

Mark 1: 29-34

**No One Left Behind**

March 23, 2014

Rev. Heike Werder

The Congregational Church of Needham

An old rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun.

“Could it be,” asked one student, “when you see an animal in the distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?”

“No,” answered the rabbi.

Another asked, “Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it’s a fig or a peach tree?”

“No, “ answered the rabbi.

“Then when is it?” the pupils demanded.

“It is when you can look on the face of any woman or man and see your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night.”

It seems that the first few months of Jesus’ ministry were quiet a whirlwind according to the gospel of Mark. Chapter one start off with John the Baptist but by verse 9 Jesus comes on the scene, is baptized by John, then goes through basic training in the wilderness to ready himself for ministry. After John has been arrested, he makes the pronouncement that the kingdom of God has arrived, and gets to work. He gathers a team which he has to train extensively, but eventually they catch on. His first public act according to Mark was that he went to the synagogue to teach. People were impressed because he taught with authority. It was not the same old same old, but what he said had some power behind it.

I think that Jesus set out to be a teacher first and foremost, a Rabbi, and I wonder if he simply fell into the healing business. As soon as he ends his first teaching session at the synagogue, he is accosted by a man with an unclean spirit, and he heals him. The people around him were amazed, and word spread that this guy could not only teach and preach, but heal as well.

He then goes to Simon and Andrew’s house, and there he healed Simon’s mother in law. And as soon as the sun sets, the people were bringing him all their ill, infirm and those possessed by

demons that he might heal them. The whole town came out that night, many out of need, some to be part of the spectacle. And scripture said that Jesus healed many – no matter what their affliction, no matter what their social status or gender or age. By verse 39 the course of his ministry had been set – to preach the good news and to heal the people.

What I would like to emphasize this morning is that Jesus healed everyone who needed to be healed. The need was great, and Jesus knew what illness did to people – to their income, their social standing, their spirits. He saw a brother and a sister in everyone. Jesus might have been the first person ever to offer universal health care. And it was free. He did not want to see an insurance card or collect a deductible. I believe he not only did it out of compassion for his fellow human beings, but also out of a sense of justice.

It is not a huge stretch to realize that in order for us or for anyone to be well and find healing, justice is part of the healing process; health justice to be exact. What do I mean by that?

As we know, our faith is about justice. The whole Bible is a story about justice. It's a story about the prophets who cried out for justice on behalf of the oppressed and those suffering under the yoke of slavery. It's a story about Jesus of Nazareth who sought justice for the poor, for the marginalized, for those cast aside by society, for the afflicted and for the sick. It is about loving God with all our heart, and minds, and souls, and it is about loving our neighbor as ourselves.

This is our story and we have to claim it. It's the lens through which we Christians are called to view the world and every aspect of our private and social lives. It is a challenging thing to do because we seem to be more inclined to apply worldly standards to our worldly lives, and keep our religious selves neatly confined to the privacy of our homes and our church life.

For as long as I can remember living in the States, universal health care that is affordable has been a hot button issue that won't go away (and it should not). When I got to Bangor Theological Seminary, I had to have health insurance - which I got through the school. But I did not understand the working of that policy at all. And luckily I never had to use it. I was so used to universal health care in Germany, that this policy driven system made my head spin. It still does a little. So, when it comes to the discussion on universal affordable health care I do not claim to understand all of the arguments. It is a really complicated issue. But on a very basic level we are trying to figure out if all people should have access to the same level of care in every situation, and if the answer is yes, then how are we going to do this.

As Christians we need to go deeper with our questions. I think we need to ask who is in need of justice, and to be more specific, who is in need of health justice? Who has been left out of a system that seems to work for those who can afford health insurance and with that, good quality care? Who would benefit from a system that is just?

There are the some 45 million people who don't have insurance at all that I think would benefit. There are some who think they don't need it, I get that. Of those 45 million the majority is poor and working two or three job, or they are in between jobs. I am sure that the 10 million children amongst them would benefit from having access to affordable health care.

It is estimated that 18,000 (in 2000; in 2012 the number is 26, 000) people die in our nation each year unnecessarily because they lack affordable health coverage, again, many of these coming from low income families. I bed they would have appreciated a just system; or their families. (1)

I am sure that those who had to declare bankruptcy due to insanely high medical bills would appreciate a little justice. Or those who have lost their life savings or their homes due to a catastrophic medical event in their life.

I am sure that many families who are one medical emergency away from financial disaster would appreciate justice in the matter.

I also think that the elderly who have to choose between paying for food or for medication would appreciate a system where they would not have to make these decisions.

I am sure that the family who takes a sick to child to the emergency room would appreciated not to have to worry about how they are going to pay for this visit.

And I am sure that the person with MS or cancer or diabetes would be happy not to have to worry about getting the help and care they need.

I think that as a society we would all benefit from a health care system that includes and cares for every person.

Love it or not, the Affordable Care Act is trying to address many of the inequities. Is the ACA the perfect solution? Probably not. Will it take more work? Good Lord, yes. But I believe it is a good start.

I do believe that healing and the afforded opportunity to do so has a lot to do with justice. And it is a matter of compassion because the issue involves human beings.

Over and over we are given the biblical mandate to care for the sick, care for the downtrodden, care for the poor, for everyone who needs help and healing. Jesus is not the only one who heals.

Galatians 6:2 urges us to "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

In Matthew 10:7, Jesus offers important directions to the disciples (and to us). He says, "As ye go, proclaim the good news, heal the sick, cleanse the lepers...freely give as you have received."

And who, of course, who could forget the story in Luke of the Good Samaritan? There a man leaving Jerusalem was robbed and beaten and no one, not the priest nor the Levite, would stop and help him. Then a Samaritan comes along who not only stops, but takes care of the man, dresses his wounds and pays for his care. And what does Jesus say at the end of this story? He turns to his disciples and says, "Go and do likewise." We are to go and do likewise.

The whole debate on affordable and universal health care has to be taken out of our heads, and put into our hearts. That will change our perspective. It should not just be an issue involving statistics and financial costs and bottom lines. We are talking about the life and death of human beings; human beings who need care but are unable for no fault of their own to access the basic rights and services this country has to offer.

Health justice is an issue of the heart. It is, as Christians, our ethical mandate:

To heal the sick; To bear each other's burden; To love our neighbor as our self.

Jesus saw a brother and sister in everyone he met. He brought compassion and mercy into the world like no one before him.

As the church, we have a responsibility to witness to the incarnational love of God by the way we care for the bodies of those who may not be able to care for themselves in our world, those whom the world casts aside as unimportant or of less value.

We have a call and responsibility to listen to the stories of those who visit the doors of our clinics and crisis programs or who sit in the rooms and halls of our nursing homes, to open our eyes to the ways that our systems and society are leaving some without adequate health care, and to begin to make changes.

When we open our eyes and hearts to hear, we will hear the voice of God calling us to care and to make a strong and compassionate care for justice. Amen.

Source:

1. Alexander Eichler, "Lack Of Health Insurance Killed More Than 26,000 In 2010: Report"; Huffington Post, June 20, 2012