

HEALTH OF A NATION
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23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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| Two Sundays ago my sermon on death and dying comforted many but disturbed several who were not in a mood to face the grim side of life that particular Sunday. Last Sunday my sermon on love, sex and marriage delighted many but troubled quite a few. That's bound to happen from time to time. After all, we are a congregation of diverse people. We come from diverse childhoods, from diverse backgrounds, with diverse experiences, convictions, scars and wounds. We are not all the same. We don't agree on everything and never will.

| A preacher's job, or so I was told, is to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. If you find yourself getting too much of one and not enough of the other, please let me know. It is not my intention to trouble anyone constantly.

| Anyway, this morning I thought I'd play it safe and address healthcare in America! (Lord, have mercy.)

| So, as one of you put it an email to me this week, *who would Jesus heal?* Apparently, not everybody. Like some Americans, Jesus at one time in his life thought health care was for "me and my people" only. Listen to this.

| *A certain woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Jesus. She came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." [By "children" Jesus meant "the children of God" which is to say the Jews, his people. "Dogs" was a Jewish name for Gentiles!] But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7)*

| Elsewhere the gospels tell us that Jesus grew in knowledge and wisdom. So it should be no surprise that he had to *outgrow* certain social and cultural prejudices and *grow into* the mind of Christ, a universal consciousness of inclusive love and compassion. Evidently that singular encounter with that bodacious foreign woman jolted Jesus out of his dogmatic slumbers, out of his cultural bias against non-Jews and women. Apparently, people need to grow up. Nations need to grow up, too.

| So who will America heal and not heal?

| I don't know enough about the various health care reform bills shuffling around the halls of Congress to comment on any of them. And even if I did, I probably wouldn't. That's not my public responsibility.

| My responsibility as a minister of Word and Sacrament is to lift up the witness of our religious tradition as it bears on this and other social issues. And this morning we don't have to go far because by eerie coincidence each of lessons for the day bear directly or indirectly on the subject of health care—who gets it and who doesn't.

| The gospel lesson from Mark is just one of many in which Jesus is portrayed as a healer. Not surprisingly, healing, healthcare, hospice care, hospitals, medical missions, and medical research have always advanced wherever the church, the body of Christ, which is to say, the community of love, has arisen. Healing and health care are integral parts of

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the Christian tradition in general and the Presbyterian tradition in particular. My own granddaughters were born at Presbyterian Hospital in Albuquerque. And, yes, though related to me, the parents still had to pay something.

| What about those in our nation who can't afford health care, the poor and now many in the middle class? What does our tradition say about that?

| Here's the Old Testament lesson for today: *Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate.* (Proverbs 22)

| Here's the New Testament lesson for today: *If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?* (James 2)

| Here's the Psalm for today: *The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all. For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, so that the righteous might not stretch out their hands to do wrong.* (Psalm 125)

| John Calvin, the 16th century founder of this Presbyterian tradition, often spoke of the "hands" that reach across a nation. His prayer was: *O Lord, strengthen the hand of righteous in the land and restrain the hand of wickedness.* Unlike some Christians and some Christian traditions, Calvin believed it wasn't enough to have "Jesus in our hearts"; we also need good and effective laws.

| Clearly and consistently, the Christian tradition advocates a certain disposition to the poor, the victimized, the marginalized, and the stranger at the gate. The ways and means of caring for such persons vary depending on time and place. But it all begins with a heart inclined toward compassion and justice. And that's one reason we gather week after week in this long house. We gather and pray and sing in order to cultivate a longing in our hearts; to cultivate a heart of compassion; to cultivate a certain way of being and living in the world that simply doesn't come naturally.

| What kind of heart is our nation cultivating?

| Many Americans, like myself, who have been to Canada or England or Ireland or certain European countries are often shocked at the medical treatment we receive as guests. No insurance cards are required. Little or no payment is required and yet the treatment is as good as we get in this country in most cases.

| Is it free? Of course not. It's costly. But it's been paid for by the citizens of those countries who have chipped in to make that kind of hospitality and care possible for everybody.

| T. R. Reid of the *Washington Post* visited many of those nations to find out how they did it. The financial mechanisms, he discovered, differed greatly from country to country. What they had in common was a commitment to get it done.

| I don't know what kind of system is right and good for America. What I do know is that a serious commitment to caring for one and all in a way that doesn't favor one group to the exclusion of others *must come first*. According to David Goldhill, our current health care system offers perverse incentives for too much unnecessary testing and treatment. I recommend Goldhill's essay in this month's issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, "How American Healthcare Killed My Father." He convincingly argues that neither health insurance nor government alone can solve our nation's health care crisis.

| It's a complicated problem but I believe our nation will figure it out. My faith is based on two nearly impossible projects our nation undertook with considerable success.

- | At one time, education in this country was entirely private. Only the rich could afford it. In the 18th century Thomas Jefferson urged free education for all but that idea was soundly rejected. Nevertheless, beginning in 1840 our nation did an amazing thing. It committed itself to providing education for all its children. How? We all chipped in. It was a grand and unprecedented undertaking for a nation. To be sure, public education is far from perfect but we keep working at it because we believe education is a *right*.
- | The other nearly impossible project was environmental legislation to clean up our nation's soil, air and water. In the 1970s a consensus emerged in this country. Citizens demanded clean air, water, and soil *as a right*. No, we didn't know how to get it done. We simply told our elected representatives to get it done. And they did. Not perfectly but far better than it was. We have a right to clean air, soil and water.
- | Can we find a way to care for all the citizens and guests of this nation? I think so. But it begins with a longing to see justice and mercy done in the land of the free and the brave.