

Some things are optional for Christians. In Maine, where I have spent the last two months thanks to the generosity of the people of this church, almost every little church sponsors “bean suppahs.” Bean suppahs are optional for Christians.

Some things are debatable for Christians. Whether one baptizes by immersion or by sprinkling and at what age the sacrament is administered has been a subject of endless discussion over the centuries. Christians disagree with each other about such things.

And still other things are beyond our ability to know as Christians. How can there be such suffering in a world created by a God of love and mercy? In the end all of our answers fail to satisfy our minds or our hearts. The question of suffering is the great unsettling mystery of our faith. Some things we just cannot know.

But there is at least one issue about which Christians do not have an option. It is not debatable and it is well within our ability to understand. Christians care about health—their own and that of others. It is axiomatic. In order to be a Christian you have to care about your own physical, mental and spiritual health and that of other people. It is not a thing indifferent.

While the Bible may not specify specific delivery plans for health care, it is unambiguous in its declaration that the well being of others is the responsibility of both the individual and the community. Individuals are judged by the measure of their compassion towards others. Nations are judged on the basis of how well they care for the least and lowest of their people. No small percentage of the scriptures deal with this question of wellbeing.

In today’s Gospel we have two healing stories, each making a particular point about healthcare. In the first the principle is established that no artificial boundaries of race, creed or nationality can be used to justify the withholding of healing.

A Syrophonecian woman, a Gentile, comes to Jesus seeking healing for her daughter. At first Jesus refuses her, appearing to favor the rationing of healthcare. He tells her that he has come first to serve the children of Israel and not the dogs of Canaan. But the woman’s faithful response and her fierce advocacy for her sick daughter melt his heart. His reluctance is overcome and the principle is established that, God’s will is for the healing of all persons who are in need regardless of human distinctions and categories. God’s plan is for universal healthcare.

The second story is about a man unable to hear or speak clearly. Jesus unstops his ears and loosens his tongue, declaring “Ephphatha,” or “Be opened.” While the particulars deal with a man who is deaf, a larger message is also being sent in this story. It is a clarion call to all followers of Jesus to hear and speak the word of God. We cannot close ourselves to the call of God to honor the sacred worth of all persons. We cannot clothe ourselves in indifference to others, so long as we have what we need for ourselves. In the words of the old Spiritual, we have to “hear the word of the Lord.” And once we have heard it, we need to speak it “plainly.”

It is no accident that our Gospels are filled with stories of healing. Healing is a visible sign of the transforming presence of God in the midst of contemporary reality. Healing is testimony to the in-breaking of God’s agenda in our lives.

As United Methodists we have long understood the link between health and our faith. Some of you may not know that John Wesley, our founder, wrote a book entitled *Primitive Physick: Or, an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*. He was greatly concerned for the spiritual and physical health of the poor and called for the prevention of disease through healthy living. The book recommended time-honored, inexpensive methods of cure and was a standard medical text in England for more than a hundred years. Wesley was way

ahead of his time in terms of his approach, but his compassion followed in the footsteps of Jesus.

It is a theme that has been picked up by modern United Methodists. There are hospitals all over the world that our denomination has founded, including some of the leading institutions in our own area. Further, there were literally dozens of resolutions approved by our General Conference last year that deal with health issues and health care. We get the connection between faith and health.

Yet, the sad truth is that what we see as foundational to the point of being beyond debate is still not acknowledged by many around us. There are still persons who find it acceptable, if regrettable, that nearly 50 million of their fellow citizens are uninsured and many more are underinsured. They may consider it unfortunate that nearly a quarter million Americans have died as a result of inadequate access to health care since the Clinton healthcare initiatives of the early nineties were defeated. Unfortunate, yes, but not sufficiently disturbing to make the necessary changes. What we take to be a moral imperative is seen by some as a luxury we cannot afford.

Sisters and Brothers, it is legitimate to debate the merits of various proposals. It is entirely appropriate to carefully consider the implications of any specific plan. Law makers are duty bound to reflect wisely and

carefully on the implications of any new approach. But for Christians the standard by which every proposal must be judged is how that plan will extend affordable and sustainable healthcare to all persons. It is not morally acceptable that there should be persons in the wealthiest nation in the world who are denied healthcare because they lack the resources to obtain it.

Sojourners, a religious community advocating for social justice, and PICO, a network of faith communities engaged in community organizing, have published a guide for Christians concerned about the healthcare debate. In it they claim that churches have an important role to play in the conversation. They call for faith communities to:

- **Lift up a moral standard**—They must remind elected officials that health care is not just about dollars and cents, but “is a profound moral issue of life and death.”
- **Be a force for reason:** “Every debate over health care reform over the past quarter century has been driven by the ‘fear factor.’ Those with health coverage are pitted against those without. The debate is presented as a choice between the status quo and a dysfunctional government system that denies needed treatment.” Churches can help to refute these fear tactics by making sure that people are not

scared by interest groups into believing lies and misrepresentations. Church people need to be well informed communicators.

- **Be a voice for the vulnerable:** There are thousands of lobbyists who descend upon Capitol Hill every day to represent the concerns of corporate America. Churches need to marshal their power to speak for the voiceless and the marginalized. While Christians may not have the financial resources of the large corporations, they can deliver votes.

The guide then goes on to cite five hallmarks of a values-based, common sense approach to healthcare reform. Such an approach, the document claims, should stress:

- **Affordability:** Health care must be affordable for everyone.
- **Coverage:** Health care must cover all Americans
- **Stewardship:** The cost of health care reform must be broadly shared and placed on a sustainable foundation.
- **Protecting the poor:** Lower-income children and families must be protected by strengthening Medicaid and protecting preventative and diagnostic benefits that keep children healthy.
- **Religious liberty:** The values of beliefs of health care providers must be honored.

Now, I am aware that there is much room for debate about how we should reform our system. Not every Christian will agree with me about every point I am making. What is non-negotiable, however, is that we, as Christians, are not indifferent to the problem. We care about the health and wellbeing of all of God's people. We can differ about how we should go about our task, but we cannot be divided over the fundamental premise that God cares deeply for each person and we are called to do the same. The present inequities and gaps in care simply cannot be allowed to continue. We Christians must lift our voices compassionately, vigorously and persuasively. We cannot pretend we do not hear the voice of Jesus on this issue. Nor can we keep silent in this critical time.

Ephphatha! Be opened!

Amen.