

How Health Care is Our Moral Issue
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In eight years I've been in ministry, there have been a handful of national issues that have seemed to me to demand a loud, clear, moral voice from the faith community. I felt the need to speak up about the violence and discrimination I saw against the Muslim community following September 11th, 2001. I felt the need to talk about and organize forums in opposition to our going to war in Iraq. I mourned the victims of and the seemingly overwhelming racism revealed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. There are all sorts of moral outrages, threats to the environment, racism, heterosexism, classism, and all sorts of other evils to confront in our society, but these national-level issues took a demanding center stage in their time, commanded my attention, and absorbed my thought for months. Now, the issue before us is health care reform.

And while I feel passionately also about the other issues I've talked about—war and peace, racism, and religious equality, the moral issues around health care reform are personal to me in a way the others are not. So it is difficult to preach about, because I not only care about it deeply and am angry on a sort of societal outrage level, I have personal anger about it that it hard to set aside. And I'm not entirely sure I want to. Striking the balance, though, is hard. It is by far harder to preach about the things that I am passionate and emotional and deeply tied to, than it is about issues I can stand back from and know that my moral clarity is unbiased by my personal desires.

My own feelings stem from two incidents. Many of you have heard these in more detail before, and some of you may have read them on my blog recently, so I'll keep it somewhat brief. In 1993 I fell and broke my back, literally—my first lumbar vertebra. Right here. I feel it today. I feel it every day when I stand up here and preach in front of you. And I was uninsured, and I was working full-time for a healthcare company—Blue Care Network, an affiliated HMO of Blue Cross, Blue Shield. And I lost my job, I lost my apartment, and I spent years paying off my medical debt, even after government assistance. I saw exactly what still remains after the government steps in and pays hospital bills, and you still have doctor's bills, ambulance bills, medications, and other things left to pay for.

The second incident is as I was moving here, and trying to find insurance that would cover me with a major pre-existing condition: a pregnancy. Only one insurance agency had to take me, Blue Cross, Blue Shield (my old nemesis). And they didn't have to take my pre-existing condition of being pregnant, under most situations. It took several people working constantly on this situation for months to find me the loophole under which they had to cover my pregnancy. And thank goodness for them.

So that, in a nutshell, has made me pretty seriously personally frustrated with the insurance system in America. I believe it needs major reform. I believe that the system is terribly broken.

But the case I want to make to you isn't about my personal experience. I have opinions about all these things, but this is not about a public option. This is not about socialism. This is not an argument for abortion services to be covered. This is not about whether or not there are death panels. This is not about economics and what our country can afford. This is not about rationing. This is not an argument about a single-payer system. This is not an argument about

problems in the insurance industry. And I do have strong opinions about all these things, I say again. This is not about Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, or Rush Limbaugh. This is not a sermon about Republicans versus Democrats. This is not a sermon about House bills and Senate bills. This is not a sermon about racism against our president.

This is about a universal moral code. This is about the bottom line of what it means to be religious. This is about morality. What I want you to see is what is moral here. We're talking about this because it's a question of what is morally right. We're talking about moral imperatives.

Now, there are a lot of differences people hold on what is a moral imperative. For example, I found one quote from Michael Hlinka, a CBC business columnist, wherein he says, "I'm not about to knock anyone for getting as much as they can. That's something close to a moral imperative in my book."¹ Perhaps most of us would disagree, and say that the drive to get what you want is *not* a moral imperative. On the other hand, there's President Obama, who said, "We also need to provide Americans who can't afford health insurance more affordable options. That's an economic imperative, but it's also a moral imperative."² Here, I happen to agree. I see affordable health insurance as a moral imperative for our country. Now, Obama actually goes on to explain the reasons it's an economic imperative, but he doesn't really explain why it's a moral imperative. So that's what I'd like to do today.

There are many sources of authority we could choose from, as Unitarian Universalists, to appeal to our moral consciousness. The Golden Rule exists in every religion—that which tells us to treat others with the type of care that we wish to be treated with ourselves. Turning to the Bible, one of the first stories we get is the story of Cain and Abel, wherein Cain asks God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Of course, the reason why this piece of dialogue is such a famous line, the reason why it is repeated so many times is because of course, we are meant to understand that yes, we are our brother's keeper. That is to say, we are told we should respect all people, and care for them like our brothers. Then, in the gospels, with Jesus, we get his teachings. I believe that the meaning of being Christian isn't really about whether or not you believe Jesus was God, or whether or not he died on the cross, but whether you strive to live by his teachings, whether or not you choose to use Jesus and his message as a rubric for life. And Jesus said, of course, telling about the kingdom of God in Matthew 25 (KJV):

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

If you think, well, Jesus just talks about visiting sick people, think about the medical knowledge of the time. Visiting a sick person then was pretty risky—you didn't know that you wouldn't be

