

People Without Healthcare  
John 17:20-26  
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21  
May 9, 2010  
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It's Mothers' Day, and I am thinking about my children. Healthcare is one of my concerns about my children. Every mother worries about her children's health. How I wished *I* could have been the one with the fever when the baby was sick. How I wished I could have been there when my 28-year-old had his tonsils out in Boston a year ago.

These weeks we are talking about people who are "without." Last week, we spoke about people who are without faith. (Many of us have found ourselves without faith at one time or another.) The week before, we talked about how so many people are without life support (without resources)—these are people who are often on the margins of our society. Many of these people have no health insurance.

With the yearlong debate over healthcare reform and the recent new legislation, it seems that healthcare is a topic we cannot avoid. The healthcare reform law voted for in Congress in March by a vote of 219 to 212 has caused great divisiveness. Some of the effects of the new mandate include that Americans will all have to get health insurance. People with pre-existing conditions cannot be denied care, and people's policies cannot be canceled if they get sick. Children can stay on their parents' policies until they are 26.

Both of our children are impacted by the status quo in healthcare. Our son is now between jobs and his health insurance is soon to run out. At the age of 28, he finds himself in a sea of choices—unsure what to do—all the options are expensive for a young person without steady employment. He would have been tempted not to get health insurance at all, because it costs so much, and he is healthy. As his parents, of course, we want him to be covered.

Our daughter has a kidney disease. We changed health plans before she turned 23 so that she could receive care in Boston where she was a volunteer. And then we continued her care on a COBRA while she has been in a second volunteer program in Kansas City. Her insurance costs us over \$600 a month. If we had not continued her on our insurance company through a COBRA, her pre-existing condition would have made it impossible for her to get insurance on her own. The program she volunteers with had a low maximum coverage for hospitalization. We didn't dare have her so poorly insured.

This is our situation, even though Jim and I are both employed. Jim receives benefits from his employer that also cover me. We speak English and can figure out bureaucratic systems, and yet healthcare is still a worry to our family.

We all know people for whom healthcare is a worry. At the last church I served there was a preschool. The church paid for the health insurance for the fulltime preschool director and her family. The preschool teachers, however, were part-time and were not covered. They

felt they could not afford to pay for their own insurance. The director was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a double mastectomy, radiation, and chemotherapy. The teachers watched her go through all this, saying to themselves, "What if that had happened to me? I would not have been covered because I do not have health insurance." The realization hit hard.

We need to think about the people who are without adequate healthcare. This brings up the question of how we view healthcare altogether. Is healthcare a commodity we buy? Or is it a right we guarantee?

Because we are people of faith, we look at issues through the ethics of our religious teachings. I realize that there are many interpretations of the Bible, and that there is not one Christian response to a topic like healthcare reform. I do believe, though, that love of neighbor must be at the heart of a Christian response.

And when we talk about neighbor, we must mean all people in need. The Rev. Linda Hanna Walling outlines 5 challenges in this healthcare debate.

The first is the challenge to have a moral vision. The moral vision must attend to the needs of the most vulnerable. This is a biblical standard—the Bible always stands up for the widow and the orphan. Jesus healed the sick and told stories about not leaving the wounded by the side of the road.

The second challenge is to balance access vs. costs. I believe we must tackle both sides of this challenge. We must give more people access to quality healthcare and yet manage the costs. How to distribute the finite resources equitably becomes a major question.

A third challenge is to involve both the marketplace and the government. I think we will need to foster a partnership of the free-market economy and governmental regulation. We need a creative mix of fair market incentive and government responsibility.

A fourth challenge is to create political bipartisanship. We need our political parties to work together for the common good. We need to develop shared values. Certainly we do not need name-calling and stand-offs. This is a "people" issue, not a "party" issue.

A fifth challenge is to limit self-interest of key players. All people must want healthcare reform for the benefit of all people. If some are only concerned with the fear of losing their own profits, we will not be able to improve the common good.

(<http://faithfulreform.wordpress.com/2010/02/27/why-is-health-care-reform-so-difficult/>)

These challenges make this issue a tough one.

At the bottom of the subject of healthcare is the human fear that we will not live as long as we wish—or that we will live longer than we wish. Death is the one thing all humans have in common: we will die! But how will we die? An early version of the healthcare reform

bill had reference to a conversation between the patient's family and the physician about dying. This conversation became known as a "death panel." And we have seen magazines with provocative headlines such as "The Case for Killing Granny" (*Newsweek*, Sept. 12, 2009). Leaving death panels in the law would have been a good idea, according to an ethicist and theologian, Dr. Margaret McLean, whom I heard speak last week (GTU McCoy Lecture). Death panels would be better labeled "conversations with your doctor." Because these conversations are not included in the final healthcare reform law, insurance providers will not pay them for, and so they likely will not happen. We need to have open discussions about end-of-life questions. Those questions involve the family, the doctor, and often the pastor. Some of the public has twisted the purpose of these so-called "death panels" to mean a way "to promote euthanasia to reduce costs." These better-called "conversations with your doctor" are really more about living well and dying well. Living well and dying well have spiritual dimensions as well as medical and personal choices. Ethicists feel that these are ongoing questions and that we need ongoing reform. We need to value both autonomy and compassion—the individual person's autonomy to control one's own choices and the compassion to treat all people with respect.

Mother's Day makes me think about my children, but also about my mother. My mother is 91. She is doing very well. My mother has an advance directive for healthcare, and my brother and I are listed as her agents, should she not be able to make her own decisions about her care. We have talked about my mother's desire not to have extreme measures taken to preserve life, if life would not be meaningful and enjoyable for her. Many of you have had to make decisions about end-of-life issues for your mothers and fathers or for a spouse.

Our scripture lessons today remind us that we are one another's keepers. The writer of the Gospel of John says, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those" (17:20). We should not only be concerned about *these* whom we know and love. We should also be concerned about *those* who live in poverty, *those* who have no clean water to drink, and *those* who are suffering from diseases for which we have cures. Perhaps we should think of *those* mothers and children around the world where infant mortality rate is 17 times what it is in the United States. I have to question paying for expensive diagnostic procedures for people in developed countries when those in underdeveloped countries are dying from lack of food and water.

In the vision recorded in the Book of Revelation, John of Patmos says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. I think this is intended as a symbolic image, but taken literally, we are talking about cleanliness and the right to life and access to the good life. And John says, "Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

Life is a gift—a precious gift from God—with a little help from our mothers and fathers. Thanks be to God for life, and love, and health!