

Changing Jesus' Mind about Health Care

A Sermon by Louise Westfall

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

Cleveland Heights, Ohio

6 September 2009

Text: Mark 7:24-30

A man suffered a serious heart attack and had to have emergency surgery. He awakened in the recovery room of a Catholic hospital. During the course of his hospitalization, a nun asked him questions regarding how he was going to pay for these services. When asked if he had health insurance, he replied in a raspy voice, "No health insurance." The sister asked if he had money in the bank. He replied, "No money in the bank." And then, "Maybe you have a relative who could help you?" He shook his head, "I have only a spinster sister, who is a nun." This got the nun a little perturbed and she remarked sharply, "Nuns are not spinsters! Nuns are married to God." The patient responded, "Then send the bill to my brother-in-law."

I really hoped you'd laugh at that because there is precious little to smile about in health care debates today. And while we cannot expect God literally to "pick up the tab" for health care, God does have a stake in who will. As a community committed to the values of God's Kingdom, the church must ask the critical questions and evaluate options for reform through the lens of our faith. Our Judeo-Christian tradition is rooted in concern for the physical health and wholeness of God's people, and just as significantly, in society's provision for those conditions. The Old Testament prophets spoke of a redeemed social order when "no more shall there be. . .an infant who lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime" (Isaiah 65:20a). Fully one-third of the gospel narratives about Jesus' earthly ministry describe him healing all kinds of illness, as an expression of God's intent for the well-being of body and soul. Given this tradition, it's hardly surprising that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has a long and distinguished history of medical mission work both in the United States and throughout the world, building clinics and hospitals, training doctors and medical personnel, caring for the suffering. At the

same time, the Church has sought to shape public policy to improve health care, and in that spirit, has long called for a national medical plan that will ensure access to equitable, affordable, high-quality health coverage for all citizens.

Our morning text is a story of healing, but with a twist that makes it disturbing. Here Jesus first declines to extend health care because of the ethnicity of the person needing it. He has retreated from familiar environs grown hostile from increasing disapproval by the religious leaders. Perhaps weary of argument and challenge (and in need of a sabbatical), Jesus has traveled into Gentile territory. But even there, human need comes calling. Listen for God's Word in the reading from the gospel according to Mark in the seventh chapter, at the 24th verse.

[MARK 7:24-30]

This unsettling tale is unique among the gospels in at least two ways: it's the only time Jesus appears reluctant to heal someone who directly asks for it, and it's the only time Jesus gets beaten in a debate. Probing these details offers some insight on the meaning of this story for us.

Jesus of Nazareth initially understood his mission to be directed toward his fellow Jews. They were the people of the covenant God had established centuries earlier; they were entitled to the blessings that relationship promised. Moreover, at the time of Jesus' ministry, Jews in Palestine were under the thumb of the Roman empire. There was tremendous economic disparity between Jews and Gentiles. Jesus may well have judged the request of this wealthy woman to be unfair - a blatant example of the "haves" greedily seeking more. So maybe the harshness of Jesus' response came from his indignation that this member of the privileged class was seeking a favor from him, a member of the very group who suffered on account of her privilege. (*Sharon Ringe "A Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited: Rereading Mark 7:24-31"*)

Whatever the reason, there is no mistaking the insult intended by referring to the Gentile woman and her daughter as "dogs." Which makes the woman's response even more astonishing. She takes

Jesus' metaphor, and respectfully--and cleverly-- turns it back on him. *Yes, sir, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.* Can you imagine this scene---the woman begging before him, Jesus dismissing her by making it clear she's outside the boundaries of his healing concern, and then her delivering a zinger that struck right between the eyes. There must have been this awful quiet for a few seconds, with everyone wondering what was going to happen next. And what happened next signaled a sea change in Jesus' ministry, a broadening of its scope to cross religious, cultural, and socio-economic stratification. He praised her moxie and pronounced healing upon her daughter; the woman returned home and found her daughter well. What's more, there was no retreat. After that, the table expanded; more children were added; the blessing of God's grace covered them too, until at the end of Jesus' ministry he would commission his followers to go "into all the world," proclaiming a gospel of universal whole life insurance.

