

Jesus' Health Care Plan

Luke 8:26-39

William H. Willimon

North Alabama Conference, United Methodist Church, Birmingham, Alabama

Now today's assigned gospel lesson is about somebody who is sick. Nobody likes to be sick -- the pain, the inconvenience, the isolation, the whiff of mortality that comes with every illness. And yet, even sickness has its benefits. You learn when you are a kid in school that the one way, the only way, you can get out of school is to be sick. Nobody expects you to go to school when you are sick.

For instance, the H1N1 Flu scare that we had last winter. A scary thing. And yet, even the bogus H1N1 scare had its advantages. They called me from the office and said, "Where are you? Why aren't you at work?"

And I answered, "When I got up this morning, I had a little snuffle, also a slight cough. I was feeling kind of down about the state of the church. And the President of the United States ordered me to call in sick. The President himself said, 'Don't you let me catch you going to work when you think you've got the flu! They don't want you at work. Stay home!'"

When you are sick, people cut you a lot of slack. All my foibles and shortcomings that people normally hammer me for are never brought up to me when I'm ailing. People don't expect things of sick people that they expect of healthy people.

Well, here is a story about a man who was sick, And then he came to Jesus.

It's tough to be sick. When you are sick, the sickness has a way of just taking over your whole life. All your projects and all your plans, everything is put on hold because you are sick. It is hard to be half sick. Sickness is imperialistic. There is nothing in your life that's more important than getting well when you are sick.

Today we have got a gospel story about a man who is sick. And look at what his illness has done to him: He's got no job. He has no friends. He doesn't even have any clothes. There he is living out among the dead. He is naked, as good as dead.

Sickness makes you feel that way--vulnerable, exposed, naked, sick unto death. This man has been suffering in body and in mind for many years. And Jesus asks him, "What is your name?" This is interesting because generally when you are sick it is so easy to lose your name. You become, in hospital, a number -- case 2422. HIPAA won't allow them to say your name in public. Or you say, "I'm a cancer survivor." Or you answer, "Legion." You don't really have this illness, it has you, it defines you. The illness entombs you, imprisons you, strips you of any name other than "sick."

Then Jesus looks upon this tormented man and has compassion. (Jesus is noted for his compassion for the suffering.) Jesus, Mr. Compassion, reaches out to this horribly suffering sick, naked, imprisoned, good-as-dead man and he heals him.

Of course that doesn't surprise you. You've seen Jesus in action before. Of course Jesus miraculously heals. This is what you expect from a nice, compassionate Savior like Jesus.

And so you now expect Jesus to say to the man, "Look, you have suffered your whole life, poor thing. Here you are with no family, no friends, no job, no clothes out here living with the dead. I want you now to go back home, and I want you to

start living. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. And get some clothes! You have suffered enough in your lifetime. You go home and take it easy. You deserve it, you....”

No, this is Jesus, not Dr. Phil. Jesus says to the man, “You go back home, and you *preach*, you *declare* (same Greek word for what I’m trying to do to you right now!), you *proclaim* what God has done for you.” Wow. A man comes to Jesus to be healed and walks away ordained to preach.

During the recent health care debate, I was upset that it seemed like everybody was debating health care on Fox News. Everybody was talking (or, on Fox News *shouting*) about health care except the church. So I said, “Hey, we follow a compassionate, healing savior; the church ought to get into the health debate.”

Maybe this morning’s scripture is an explanation for why we didn’t get into the debate. If Christians get into anything, we’ve got to get into it with Jesus. This man, suffering in body and in spirit, comes to Jesus for a cure. And Jesus cures him. And the next thing Jesus does is *call him*. He comes to Jesus for therapy, and Jesus gives him an assignment. Now that’s a different way to treat sick people.

I know there are some of you out there who say, “I wish my pastor would visit me. My pastor has not been in our house in 10 years.” Well, I can fix that. Just get real sick. If you get terminally ill — I don’t mean just become one of these bogus “shut-ins,” but really sick — you will get a visit from your pastor. That is the only reason you will get a visit from your pastor because we pastors generally don’t kick into action until people are sick. Sickness has become the most important thing that can happen to you in life. Watch the 6:30 News. All the advertisements during the 6:30 News are for drugs, medicine. That is all we care about.

As a young pastor in my first week at my first church, I was going down the membership roll with the lay leader. We came to this woman’s name. “She doesn’t attend church,” said the lay leader. “She enjoys poor health. Son, you will log a lot of hours with her, let me tell you.”

