

Sunday, May 13, 2007

John 5:1-9

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’ The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Sermon: Some things are hard to Measure

A few weeks ago I received a packet with a note attached:

Dear Pastor, As a resident of this region and a concerned citizen, I urge you to consider the enclosed information and pass it along to your members.

In the envelope was a handout from the Interfaith Fellowship for Universal Health Care with the title, “Health Care is a Human Right, Health Care is a Divine Right.” It opens with this statement:

We raise our voices in support of a health care system that leaves no one out. God has created all of us and calls on us to care for each other. Caring for each other expresses our love for God. God invites us to bring justice to all people. God’s consistent concern for healing challenges us to pursue affordable and quality health care for all people.

Given the Gospel lesson this morning which tells the story of Jesus healing a man in Jerusalem who had been ill for 38 years - and given the decision by our confirmation class to raise the issue of health care for children with the congregation, I saved this flyer as a starting point for today’s sermon.

Do you agree that health care is a human right, a divine right?

We discussed this in our confirmation class. There are things in our society that we think should be available equally without regard to your ability to pay. We believe that police protection and justice in a court of law, for example, should be equally available to all and, in fact, should be completely blind to an individual’s status, wealth, color, race, religion, or any other factor that would tip the scales of justice to an unfair advantage for one person over another.

Automobiles, on the other hand, are viewed completely as a consumer commodity – there is no mandate with commodities for equal access. We don’t think anyone has a right to an automobile and it would not surprise us or violate our sense of fairness in the least if we see the stock broker driving a Jaguar and the administrative assistant driving a Suzuki.

Somewhere between equal protection under the law and unequal access to consumer commodities lies an area like education. Most of us don't mind if people with money can buy access to private schools, but we also want to have a system of public education that affords equal opportunity to all children regardless of their family income or status. There is a baseline quality of public education that is a foundation and underpinning of a free and democratic society. Most of us would consider that every child has a right to an education and that while wealth may secure some advantages in this, poverty should not be an obstacle.

We are all familiar with that famous phrase in the Declaration of Independence, drafted in part by a Deacon of this Church, the Honorable Roger Sherman:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

In that light, whether you consider health care a right or a commodity will make a big difference in how you see the role of government in securing health care for all. And how you measure the value of that right in the balancing act of providing one right at the expense of another will also be important in terms of what political solutions are possible and acceptable.

We're all in the middle of a balancing act right now between the right to privacy and the desire for safety. What is your privacy worth to you? Do you want a federal agency to know that your child is having difficulty sleeping at night because they think it will promote security to database your Google searches and they can see that at 2:00 AM on the morning of April 20, 2007 you were at your computer searching on the phrase "getting the baby to sleep through the night?" I don't want them to see that I was looking up "home remedies for a hangover" some Sunday morning!

Of all the rights we have, probably the only one that is easy to measure is property – and even that has its problems. When the City of New London was trying to take those houses by eminent domain for economic development, how could you calculate the value of a place someone has called home for half a century? You could look at market value, but what table would you consult to find the price of uprooting a widow from the comfort of her memories and surroundings.

When you get to health care it's even more difficult. What is your health worth to you? Yet, sadly, I know from personal experience that there is an element of the health care industry that is devoted to setting a price on your life, your health, and each day they calculate you will spend on this earth.

Some of you know that our family is in the middle of a lawsuit resulting from a medical mistake that left my mother-in-law totally disabled and requiring round-the-clock care in a nursing home. There is no question that there was a medical mistake. There is only dispute about who was responsible and there have been several years now of effort to discover any little details in her life that would allow those who will have to eventually have to compensate her for this mistake to nickel and dime down the value of her life because:

- she was already in her 70s
- she had arthritis
- she had back surgery
- she didn't have a college education
- she didn't have much income
- she had a pacemaker
- and on and on.

This is one face of the health care system I hope you never have to see.

I don't know how, in the end, they will put all this into some kind of spread sheet and come out with a number, but I'm sure this kind of thing goes on every day and eventually they'll assign some monetary value, some property value essentially, to her pain and suffering and loss of fullness of life. But some things are just hard to measure.

How do you factor the love of parent for child and child for parent into a cost benefit analysis of providing quality health care. How do you measure the value, to society, of someone who is working the night shift at the nursing home doing the very difficult work of caring for the frail elderly? Out of sight, out of mind. What kind of car should they be able to afford to drive?

I didn't provide any answers, did I. I hope I helped us ask the right questions. And I invite you to coffee hour to hear our speaker, Mary Jane Lundgren, speak on the topic of health care for all.

I would like to end this sermon with a simple affirmation of the immeasurable value of love. This affirmation is contained in a poem written by a hospital chaplain for the parents of a child who doesn't measure up by many of the standards we often use. But the poem affirms the one thing that makes his life a full life, a life worth living, a human life:

My name is Mark
When you look at me,
You will measure me
By my awareness
By my response
By my age
By my development
And you will shake your head

And find me lacking.
But, for me, you are measuring
With the wrong cup.
For I have one possession
Which brings and overflows
Beyond all others

I have my parents love.

So measure me, if you must...
But measure me, too, with my cup
And you will find me
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