

“You shall Love Your neighbor as Yourself”

(A Health Care Discussion)

James said, *“My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?...You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors...So speak and act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty...For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy, mercy triumphs over judgement.”* James 2:1, 8-9, 13.

And in Mark, the gospel writer told of two occasions in which Jesus reached out beyond his Jewish boundaries to heal gentiles. One was in the region of Tyre and Sidon where Jesus casts out a demon from a little girl. The other was many miles away in the region of the Ten Cities where he enabled a deaf man with a speech impediment to speak. Mark 7:24-37.

The gospel sets the stage for some thoughts on how we should treat those who are different from ourselves. Jesus performed miracles among gentiles who were considered by most Jews to be less than a lap dog. And, James spent quite a bit of time admonishing his community to treat all people the same. James considered the commandment to love ones neighbor as oneself to be the “Royal Law” which if broken will bring down the judgement of God upon the transgressor.

Our lessons, therefore in my opinion, put emphases on treatment of the neighbor. They clearly admonish us not to show preference to a person of high estate while disregarding a person of low estate. Those precepts, nevertheless, even when we try to follow the advice of James and the commands of Jesus Christ, are difficult rules to follow. Why is that?

The abuse of the “Royal Law” (Love your neighbor as yourself) and the transgression of the commandments of God and the precepts of Jesus Christ are what allow unfair advantage to the rich and the powerful while tolerating neglect of the needs of the poor. It affects places and conditions under which people are forced to live, their access to or lack thereof to good health care, the safety and environmental conditions under which some are relegated to live and their limit and access to necessary food, goods and services. In other words, it affects the quality of life of all and mostly of those who are least likely to be able to help themselves.

One pertinent question is, “Who is my neighbor?” Is a liberal my neighbor? Is a conservative my neighbor? Am I a neighbor to a communist, socialist, southerner, northerner, a person of a different socio-economic status, of a different philosophical or religious persuasion, of a different ethnic or national origin or of some other difference? Who then is my neighbor, Lord, whom I should love as myself? My answer and your answer to these questions and the subsequent treatment of such persons will determine our response. Moreover, James and Jesus suggest that they will also determine the judgement that God will one day place us under.

We might not want to think about it this morning, but each of us must feel that there is something wrong with the present health care system in one of the richest nations in the world. Something about our system is broken and should be fixed immediately when:

-47,000,000 Uninsured in USA,
-25,000,000 Under-insured in USA,

**-15,000 a day are losing health care coverage,
-729,000 Uninsured in Missouri's 5.9 million,
-55.4 % Employed in MO's larger industries have coverage while 44.6% are not covered,
-42.4% Employer in MO's small business have coverage while 57.6 % are not covered,
-92% Increase in premiums in MO during the last ten years ,
-156 Billion dollars have been spent by small businesses on health care for their employees in MO in 2009.**

Of course, if those who have fallen through the cracks are not our neighbor or if they are not members of our families, we might feel that we have no responsibility to be concerned about them. It is not my intention to invoke guilt or anger this morning. It is my privilege as a Christian to ask the hard questions as they relate to the faith we profess.

After 65 years of trying to get adequate health care for all citizens of the USA (From President Truman through President Bush), we are faced once again with the opportunity to live out James' principle of showing no partiality and we are called after the example of Jesus Christ to help care for the least among us. We are admonished to follow the ancient precepts known to Israel of old of seeking to provide for the orphan, widow and sojourner in our midst. What will be the outcome this time? How will it impact our Christian faith, our quality of life and our immortal souls? It would be a shame if we let this moment pass.

Now there are several ways that people feel about universal health care in the USA. There are those who believe that to the victor belongs the spoil. Some think that their good fortune is as a result of blessings from God or that they are just smart, wise and industrious enough to have it good. They probably would contend that others are just cursed, not smart enough or too lazy to have it as good as they do. Others would contend that it is a shame that some are not privileged, but what can or should they do about it? They would go further to say that they have all that they can take care of with their own concerns and those of their family. Some may feel unduly helpless and wish that they could do more about it. And still others will say, I can not help everybody, but I will do what I can to help to make a difference for those whom I can help. It seems to me that the health care debate centers around all of those concerns and more.

Some are aware that we have health care problems in this richest country in the world. They feel that they presently have good health care and do not want to lose what they have. They have an uneasy feeling that a catastrophic illness may change all of that for themselves, but hope that they will not be affected. They feel that a public option allowing fairer competition in the marketplace and access for all will in some way reduce their access to primary health care. It will lengthen the time that they could see their doctors or get immediate attention. It would cost more for them and for their families.

I have heard some say that they do not want the government meddling in their business, even from among those who are on governmental Medicare or Medicaid. It has also been shown that some of our national elected officials have used Walter Reed Hospital rather than their local doctors and hospitals back home, even from among out Missouri delegation. When I hear that, I have to ask myself who is making those decisions for me as to what doctors I can see, when I can see them and what illnesses are covered or not covered under my expensive plan? How, why and by whom are those decisions being made today?

Alice and I are blessed to have good health care coverage. All of our children and grandchildren are covered, but our son is not covered. I wonder what is your situation and what about your family? I wonder how you feel about health care reform? For me, I am hopeful that the public will not fear civil and thorough debate (rather than screaming and shouting) during the next few months in order for us to arrive at the best program of health care in our country for all of our people. I do know this, that all of our insurance premiums are steadily increased by the high cost of health care, by those who end up in the emergency rooms without medical coverage, by the escalating costs of drugs and medical procedures, and by not having a more competitive health care market today.

In the next few weeks, I invite you to become as informed as you can and not to depend on the pundits who are producing the news daily. On line, take a look at House Bill number 3200 and whatever other proposals that are being debated. Read carefully the various options and contact your congressmen with an informed and compassionate response. And if we are tempted to be fearful or bitter let us remember that Jesus was not crucified because he was a blasphemer or seditionist. It was because he dared to speak out for the least of the people of his time. May God be with us all!

Proverbs 22 says “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor... Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate, for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils the life of those who despoil them.” Proverbs 22:8-9, 22.

And

Psalm 125 “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but stands fast for ever... Show your goodness, O Lord, to those who are good and to those who are true of heart.” (Psalm 125:1, 4). We pray this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.