As bishop I go around to Methodist churches, and when I am in worship in a small Methodist church, they often come to something they call the “prayer requests.” The pastor asks, “Are there any prayer requests?” And then the sick list begins. There never are any prayer requests for anything except for matters related to the physical deterioration of older adults. Now I am an older adult suffering from physical deterioration, so I can say this: Show me in scripture where Jesus appears to give a rip about the physical problems of older adults! In the Lord’s Prayer, where is the sick list? Jesus appears to have a very different definition of prayer.

Oh my goodness! You are in your late 60’s and you appear to be returning to dust. That is a horrible injustice! That is just terrible, unexpected news! Let’s all hold hands and pray for you. And I hear God saying, “Look, I got that out of the way by the second chapter of Genesis. You are dirt, and you are returning to dirt and it’s okay. That is the way I set things up.

Health has become our national obsession, our greatest need and our fondest desire. And I am saying that one of the few virtues of being sick is that sickness gives us a kind moral free pass. Nobody expects sick people to be polite. Nobody expects sick people to be good. Get sick and all moral responsibilities are off. The only thing you have to do when you are sick is focus entirely upon your self. “Don’t worry about anything,” they say softly to us, “Look after yourself. You just get well.”

I did a book on clergy burnout some years ago, and after interviews with clergy who had called it quits, found that a major reason why some pastors quit is because they are forced to spend so much time listening to sick people. Sickness, in our culture, has a way of making self-consumed narcissists of us all. No wonder few people except clergy visit the sick.

About a year ago I had an accident with a chainsaw. I badly cut my hand. Patsy raced me down to the emergency room. When I got there it turns out that in Sylva, North Carolina, a chainsaw accident is just another day at the office. I was grateful for that. I got in there and the nurse said, "We are going to have to clean this thing up. Ever had morphine?"

I responded, "No. I've always wanted some but..." So I got this shot of morphine. She came back a few minutes later and asked how I was, and I said that it still hurts, it still really hurts. "Let me give you another shot of morphine," she said. She came back a little later and asked, "How are you feeling now?" And I replied, in a stupor, "You know, I'm thinking that Dick Chaney may be a great leader after all. I am starting to feel good about the whole Bush Administration." Just then the Doctor entered, and she said to him, "Sorry. I may have overdone it on the morphine. Don't dare give him any more." I saw that afternoon why the government makes it illegal for you to just shoot up anytime you are displeased with life.

Well, any sickness has a way of de-moralizing you. "You are sick? What you need is therapy." But today's gospel suggests that, in Jesus, we got more than a therapist, a doctor. What we got was a Savior: Return home, return home, and you declare what God Almighty has done for you. Jesus makes this formally sick deranged man a disciple.

One can imagine years later, "Mr. Legion, how did you get called into the ministry?" And he said, "Well, I was suffering from mental illness for thirty-five years and then Jesus healed me and he made me a preacher that same day. It wanted to see Paris, but no, I was forced to go back home and preach."

Jesus doesn't just fix us. That is what we want when we get sick; we want to be fixed, we want to be put right – with minimal effort on our part – no life style changes or anything. Jesus doesn't just heal people. He is in the business of calling, assigning, commissioning, and sending people.

I remember being asked by a college student, "Aren't you troubled that the Bible says that Jesus performs miraculous healings? How could a modern person believe in miraculous healing?" I responded, "You know I am not troubled that Jesus heals some people. That's beautiful. I am troubled that he didn't heal more people." And because you are Presbyterian, you probably know lots of scripture. Therefore you know that healing is a decidedly ambiguous phenomenon in the gospels. When anybody starts calling Jesus a healer, he appears to get nervous. "Don't you tell anybody I healed you!" he often commands. Jesus is about more important work even than healing, even than assuaging our pain.

A former church member of mine was unmarried much of her adult life. She met a man at church. Actually, they met at the Arthur Murray Dance Club. They both loved ballroom dancing. They were at midlife. Got married. We said it was "a marriage made in heaven and on the dance floor." One year into their marriage she was struck down by a rare, debilitating nerve disorder. Within one month she moved from this vivacious, lively person to someone who was totally confined to bed, unable to

walk or even to move her legs. In my pastoral care for her in the days afterwards, it seemed to me one of the saddest tragedies I had witnessed.

One day she said to me, “You know I’ve been praying this morning, and I thought about what am I doing for God and what am I doing for the church. And preacher, I want you to help me think about what job I could have at the church. Give me something to do for the church. God expects it of me.” And I looked at her lying there in that bed paralyzed, and I thought, “You are fortunate just to be here. What on earth could you do? You are paralyzed!” But I asked her, “Have you thought about what you would like to do for the church?”

