

# “Health Care Reform – the Jesus Plan”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – September 6, 2009*

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Isaiah 35:4-10

Mark 7:31-37

For those of you weary from following this summer’s progress in the health care reform arena, I’ll give you the quick update: nothing has happened yet. Despite the deadlines set by the Administration for votes to be take place in the House and Senate, there is still work to be done in agreeing to both the House plan and the Senate plan; both of which are sure to differ from the White House plan.

Like me, your weariness might well be because it is nearly impossible to feel sufficiently informed about health care reform. We all know that something needs to happen, some of us know what a something like “blue-dog democrat” means, and a few of us can imagine the ramifications of a single-payer system or public option program.

But, as we have heard, the health care reform bill – whenever some version comes to the floor of congress – will be over 1000 pages long; meaning that no member of congress voting on the bill will have actually read the bill. When I worked with the Senate’s Committee on Foreign Relations in the 1990’s, every year our funding bill would be over 1000 pages long and I attest that many of those pages went unread.

And so, sometime in the coming months, someone will offer a plan – made up from hundreds of pieces of other plans proposed by hundreds of lobbyists, staffers, consultants and advisors; and we’ll rely on hundreds of journalists, economists and spokespersons to interpret what is and is not in that particular plan.

Needless to say, if you are waiting for me to endorse a particular plan – even if I could understand it – you’re going to be disappointed. That is, of course, except for one plan – the Jesus plan.

Jesus was – among and in combination with many other things – a self-described and renowned healer. He stated plainly that he came not for those who were healthy and whole, but those who are sick and broken. His ministry of healing appeared not to be bound by geography, race, religion, age, gender, class, social status, duration of the illness, or severity of the affliction. The only two times that come to my mind when his healing was less than effective were when he returned to his hometown of Nazareth – where the people thought, “isn’t this just the carpenter’s son?” – and on the cross, when the soldiers asked: “he saved others, why can’t he save himself?”

It is important to remember, of course, that Jesus was not in the health-care business: not only because with Jesus money was never exchange for healing, but also because curing disease was not his sole focus. We have many modern ways of providing cures, but more is involved with being healed. Imagine that a woman, who was seemingly in good health, has a biopsy which reveals cancer. The doctor says she has a disease, but the patient's mental reaction to having cancer means she has not only a disease, but not an illness. The illness is her mind's reaction to her disease. The field of medicine concentrates on curing the disease. But it is another task to bring healing for the illness – the task of family and friends and pastoral caregivers. While the disease needs and may get a cure, the illness will still require healing.<sup>1</sup>

The first thing that we were told in today's reading was that Jesus went out of his way to encounter this deaf and mute man. We are told that the healing takes place in a predominantly gentile territory called Decapolis; which is on the way back from the healing just completed in Tyre, but certainly not the most direct route. Jesus and his disciples seem either to be wandering purposefully, or wandering aimlessly, but it seems clear that this healing plan of Jesus involves more people than just those who might show up on his doorstep.

And still, like some other notable healing stories in the gospels, this encounter between Jesus and the deaf-mute would not have happened without help from some friends. Like the crippled man who was brought to Jesus by friends who lowered him through the roof, this man is brought to Jesus by others who cared enough to even beg Jesus to apply the laying on of hands. In both cases, it is the faithful actions of others which bring about the possibility of healing. Why? Because the Jesus plan has more to offer than just words of comfort; more than the limits of scientific knowledge; there is a chance for wholeness to spring forth from brokenness.

Jesus then took the man to a private place and applied what might appear to us an unconventional healing method. Complete with a magic word, *ephaphtha*, Jesus in some other context might seem to resemble either a sorcerer or a swindler. Obviously, though, this was not for show because there were no witnesses present; and it was not for notoriety, because Jesus pleaded with them not to tell anyone what had happened.

It was a healing – not unlike many other healings attributed to Jesus – a reforming and transforming of the body, spirit and community. Jesus sees an individual who is broken, who has no voice, who presumably lacks self-confidence and a sense of fulfillment and value to the community. To that individual, he gives not only a cure for

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<sup>1</sup> Myron Madden in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Sept. 2003

the disease, but a renewal of place, person and purpose. And to all the people who are present – if not for the actual healing then at least to see its effects – Jesus gives an opportunity to bear witness; to testify that healing can take place, that obstacles can be overcome.

One individual is healed, and one small community so amazed that they can't keep the good news to themselves. And in the gospels, we see Jesus healing a dozen or more times in almost as many different places. Imagine how many people became witnesses. But, when you compare those figures to the ones that are being discussed in our national health care debate, it all-too-quickly pales in comparison: millions of undernourished children, tens of millions of uninsured families, billions being spent on expensive prescription medicine and pricy emergency room visits. What impact do a few healings make when compared to such an enormous health-care system that is so severely fractured?

To counter that frustration, let us remember the content of the Jesus plan. Healing is to be taken to all places, even the out of the way places. If we choose to participate in the plan, those in need of healing will likely not be coming and finding us. The healing will, however, rely on a network of others. Maybe that means neighbors, or family members, or golf buddies, or the members of a parish here at church. But, healing according to the Jesus plan does not happen alone: it requires the faith of the others when illness strikes one. Sometimes, those helpers need to beg for healing – maybe by appealing to God, maybe by convincing someone that the illness really exist, or maybe by pleading to the doctors to take another look.

What makes for a good neighbor – or family member or golfing buddy or friend? Jesus answers this question in a parable, telling us that the good neighbor is the one who is not afraid to go out of their way, or to be inconvenienced, or to get their hands dirty, or to invest their own resources for the health of somebody else. The Samaritan, the least likely neighbor traveling down the Jericho road, devoted his time for healing, and willingly invested in the health of even a stranger.

The Jesus plan does not lead to silent resignation. We're told that the more Jesus ordered them to stay quiet, the more zealous was their proclamation. What they witnessed was amazing and the healer who made it happen had incredible powers. Naturally, they knew others who also were hurting, who needed hope, who longed to be amazed, and so they could not keep quiet. Too many people were bruised and battered to withhold this potent medication.

Dr. Martin Luther King, in a sermon he once preached, said this: “We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside...but one day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. We are called to be the Good Samaritan, but after you lift so many people out of the ditch, you start to ask, maybe the whole road to Jericho needs to be repaved.”<sup>2</sup>

Maybe it is time for the twelve-lane super-highway – which we know as our health-care system – to be repaved. But, no matter what legislation is or is not adopted, I believe there are ways that we can better implement the Jesus plan. For we know that there are folks in nursing homes who are disease-free and yet suffer from the illness of loneliness. We know that the weak economy has led more people to seek out food assistance: how are we witnessing to the fact that under the Jesus plan, two loaves and five fish when blessed are shared is more than enough?

What is this Jesus plan; how can we describe it? It is as if God himself came to earth to lead and teach us and then sacrificed his own life so that we might regain ours. It is as like when we come to the Lord’s Table in remembrance of what God has done for us, we eat a small piece of bread, infused with a few drops of juice, and it becomes for us a feast for the soul, causing us to sing praises of thanksgiving and making us long for justice. It is as if hundreds of millions of people all around the world have on this day heard the story of this healer named Jesus and have become inspired to participate in some way in the healing of a person’s body and mind and soul. Not a dozen or so healings with a handful of witnesses each, but followers of Christ in every corner of the world who want the deaf to hear and the mute to speak and want to cure loneliness and eliminate malnutrition.

As we eat and drink today, may we also become witnesses to the amazing works of God made known to us through Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord. AMEN.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, jr., “A Time to Break the Silence” April 4, 1967