

Sermon on Mark 5:21-43
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 28, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

This past week has been a big one for the health care issue in America. The debate about health care legislation before the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives is perhaps the number one topic of conversation on talk radio and in the press these days, as our nation considers making changes that will help make health care affordable and accessible to millions of women, men, and children not covered today by medical insurance. Last week President Obama answered questions about health care in a public forum on national television. Then Michael Jackson died suddenly of a massive heart attack last Thursday; an autopsy is being performed to find out the cause, and whether prescription drugs had anything to do with the “King of Pop’s” untimely death. At the same time, Farah Fawcett of “Charlie’s Angels” fame died after a long fight with cancer (the story of her struggle was shown recently in a tv documentary), and long-time television announcer and “Tonight Show” sidekick Ed McMahon also died of natural causes. All this, added to our own concerns about personal health, the well-being of friends and family – with eleven persons named in our prayer requests today - and health care and healing obviously have great priority for each one of us. So there is no question that a story about Jesus healing a young girl and a woman in the gospel lesson is relevant today! And to observe the rite of healing with the laying on of hands and anointing with oil in worship today not only reminds us of the role of faith in the issue of health care, but it is also timely!

First, the gospel story. It is certainly one more example of the power of Jesus to heal human beings who are suffering from common afflictions – even to the point of death. Mark is absolutely clear in his gospel that one of the signs that Jesus was the Messiah (or the Son of God) was his power to heal and cast out evil spirits. In this story we hear how a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years (who had spent and endured much under many physicians, hoping for a cure – none of whom could help her – so where have we heard that before?) – was healed just by touching Jesus’ cloak. And Jesus felt the power go out from him, and asked who had touched him, so we know there was a healing power that he possessed, which God had given him. In the second part of the passage we read how Jesus entered the room of a little girl who had been very sick, who in fact had just died (with weeping relatives and friends gathered outside the house), took her by the hand and told her to “get up”. And she got up and walked, to the amazement of everyone in the house!

So we get that Jesus had special powers for healing. There’s another power that is also clear from the gospel – the power of faith. The woman who had

suffered so long, and had almost run out of hope, dared to approach Jesus and touch him because of faith. She believed that if she just touched his clothes, she would be healed. And she was – immediately. Jairus, the leader of a synagogue, believed Jesus could save his daughter when no one else could, and knelt at Jesus’ feet to beg him to come and lay hands on her so that she would live. Now, was this faith based on desperation, hope in Jesus as a last resort? Perhaps, but where is the dividing line between hope and wishful thinking? Doesn’t faith in God (whom we cannot see) begin when we realize that everything and everyone we have depended on in this earth fails us or cannot save us? Any parent who has a sick child, and any person who has suffered from a long, incurable disease can relate to Jairus or the woman in this story. Faith is all they had left, because the health care system of their day could not help them. So they believed in Jesus as their last hope for a cure, because they had seen the power God had given Jesus to heal.

One other point in the story: Jesus did not make judgments about who “deserved” healing. The woman who had bled for twelve years would have been considered ritually unclean in his society, an outcast; no respectable man should have had anything to do with her. So the woman showed courage in touching Jesus. But he did not reprimand her. Instead he said, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” He treated her with the same respect and mercy that he showed to the daughter of Jairus, a respected leader of the local synagogue. What does this teach us today about universal health care? Is it right to deny treatment to anyone – just because they have don’t have health insurance coverage, live in poverty, or have a pre-existing condition?

Today there are many things we could say about health and healing, and the relation of faith, as we read this gospel passage. We could get stuck on whether the power Jesus had when he walked in Galilee is available to us today in the church, through faith. But I think there’s another way to go here, based on compassion and mercy Jesus showed for everyone, regardless of rank or station in life, which was in opposition to the common way of thinking both in his day and in our day. For we continue in our world to make judgments, and distribute health care to some and not to others (not based on need, but on privilege) – when Jesus came to heal and save the whole world!

It is clear from the scriptures that one of the roles of the apostles in the early church was to imitate Jesus in the preaching of the good news of God, and to show God’s power with works of healing. We read many examples of this in the Book of Acts. The power of healing that God gave Jesus and his disciples crossed all social boundaries; and human faith surely had a part in it. But we also see the entire church taking on the role of compassion and mercy far beyond the mere healing of disease and exorcizing of demons. We see churches in the New Testament reaching out to those suffering from famine, by taking up an offering throughout the Mediterranean world, to help those starving in Jerusalem. The

early church grew in those first centuries because Christians fed the starving, buried the dead, and cared for the sick when famines and plagues decimated the population. People saw the compassion Christians had, and joined the church in droves (because it made sense: your chance of survival went up when you were part of a caring community like the church!). Churches have always been at the front of medical care, starting hospitals in every country where there was a Christian presence, open to everyone, of any faith. Compassion and caring for the sick and suffering has always been at the center of our mission as a Church, and the starting point of our growth, if and when it happens.

So today we remember the role of healing in our Christian faith: that God is the giver of life and the gift of health, the healer when we are sick, and the comforter when we suffer and when we die. God is with us throughout our lives, from birth to death, in sickness and in health. God has called the Church, through the ministry of Jesus Christ, to remember God's power of healing, and to honor our Lord by imitating him with compassion for others, healing for the sick, mercy for the dying and comfort for those in grief.

This is why we in the Church are interested in the issue of health care in our nation and world: for the healing of the nations is at the center of God's mission. If Jesus came to heal and save the world, then we who follow Jesus must share in this compassion and do all that we can to bring healing to others. For there is no biblical mandate for us to "save money" or not to raise taxes – our biblical mandate is to care for the poor, for widows and orphans. We pray for the sick and the dying, not for our bank accounts in Christ's Church! I don't know what national health care legislation is going to look like in the end, or which political party or persons will have the best ideas or plan – frankly, I don't care who gets the credit! The main issue at hand is will the children of God be cared for when they are sick or dying. Will everyone have access to health care, or will it once again depend upon who is sick, or whether you are insured? This is a moral issue, not a political one, and our budget for health care is a moral document, not just a financial one. It's not a matter of money, but of faith. So it's time for us in the Church, you and me and your neighbors, to call or write our national leaders in Congress and our state legislature and governor and speak up for health care access for everyone.

Today we offer the rite of laying on of hands for healing to everyone in worship. This is the way Jesus healed, and anointing with oil was a common healing rite from the ancient world. But this is not only a personal blessing. This rite reminds us that everyone is connected to this issue: health and health care is a concern for each one of us. We all get sick, and we shall all die – but through faith, we shall also all live! So when it comes time, I invite each one of you will come forward to receive this blessing, in the name of Christ, the great healer and reconciler of the world. Amen.