She said, “Well, you know we are a small church, and we have only a part-time secretary. I can’t do much, but I can punch numbers in that telephone. How about you giving me any phone calls that I could make for you? Just give me a list of people to call related to meetings and people to check up on. I could do that.” A couple of times of week I would go by and give her a list of people to call about meetings or to check up on. She was amazing. I wouldn’t have thought it up on my own.

One evening one of the Trustees said to me, “I want to ask you what kind of preacher, what kind of low, conniving preacher, would ask a man like me – who has a very demanding job, 10 hours a day, to come home dead tired, pick up the phone and have a paralyzed woman ask, ‘Hi! You’re going to be at the Trustees Meeting tonight. Right? We are counting on you, and you know it is important, some very important business.’ Preacher, that is low. That is so wrong.”

Jesus does that sort of thing all the time.

I have a number of churches that are doing Celebrate Recovery. I think Rick Warren has this big program – Celebrate Recovery. Fine. Wonderful ministry for a church. But let’s not wait for them to get cured of their addiction, their illness, before we ask them to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Jesus didn’t heal all that many people. And many of the sick people with whom we work are going to be just as messed up when we leave as when we arrived. Jesus was about things even more important than healing.

Many times I’ve asked a pastor and congregation, “What are you doing out here? I can’t tell that anything is going on.” A predominate response to my question is, “We are healing. This congregation has been divided, in crisis. Now we are healing.”

Please don’t wait for Jesus to heal you before you obey him!

I have a friend from college who came back from Vietnam with a bad back injury. He is never away from pain. He even got addicted to drugs and alcohol because of the pain. Some years ago he told me, “Before I get out of bed every morning, I pray to Jesus, ‘Please take away some of the pain. I think I can serve you better. Just take away some of the pain.’” I saw him just a few months back and he looked better. He looked physically better and I said, “Hey, have the doctors found out what was wrong with your back?” He said, “No, no they are just as clueless as ever. You know, since you are in the business, you might be interested in this: every morning I would pray to Jesus, ‘Please Lord, just take away a little of the pain.’ I was praying the prayer that I pray every morning. It was as if for the first time God spoke to me and gave me an answer. You know what he said? ‘Where in the Bible does it say I’ve got some objection to people being in pain? Hey, I love to put people in pain they wouldn’t be in until they met me.’”

Wow! That’s not a Methodist Jesus; that’s some kind of biblical Jesus. Jesus

loves us enough not to let our pain keep us from being responsible to him.

Hear the good news: Jesus doesn't wait till you get your life together to commandeer your life. He is not going to wait until you are delivered of your aches and pains and your debilitating illness and even your craziness before he calls you to be a disciple. Jesus is much more into assignment and commissioning than he is in to healing. "Go home! Tell the folks back home how much God has done for you."

And sometimes the greatest thing that God does for us is not to heal us but to call us. God preserve the church from presenting Jesus as the great cosmic therapist, the solution to all your problems, aches, and pains. From what I have seen as a pastor, Jesus complicates people's lives in ways they didn't have before they met Jesus.

When I was a campus minister at Duke, a favorite student of mine was struck down with a brain tumor. I went over to Duke Hospital the night before his brain surgery. There were his parents and his young wife. (They had been married only a year.) They all stood around his bedside, trying to be cheerful, but, like me, deeply fearful.

Eventually the neurosurgeon came by. He explained what he planned to do the next morning. "We'll slice open your brain here and open this up, and we'll work here and then we'll send it to pathology." When he finished describing the gruesome surgery, he asked if there were any questions. We had none. The neurosurgeon then said, "Look before I leave would you like to have prayer?"

And we said, "Sure. In fact you have two Methodist preachers right here."

The surgeon said he would lead the prayer. He asked that we all join hands around the bedside. Then he led one of the most power prayers I had ever heard in the hospital.

"First I am going to pray for Clark, as we go into the surgery, that God's presence be with us. Then I am going to pray for me, that God will use my skills tomorrow, and then I will pray for you."

When he finished there was not a dry eye around the bedside. It was powerful!

"Well" he said, "I've got to go."

I shot out of the door and went down the hall, calling after him. I told him I was a chaplain here, and I said, "Wow, that was one of the most wonderful power prayers that I've ever heard. Do you offer that to everyone? I just think that was wonderful."

"Do you?" he asked. "I just don't know."

"Well, I know what you mean. This is a secular university with government regulations and everything. And you don't want to offend anyone," I said.

"That's not what I meant," he said. "You are a preacher. You know what it is like. You get into these situations in life, you invite Jesus in, you turn it over to the Lord. You just never know what Jesus is going to ask you to do. Do you?"

Note

This sermon was preached at Montreat, North Carolina, on June 20, 2010.