How Would Jesus Handle Health Care?

One of the vocations for which Jesus is best known is being a healer. The Gospels narrate stories in which he makes the blind to see, the deaf to hear and the lame to walk. He heals some of dreaded diseases and raises others from the dead. Yet, the healing narrative in Mark 5:21-43 strikes me as particularly interesting in the way it is told and for its implications for how we envision health care reform in this country.

In the hands of the author, the two stories of healing that we find in Mark 5:21-43 have become intertwined into one story. The story of Jairus, the synagogue leader, and his very ill daughter brackets the story of an unknown woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years.

Both stories involve females in need of healing. The number 12 is important in both. Jesus’ touch plays a key role in each healing. And the theme of faith is vital to what takes place in each episode. The literary structure and details not only force us to read the stories as one story, but lead us to see one story as having meaning for the other.

Yet, when we read the stories as one, we also come away with the idea that the two individuals that come to Jesus could not be more different. Jairus, whose name we know, is a male. The woman, who remains nameless, is a female. Jairus is a leader in the synagogue, a man of great religious and political stature and
influence. The unnamed woman is an outcast, who has been shunned by her community because of her disease. Jairus can come to Jesus expecting to seek healing for his daughter. The woman is disregarded by the crowd as she approaches Jesus from behind.

Perhaps one of the reasons these two stories are linked together is so that readers can face the reality that in our human existence all of us are vulnerable to sickness and death. Sickness and death are universal, and they have neither respect for people of importance nor sympathy for those who are poor. At some point in life everybody suffers pain and sickness. Therefore, at some point in our lives, we will all seek healing.

The problem, however, is that many who seek healing will never receive the care and treatment they need because they cannot afford health care coverage. In our wealthy and technologically advanced country, millions of people will not receive the health care they need because they cannot pay for such care. Tens of thousands die each year for lack of health care. Thousands of others suffer in pain and sickness because they cannot meet the expense of medical care and treatment.

Politicians have debated this issue for some time now. Currently, there are plans being put forth to reform our health care system and make quality care affordable for all. Yet, there are still those who argue that our health care system should remain as it is, market driven.

They think that the free market is the best solution to our health care problem, for in their minds competition will produce an industry that will be beneficial to all. The discussions have been reduced to political and economic debates that treat those who need health care coverage as mere numbers.

Yet, the issue of providing health care to those who do not have access to such care because of the exorbitant costs is not a political or economic issue; it is a
moral issue that calls us to re-envision how we see life and human dignity.

In a market-driven system of health care, the unnamed woman would have perhaps gone untreated, but Jairus would have had the health care he needed for his daughter. After all, Jairus is a man of means. But the woman has no money left. Jesus, however, saw things differently. Jesus valued all human life as sacred to God, and he extended healing and wholeness to both the woman and Jairus’ daughter.

But in stopping to heal the unnamed woman instead of proceeding straightaway to Jairus’ house uninterrupted, Jesus also rebuked a system that offered preferential treatment for those like Jairus who have power, status and money. He recognized the universality of pain and suffering, and thus he desired to heal both the woman and Jairus’ daughter.

He also knew the prejudices of societies that do not nurture and heal their most vulnerable members, and he stopped to affirm the value of someone who others perceived as an insignificant poor woman.

The test of faithfulness to Jesus is always in how we treat the vulnerable of society. If we are to bear authentic witness to Jesus as the healer, and to God as the giver of life, then we must embrace the value and dignity of all human beings, but especially the vulnerable of our world. In our American society, perhaps there is no greater population that is more vulnerable than those who do not have access to good and affordable health care.

It is time that Christians, and indeed people of all faiths, seriously consider this issue beyond the political battles and number crunching, to see the moral imperative of developing a system that offers to all the basic human right to quality and affordable health care.
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