

Healthcare for All!

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To those first followers from the peasant villages of Lower Galilee who asked how to repay his exorcisms and cures, Jesus gave a simple answer... You are healed healers, he said, so take the Kingdom to others.

—John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*

Ancient Witness: Luke 9:1-2

In the United States, the overwhelming number one reason that people file for bankruptcy is medical costs. About two thirds of all bankruptcies are the result of medical costs. The numbers are staggering. Every year over 500,000 people declare bankruptcy because of huge, crushing medical debts. The numbers of uninsured have gone down some since the Affordable Care Act, but even with insurance, families cannot afford the high deductibles and rising out of pocket expenses.

It is estimated that despite the ACA there are about 30 million Americans without health insurance. With rising premiums, few people can afford to buy it on the marketplace, while there are millions more who have *inadequate* coverage.

The United States has the highest per capita healthcare costs in the world, more than any other nation by a very large margin. It's not even close. The average cost per capita cost in the U.S. is *double* that that in the other countries. And since most of the healthcare spending in the U.S. is private, this has become a crisis for U.S. citizens, where the private sector spending is triple that of comparable countries.

Out of over 50 countries, the United States is the *only* highly developed country that doesn't have universal healthcare. The United States has seen its average life expectancy *decline* in six of the past nine years, ranking now 45th among other countries. This, in the United States, the richest and most powerful nation on earth!

And so, in light of this today, what does our faith have to say? For those of us who profess to follow the path of Jesus, what is required of us?

You know, we often skip over the idea that Jesus was a healer. But a large portion of the gospel accounts speak of Jesus healing lots and lots of people: blind people, people with leprosy, those who were paralyzed, those who suffered emotional illness and demonic possession, a woman with a flow of blood, a man with a withered hand, someone with dropsy, the sick—lots and lots of people! Healing was a central part of his ministry. Perhaps we find his method as too far fetched, but we gloss over Jesus the healer.

Furthermore, in our text this morning it says that Jesus his disciples “the power and authority to drive out demons and to cure diseases.” And it says the “he sent them out to heal the sick.”

Providing healthcare for others is an essential—a huge—part of the Jesus way! For those who wish to be disciples of Jesus, there is no way around this.

So what does this mean in our post-Enlightenment, scientific age? The means, of course, have changed in each generation; they have been refined. We now use pharmacology, surgery and various therapeutic methods, but the *goal* is still the same: to help people heal.

And not just some people. Not just those who can pay. But *all* people. As many as you can. As someone once joked to me, Jesus and his followers didn't charge a co-pay!

New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, noted that there were many healers at the time of Jesus. So it was not odd or extraordinary to be a healer. But the *way* that Jesus did it was unique. And his family, for one, did not think that he was doing it the right way. Crossan wrote:

What Jesus should have done, as any Mediterranean family knew, was settle down at his home in Nazareth and establish there a healing cult. He would be its patron, the family would be its brokers, and as his reputation went out along the peasant grapevine, the sick would come as clients to be healed...

So, basically it was seen as a way to make a living and earn money. Crossan continued,

But instead Jesus kept to the road, brought healing to those who needed it, and had, as it were, to start off anew every day. That was no way to run a healing ministry and no way to treat your family, especially within the world of Mediterranean values.

And so what Jesus *did not* do was commodify the healing of others. It was not a money-making enterprise. No wonder his family was upset with him; they didn't get a cut. They would not benefit, as would have been the norm.

As they traveled, Jesus and his followers lived very simply. Their only possessions were what they could carry. And they accepted food, shelter and hospitality from those they helped. But, as Professor Crossan writes,

To those first followers from the peasant villages in lower Galilee who asked how to repay his exorcisms and cures, Jesus gave a simple answer... You are healed healers, he said, so take the Kingdom to others.

The Kingdom of God is not based simply on free enterprise and the market economy. There are some things that need to be done without the profit motive. Among these, it seems to me, schools, clean water, prisons and hospitals and healthcare. When it comes to essential needs and vulnerabilities of people.

Early on, health insurance in this country was all non-profit, but that started to change drastically with the HMO Act in 1973. With this change, the major goal became not curing people but higher profits, sometimes by denying claims, rejecting treatment or restricting coverage to certain groups. Meanwhile, executives and shareholders extract a huge share of the healthcare money. It is not the only reason why we pay the most and have a lower level of care compared with other countries, but it is one of the main reasons.

It seems to me that there should not be incentive for competition in healthcare. Communities should have all the healthcare that the people need, but should not duplicate or triplicate services so each can compete. The emphasis becomes the money-making services while less lucrative needs go unmet and poorer patients go unserved.

And whether a system is for-profit or not, in this modern age we should not begrudge physicians, nurses, therapists, technicians and administrators good, even very good, wages that reflect their dedication and skill. However, multimillion dollar salaries for executives in the service of helping the sick is morally obscene. And the layer of the middle-man health insurance industry is unnecessary and exorbitant.

Personally, I have believed for at least 30 years that our nation should have a nationalized health insurance program, similar to Canada or the United Kingdom. Over 15 years ago I remember preaching about this and was part of a national group called Single Payer Action. My father was also active in this group in Kentucky. The hope for a single payer system, like Medicare for all people, seemed faint at the time. And I was bitterly disappointed when the newly elected President Obama took it off the table before negotiations for healthcare revisions even began.

But since those days, premiums and costs have continued to skyrocket while deductibles and out of pocket expenses have soared. And now, many more politicians—Senators and Representatives—have gotten on board. Recent polls have shown that a solid majority of Americans favor expanding Medicare and developing a single-payer system.

A few years ago, a study conducted by Charles Blahous for the very conservative Mercatus Center, funded by the Koch brothers, concluded that a Medicare for All program would cost \$32 trillion dollars over the next 10 years. A startling price tag, for sure. But the *same study* also concluded that in terms of total spending—federal, state and private—the Sanders Medicare for All plan would *save \$2.1 trillion!* It would be \$2.1 trillion less than projections of spending under our current system.

The reasons that a Medicare for All plan costs less are that there would be massive administrative cost reductions by cutting out the health insurance middlemen. Plus there would be better controls because of the strength of government bargaining power on costs of drugs and care. A Medicare for All essentially shifts payment for healthcare from premiums, deductibles and co-pays to taxes. Yes, taxes go up, but the overall amount citizens pay goes down. Businesses and employers would have a level playing field with foreign companies that don't have to provide employer-based insurance, as well.

Oh, by the way, even though the total costs of this plan are less, it provides healthcare coverage to *every single American*. What Jesus-follower can't get on board with that?

No more bills, co-pays and deductibles. No more in-network or out-of-network. No more huge debt and bankruptcies from medical bills. No more people dying every day due to lack of health insurance.

Now, the world has changed dramatically since our spiritual teacher and leader, Jesus, was alive. If you wanted to heal the sick back then, you had to do it yourself, directly. Like the Good

Samaritan, you had to pick up the injured, bandage them and nurse them back to health yourself. Today, we have a social infrastructure. We have networks, resources, specialists. We have a system. And, unlike the time of Jesus, we are an organized, representative democracy.

And so today, if you want to bring healing to the people who need it, the *most effective* way to do that is to work to change the *system* to include millions of people. You want to be a disciple of Jesus today? We work to change the system. You want to bring healing to those who need it? We work to change the system. You want everyone to receive healthcare? We work to change the system. You want to be a Good Samaritan in today's world? We work to change the system.

To bring healing to our neighbor and to bind the wounds and care for all.

Everybody in. Nobody out.

Amen.