¹ Hlinka, Michael. "There must be a direct connection between CEO pay, performance." CBC News. February 5, 2009. http://www.cbc.ca/money/moneytalks/2009/02/michael_hlinka_there_must_be_a.html

² Obama, Barack. "Should Security Guards Wear Bullet-Proof Vests?; President Obama Urges Health Care Changes." CNN. June 11, 2009 <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0906/11/cnr.05.html>.

contaminated and die. Jesus asks people to risk their lives to take care of the sick. That's a whole lot more risky than anything we're being asked today to do to care for the sick. And, of course, many of Jesus' miracles have to do with healing, most famously raising Lazarus up from the dead, but in over twenty other accounts in the New Testament he heals the sick. If you look at all the miracles credited to Jesus, about 70 percent of them are healing, if you count groups of people being healed as one miracle. Now, I'm also counting raising the dead and exorcisms as healing. But this is basically all he does, other than turning water into wine one time and cursing a fig tree. Basically, this is what Jesus does during his life: he wanders around, gives lectures, and performs miracles. And the miracles he performs are almost always healing the sick. And the lectures he gives often talk about how we treat other people.

To be a Christian, you must follow Jesus' teachings. And Jesus taught by his words and his actions, too. We can't perform miracles, but we can do everything we can to heal the sick. And that includes giving them the access to medical care.

But, as I said, in every other religion, there is the Golden Rule. And every religion has stories which tell of the importance of healing the sick. We see in Buddhism, for example, that the entire religion is a response to suffering. Let me say that again: the *entire religion* is a response to suffering. The Buddha became the Buddha in response to the suffering he saw in the world. He was a prince, a man who himself had been protected. He had the Cadillac of health insurance of his day: his father kept anyone sick or dying from coming near his son. And then one day he goes out into the world and sees that not everybody has access to the life he leads, and he is overcome from this experience. And he looks for answers to this, and he comes up with what we know as Buddhism.

I think you can look at the story of these two great teachers, Jesus and Buddha, as a story of two men who understood at the deepest level their moral obligations to others, and that those moral obligations were to alleviate suffering however possible. Jesus does it with miracles. Buddha does it with giving us the wheel of the law. But we have equal moral obligation to the weight these two incredible men felt on their shoulders. We have a moral obligation to alleviate suffering. As religious people, we must look out into the world like Jesus and Buddha, and look for how we can alleviate suffering. And we can do it and must do it in this country. We don't need miracles, we don't have access to miraculous powers to heal the sick. But we can do a lot more than we're doing now. We have amazing scientific knowledge that Jesus and Buddha didn't have access to. We have amazing medical practitioners. We can and must, as religious people, choose to heal the sick.

If we are moral, religious people, we must live up to this greatest moral imperative, this greatest moral obligation. Jesus saw suffering, and he went out and did something about it. Buddha saw suffering and he went out and did something about it. And now we have people in this country who dare to say that they are Christian, and they believe that the problem with health care reform is that we might possibly provide health care to immigrants? What would Jesus say about that? Oh, sorry, you're a Samaritan, not a Jew, and so I don't think you should have access to my miracles? No health care for illegal immigrants, they say, and then turn around and say this is a Christian nation? As long as anyone is turned away from medical treatment, there is no way that this is a Christian nation. If you believe that being Christian means being good, we are failing miserably.

Now, I know not everyone here wants to consider this a Christian nation. Perhaps you don't want to consider us a religious nation, either, because of separation of church and state. But I do want to consider us moral people. And if you are a Christian person, or a religious

person, or a moral person, our obligation is to care for others, not just ourselves. That's the essence of faith—this connection to something other than the selfish "I", the individual ego, that our greedy society would otherwise hold as primary. And if we are a Christian country or a religious country or a moral country, we must show it in our actions of how we treat the poorest among us. And by saying it's about how we treat them, yes I mean it's how we treat them medically, as well. That is the essence of religion. If you have a connection to the divine, you have a connection to other people. And yet in this country we have people dying because they can't afford treatments. We have people becoming homeless because they can't pay their medical bills. We have people suffering because we hoard health like it is a scarce resource. And we say we respect every person on the web of life in Unitarian Universalism, and we say in America everyone is created equal. And it is meaningless. This is an outrage. It is shameful. It is a failure of epic proportions.

If we are religious people, if we are American people, we have two choices: we can change this system, or we can live in shame, knowing that we saw the shining possibility of a truly great nation on a hill and we ran the other way out of selfishness, greed and fear.

I'm sorry if you want a nuanced approach today, full of openness and seeing all sides. I don't see it that way. There is love, and then there is this, the system that we have. There is living our religion, and then there is this, the system that we have. There is God's vision, and then there is the system that we have. And we have a choice. We choose the path of love, of living our religion, of God's vision, or we choose the system that we have. There is no gray area to me. There is no time for a nuanced moderate approach. There are people dying out there. And we need to stop being the country that is killing them.