

Mark 7:24-37

Weekly Eucharist

September 2, 2009

Hope for Healing

It would be hard to miss the health care debate currently raging in American politics right now, even if, like me, you only hear about 15 minutes of news every week. Somewhere in that 15 minutes of coverage someone is going to mention health care reform. I tend to listen to NPR, National Public Radio, what my father pejoratively, but lovingly, refers to as “that bunch of liberals.” He watches Fox News, which I pejoratively, but lovingly, refer to as “that bunch of conservatives.” We figure between the two of us, we can probably find the truth somewhere in the middle so we keep talking to each other about the news that we hear since our respective news is so very different.

But even if you never watch the news or pick up a newspaper—or download a newspaper—you can’t miss the health care debate. Your friends are talking about it; your parents are talking about it; depending on the classes you’re taking, your professors may be talking about it. It’s even been suggested that this week’s gospel lesson is about health care reform—I didn’t make that up. In fact, I resisted writing that sermon, wishing instead to write a sermon about how an unnamed woman from the wrong side of town teaches Jesus a thing or two about his own ministry. That’s a good sermon, but that’s not this sermon. This sermon is about health care.

There are two healing stories in today’s gospel lesson. The first one is about an unnamed woman from the wrong side of town who demands help for her daughter. The English translation doesn’t do this woman justice by saying, “she begged” Jesus to help her daughter. What she really did was make a scene by yelling at him in the street and then calling him out when he ignored her. And she got what she wanted, which is ultimately

what Jesus wanted, he just didn't seem to know it at first. Her daughter is made well. It's what any of us want; a sense of wholeness, a sense of belonging.

If you are sick, you are left out.

If you're from the wrong side of town and you're sick, you are left out twice over.

If you're a girl in a culture that gives no rights to women and you're from the wrong side of town and you're sick, you're not just left out. You're hopeless.

The second story in today's gospel is about a deaf man with a speech impediment. People who are deaf almost always have a speech impediment, especially if they have been deaf since early childhood. We learn to talk by hearing others talk; if you can't hear, you can't talk. You start to form words by watching the lips of people around you, but you don't know if the way you sound, sounds like the way they sound because you can't hear how you sound. So, you mumble a lot because your tongue doesn't know what it's supposed to do. How awkward! Small children who struggle to form words are cute; adults who struggle to form words are embarrassing. We usually think they are mentally challenged, assuming that if they can't talk they probably can't think either. But maybe they just can't hear. Maybe there was absolutely nothing wrong with this man who came to Jesus except that he couldn't hear. And that was enough to make him left out, to make him hopeless.

The Old Testament prophets regularly proclaim that the measure of the nation's worth can be judged by how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. We're not talking about Nothing but Nets to fight malaria in Africa or some kind of global health initiative to wipe out the AIDS virus. We're just talking about our hometowns. 18,000 die in our hometowns every year because they lack affordable health coverage. Who dies in your hometown because they couldn't afford to see a doctor? because they're hopeless?

Everyone in this room has health insurance—you can't be enrolled at Duke without it. Everyone in this room has access to one of the best medical care centers in the world. Ted Kennedy develops brain cancer; where does he go for health care? He goes to Alan

Friedman. Alan Friedman sits on the front row of Duke Women's Basketball games. He usually comes in late, probably checking up on his patients until the last possible moment. Even Ted Kennedy had to fly in from Boston to get to the best brain surgeon in the country; you pass him on the quad a couple of days a week.

My point is, we who have not just good health care, but great health care, have to work a little harder to think about what it would be like not to have the best surgeons, internists, pediatricians, oncologists, orthopedists, whatever –ist or –ian you could want, only one football field away from where we sit. Of course, there are people who sit only one football field away in the other direction that might as well be in Kenya for all the access they have to medical care. They are hopeless.

As you might expect, I have an opinion about the health care debate in this country, but a Ph.D. in homiletics doesn't give me the right to make this a bully pulpit. I'd be happy to share my opinion and hear yours over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine if you're twenty-one, but my purpose right now is to let these two stories from Mark open up for us the way we think about healing and wholeness.

There are, of course, many kinds of healing, the two most familiar probably being physical or spiritual healing. Not to be a Platonist about it, but I've known people to be healed in the spiritual sense of the word and die the next day in the physical sense of the word. Interestingly though, the root meaning of the word 'saved' σωζω is physical healing; it means, specifically, "free from disease." Saved: Christians throw that word around all the time: Have you been saved? I was saved on such-and-such a day. Or as Stanley Hauerwas likes to respond, I was saved two thousand years ago at Golgotha. And it comes from a word that means physical healing. If healing can be seen as a sign of God's reign breaking into our world, then maybe health care is about participating in God's reign.

When you consider the health care debate, whether you get your news from NPR or Fox News, consider the deaf man and the Syrophenician woman. If health care is about

healing and healing is about participating in God's reign then maybe health care isn't about protecting my access to good doctors and great medical centers. Maybe it's really about giving the ones who have been left out a chance to be healed.

Healing begins at this table. Come and be healed so that you, too, can participate in God's reign. Amen.