

Holy Health Care!

^{NRS} **Proverbs 22:2, 16** The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all. Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss.

^{NRS} **James 2:15-17** If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,¹⁶ 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?¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

^{NRS} **Mark 7:24-30** From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.²⁷ 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."²⁸ But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."²⁹ Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go-- the demon has left your daughter."³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Holy Health Care!

In case you haven't noticed, there is a bitter argument going on in our country about health care. I don't propose to resolve this issue before we sing the final hymn this morning. But, by searching the scriptures, we may find firm ground on which to stand as we continue to look at health care in the coming weeks.

The writer of Proverbs tells us that the rich and the poor have something in common. God is the maker of us all. We are all made in God's image. We are all of equal value before our God. The Apostle Peter figured that out after having a mid-day vision and meeting a Roman officer named Cornelius. Peter declared, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." (Acts 10:34) That being said, we might also understand that God has some increased concern for some people. There's an awful lot of ink spent in the Mosaic Law about how to treat strangers, foreigners, poor people, and various kinds of people who have suffered misfortune in life. The prophets must have grown hoarse from all of the proclamation they did about how Israel was to treat people who were the least powerful.

James gets downright sarcastic about how we sometimes wish the best for folks but fail to move past wishing. When we offer blessings and good wishes to people who are hurting emotionally, physically, or financially, it's an indication of our Christian sensitivity and concern. We go a step farther, when we offer to pray for them. The temptation at that point is to wash our hands of the situation. We've placed our concerns at the foot of the throne - and God will do whatever he thinks best. Meanwhile, we move on. James jerks our chain and pulls us back to face the situation. He says, wishes are fine, but what did you do to make life better. This is why in our worship here, often the prayers of the people will ask God to help us remember to be part of the answer to the prayers we lift up.

Why do you suppose that Jesus performed miracles? The quick and easy answer is that he did it to show his divine power. We may see Jesus' miracles as the evidence and proof that he is divine, that he is God. That may be a less than complete answer, however. We don't claim that Peter was divine because he healed a lame beggar while he was on his way to afternoon prayer at the temple. We don't think that Paul was divine, even though he raised a young man from the dead.(Acts 20:9-12)

If you wanted to impress people with your power – divine power – so that they would recognize you as God in human form, what would you do? Would you stand on a mountaintop before thousands of witnesses and make the sun stand still? Would you publicly bring lightning down to consume a bull and the rock altar upon which it lay? Would you have someone's donkey begin to start talking to her rider? Would you part the waters of the Jordan River and invite people to walk across on dry land? Would you collapse city walls or have people stand unharmed in a blazing furnace? What fantastic feat would you do before crowds of thousands to illustrate your divine power?

This week I pulled out my old King James study Bible. Amongst the study helps in the back was a list of all of Jesus' miracles. There were thirty-five miracles listed. It's an interesting list! In that list of thirty-five miracles, there's a common thread, a pattern that develops. Four of them have to do with feeding people. Twenty-five have to do with healing people. That's over 70% of the miracles in Jesus' ministry! And a lot of times Jesus says, "Don't tell anybody that I healed you." Sometimes the healing takes place in a separate room with only a very few people present. If Jesus was healing people to prove his divinity to everybody by doing powerful things for everybody to witness, he often chose situations that wouldn't be very effective at it.

So perhaps something else was going on. Do you suppose that perhaps he healed people because he loved them? Perhaps compassion was involved when he fed the hungry and healed the sick? It certainly fits with someone who said love your neighbor like you love yourself. Treat other people the way you wish to be treated. Love each other the way I've loved you. Whenever you relieve suffering, you are doing it to me. Perhaps in his healing and feeding miracles Jesus wasn't driven to show God's power, but rather to show God's love.

Not every passage of scripture is patently clear in its meaning or completely comfortable in its message. Today's story about the Syrophenician woman is one of those texts. Jesus went off on vacation. He was tired. He needed to get some peace and quiet, so he left to go on retreat in the region of Tyre. He didn't want anybody to know that he was there. But this woman, this Gentile, found him. She had no right to approach him and talk to him. She was a Gentile - and therefore, to a Jew, she was unclean. She's also a woman, and in Jewish society, women didn't talk with men in public who weren't members of their family. As a Gentile and a woman she violated multiple taboos by approaching Jesus and talking to him. She was incredibly brazen and "in his face" as we would put it. Then, piling insult upon insult, she had the audacity to ask him to do something - for her. She begged him to cure her daughter. A daughter, for pity's sake! The child wasn't even a boy. Jesus turned her down. He said that she wasn't worthy or deserving of his attention. He called her a dog, a foreigner.