What changed Jesus' mind? Was it simple compassion towards a worried mother? Was it the courage of the Syrophenician woman-- her persistence even in the face of rejection? Perhaps it took this outsider to show Jesus the universal implications of his own message: that social conventions must never stand in the way of helping those in need. I think it was all this and something more—a willingness to consider a new way, an openness to receiving the insight of another; in this case, one from an entirely different (and oppositional) perspective. Jesus recognized in her argument the power of God at work to put broken humanity back together. Jesus changed his mind and that decision brought healing to one particular sick child *as well as defining a far more inclusive vision of health care cutting across the categories that divide us.*

Friends, it is the example of Jesus that has prompted the Presbyterian Church -as well as many of other Christian faith communities -to pursue universal health care access as a matter of public policy. The need is undeniable and enormous. In our country a baby is born every fifty-one seconds to a family with no health insurance. Forty-seven million Americans are uninsured—over half of whom are employed and one-quarter of whom are children. I was shocked to learn that in 2006 some 15,000 families

were forced into bankruptcy due to medical expenses. Though we currently spend nearly twice as much per capita on health care than any other country, we rank poorly among industrialized nations with respect to infant mortality, immunizations, preventive care, and overall health. A resolution passed by last year's General Assembly responded to this crisis with a clear call: *As followers of our Great Physician Jesus, we have a moral imperative to work to assure that everyone has full access to health care.*

Much of the current national debate focuses on how to finance such reform sustainably, and with a view toward minimizing the debt burden for future generations. The Presbyterian Church's resolution endorses a privately- provided, publicly-financed single-payer system as the best way to fulfill God's promise of health and wholeness for all God's children, and to do so cost effectively. The federal government already operates such inclusive health delivery programs in Medicare and Medicaid, with efficiency and relatively low overhead. Private insurance companies spend nearly one-third of every premium dollar on marketing and other administrative costs—and in fact, several companies spend less than 60 percent of premium dollars they receive on actual health care services. Look, this isn't "socialized medicine"--- but a way of redirecting what is estimated to be over three hundred billion dollars of bureaucratic waste towards broader coverage for more people. The truly expensive option that would saddle our children with crushing debt would be to do nothing. I'm glad that we at Fairmount will have opportunity to consider and discuss various dimensions of health care reform---from a spectrum of perspectives-- during Sunday morning Faith Matters classes September 13, 20th and 27th, and hope you'll make a point to attend and join the conversation.

It's been said from this pulpit before: the Bible doesn't anoint any political system or human institution as a perfect expression of God's will. I'm not endorsing President Obama's plan or anyone else's. But I do believe our faith calls us to work persistently for health care that is universally accessible, equitable, and affordable. For the sake of a little girl struggling with chronic disease. For the sake of an elderly man who has to decide every month whether to pay rent or purchase prescriptions. For the sake of a working family

faced with a catastrophic illness. For the sake of a city with some of the best health care resources in the world and some of the least healthy citizens. And because this is as spiritual a matter as it is an economic one, for our own soul's sake.

Jesus changed his mind, and in so doing, broke through long-standing barriers that impaired the health of his community. Perhaps the logjam created by the current debate could be broken by seeing as Jesus did the common need that connects us all. In the woman's poignant response, "...but even the dogs get the children's crumbs..." he realized that deeper than all our differences lies our common hunger. But even greater than that immense hunger is a God who nourishes not with crumbs but with the abundant bread of life. At this table we remember our need, but we celebrate the God who supplies abundantly far more than all we ask or imagine. In a way I guess the opening joke got it right: our health care bill has been paid in full by Jesus Christ. Now it's up to us to let the others know.