) parties were all involved in the beginnings of social legislation, but it was Bismarck who established the first practical aspects of this program. The program of the Social Democrats included all of the programs that Bismarck eventually implemented, but also included programs designed to preempt the programs championed by [Karl Marx](#) and [Friedrich Engels](#). Bismarck's idea was to implement the minimum aspects of these programs that were acceptable to the German government without any of the overtly Socialistic aspects.

Bismarck opened debate on the subject on 17 November 1881 in the Imperial Message to the [Reichstag](#), using the term *practical Christianity*^[35] to describe his program. On 4 May 1881 Bismarck had also referred to this program as *Staatssozialismus*, when he made the following accurate prediction to Moritz Busch:

It is possible that our policy may be reversed at some future time when I am dead; but State Socialism will make its way.^[36]

Another translation of this accurate prediction is:

It is possible that all our politics will come to nothing when I am dead but state socialism will drub[force] itself in. (Der Staatssozialismus paukt sich durch.)^[37]

Bismarck's program centered squarely on insurance programs designed to increase productivity, and focus the political attentions of German workers on supporting the Junker's government. The program included Health Insurance; Accident Insurance (Workman's Compensation); Disability Insurance; and an Old-age Retirement Pension, none of which were then currently in existence to any great degree.

Based on Bismarck's message, The Reichstag filed three bills designed to deal with the concept of Accident insurance, and one for Health Insurance. The subjects of Retirement pensions and Disability Insurance were placed on the back burner for the time being.^[38]

[\[edit\]](#)Health Insurance Bill of 1883

The first bill that had success was the Health Insurance bill, which was passed in 1883. The program was considered the least important from Bismarck's point of view, and the least politically troublesome. The program was established to provide health care for the largest segment of the German workers. The health service was established on a local basis, with the cost divided between employers and the employed. The employers contributed 1/3rd, while the workers contributed 2/3rds. The minimum payments for medical treatment and Sick Pay for up to 13 weeks were legally fixed. The individual local health bureaus were administered by a committee elected by the members of each bureau, and this move had the unintended effect of establishing a majority representation for the workers on account of their large financial contribution. This worked to the advantage of the Social Democrats who – through heavy Worker membership – achieved their first small foothold in public administration.^[38]

vii http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Health_care_reform_debate_in_the_United_States Healthcare Reform Debate in the United States on wikipedia.org

viii (1999, Cincinnati Resolution, 9995; 2007, Fort Worth, Resolution 0724₁. See pronouncements at <http://www.disciples.org/GeneralAssembly/PastGeneralAssemblies/tabid/371/Default.aspx>

ix <http://www.disciples.org/tabid/58/itemid/346/General-Minister-And-President-Calls-For-Disciples.aspx>

x http://www.catholic.org/printer_friendly.php?id=34287&ion=Cathcom Bishop R. Walker Nickless on Health Care Reform