With that negative answer, that put down, most people would have heard the door slam in their face, and they would have walked away, hurt, or angry, or both. But this woman stood her ground. Perhaps she felt that she had nothing to lose. The woman persisted and reminded Jesus that even dogs got scraps. Perhaps Jesus was just exhausted. Perhaps his response to the woman had just been an automatic response of the human Jesus. Perhaps the human Jesus suddenly had a divine insight, an epiphany, and suddenly he understood that his mission wasn't restricted to Jews. Whatever the internal process, Jesus doesn't scold the woman, but sends her home to a healed daughter. And so, a pagan child with a demon damaged mind and an offensive pushy mother was healed.

This story stands out because it is the only healing miracle where Jesus seems to even hesitate. Think back on the other healing stories. Never does someone say, "I've made a contribution to the purse that Judas carries and I'd like to talk to you about my bum leg." Jesus doesn't check to see how they came to need healing. There really doesn't seem to be some sort of qualifying process to get healed. Over and over, the stories are pretty simple. There's a need and the need is met.

Following Christ can be very challenging sometimes. It can be difficult. It can be demanding. It can call for atrocious actions that violate what we might see as common sense. Jesus himself was run out of Nazareth by an angry mob when he reminded them that Elijah had healed foreigners.¹ Some things seem to be fairly clear. As followers of Christ, as Christians, we are called to be pretty indiscriminating in determining who gets healed.

When I worked in Libya, one of the air conditioning technicians, a fellow from Louisiana, was near a light bulb when it shattered. Tiny glass fragments got in his eye and the pain was terrible. The medical personnel out there in the middle of the Sahara Desert did all that they could, but the glass and the pain remained. After several days, he was flown out of the desert to Tripoli, where he was put on a British flight to head for home. However, the flight attendants noticed his pain, radioed ahead, and when they landed in London an ambulance was waiting. He was taken to a hospital, went into surgery, and returned to work a few days later. Despite the fact that he wasn't a British citizen or even a resident alien

in Britain, he was treated and cared for. I'm not promoting nationalized health care, but it did illustrate to me the compassion of indiscriminate health care.

Fast forward about twenty-five years. I spent a summer taking a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at a hospital with a trauma unit. That means I spent a lot of time in a well-equipped emergency unit. There were lots of cases of gunshot wounds, car accident victims, heart attacks, and other traumatic cases. There were also a lot of sick folks with no insurance who had gotten so sick that they came to the emergency room.

Fast forward to the present. When I watch the evening news, it seems like all of the ads are for one drug or another. I can't imagine how much money is being spent to encourage me to ask my doctor for drugs. It must be working. The pharmaceutical companies keep advertising and they don't seem to be going bankrupt. I wonder what percentage of their budget goes to advertising?

My point is that we have an incredibly complex health care industry in the United States. We spend more per person on health care than any other developed nation and yet our health status ranks near the bottom, 37th in performance according to the World Health Organization. We have some of the most advanced medicine that money can buy - and that works well if you have the money or have the insurance. But almost one in five do not and therein lays the problem. The hard truth is that we do ration health care in this country. The insured get it - and the uninsured do not, at least not until they become so sick that they require hospitalization.

A lot has been said about waste in our system - frivolous lawsuits, excessive lab tests, high drug prices, medical equipment costs out the roof, fraudulent insurance claims, the high administrative costs imposed by our complex system, and the list goes on and on. Sometimes it seems like every facet of health care, from patient to facility to pharmacy to payer is out to milk the system - with little regard to how we all end up paying with our wallet or our health.

I make no claim of having the solution, but two things I know for sure. First, when Jesus wanted to drive home the point of how we are to love our neighbor, he told a story about a low-life Samaritan caring for an injured man, no questions asked. Jesus revealed his divine nature and showed us the way of life in how he spent so much time on indiscriminate healing. Our Christian calling demands that we care for the sick without reservation. Second, as Americans we can do better than the mess we find ourselves in. We are smarter, more ingenious, more caring, more compassionate, more creative, and more unified than the present situation shows. We can do better, but it will require that we spend less time finding fault and making accusations about each other's motives, and more time with our eye on the goal of better health care for all and making positive proposals about how to reach that goal. Amen.

¹ NRS **Luke 4:25** But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.