

cChristmas 1 ~ December 27, 2009 ~ A homily preached by The Rev'd Erl G. Purnell at *Old St. Andrew's Church*, Bloomfield, CT

Isaiah 61.10-62.3; Psalm 147.13-21; Galatians 3.23-25, 4.4-7; John 1.1-18

Sitting on this side of Christmas and on this side of the Senate's passage of Healthcare reform causes me to remember not just the celebration of Jesus' birth but who he became.

This child of light, the Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, "the Word made flesh" (according to John), the first born to his mother, Mary, had no healthcare at all. Perhaps Mary had some mid-wife help, besides Joseph, during child birth, but we can't possibly know because the record is so sketchy and incomplete. But, besides Jesus, we do know Mary had a passel of other kids—the boys: James, Joses, Judas, and Simon; and, according to Mark, at least some girls, too.

Just imagine, all these children to care for along with a working husband. Mary needed to keep everybody fed, clothed, and healthy. Yet, no Stop & Shop, Geislers, or Big-Y; no Walmart or Brooks Brothers; no hospitals. No immunizations, no aspirin, no iodine, no Percocet or Vicodin, no penicillin nor any other antibiotics. No orthopedic surgeons to set a broken arm. No eye drops or band aides or thermometers or tweezers to pull out a splinter. How in the world did Mary keep everybody healthy, let alone survive multiple childbirths herself, when infection claimed more lives than anything else?

Recently, I learned a lot about severe infection and the catastrophic consequences of it ... how quickly it can take you down. I also know something about skilled orthopedic surgeons and the efficacy of antibiotics, pain-killers, and physical therapists. I know about the blessing of excellent healthcare and excellent health insurance, thanks to you and the Episcopal Church. How lucky am I to live in this modern world?

Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the other kids had none of the benefits of modern medicine, nor did they have anything like insurance. Death was easy, very easy, and life was hard, very hard. Kind of like living in Haiti today.

I walk a thin line when I address social concerns from the pulpit. These can appear political but my intention is not to be political. What I most want to do is point out what the Jesus story says about contemporary social issues from a moral and ethical perspective.

Of course, Jesus lived at a very different time, in a very different place. We can't compare the home-spun medical care Mary provided her family with

today's healthcare in the United States, New Zealand, the UK or France. Likewise, we need to recognize the extraordinary advances in biology, physiology, and hygiene, not to mention medicines and medical procedures—pills to control blood pressure or cholesterol, instruments that can cut cleanly and precisely, machines to peer inside a body without even disturbing anything. These technologies today astound me every time I think about them. What an incredible time to be alive.

And yet. And yet, the most basic medical care is unavailable to millions of people around the world. The medicines, machines, doctors, procedures, these all exist. What's absent is the collective will of humanity to provide basic healthcare to those who don't have it.

When I visit Haiti, I see faces—old faces and young faces—who's eyes have never looked into the eyes of a doctor or nurse. There, the basic care is much more like it was in Jesus' day. The rich and the lucky are touched by 21st century medicine and care but the poor are left to fend for themselves as Mary did.

And, we all know, it's not just Haiti, is it? I could have used any number of examples, like ... like living in Bloomfield without a physician or dentist, without a yearly check-up, and without money to pay for prescriptions.

This acute illness—the lack of affordable healthcare—afflicts the United States in particular ways. We—among all the industrialized nations of the world, and I might add, among many developing countries—have neglected the health and wellbeing of the Community in favor of economic profit for the few.

But, my point isn't the economic one. I believe in free enterprise. It's one of the founding pillars of America. But I do not believe in benefitting the few at the expense of the rest.

Remember, another founding principle of our nation was *e pluribus unum*, (out of many, one), and, in the most profound terms, that means the good of the whole always, *always*, trumps the individual or the few. And that is the point. We cannot not afford to care for *ALL*.

The which turns me to Jesus. How easy it is to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus. His parents endure hardship in the barn but the little fellow is cute as a button. Shepherds flock to see him and angel choirs sing his praises. This, however, is not the Jesus story. The Jesus story is about Jesus' later life and a radical social shift, an adjustment in how people live with and treat each other. It's very radical!

The Jesus of ancient times does not equivocate about who is included. Everybody is included and welcome at the Table. Everybody ... Always. There is always enough food for everybody—to wit, the feeding of the five thousand. So, which part of *feeding everybody* do we skip? Which part of *caring for all* are we missing? Which part of *love your neighbor* are we ignoring? Which part of *this Jesus story* do we not understand?

The gulf between hearing the story and our willingness to follow this radical social activist needs a sturdy bridge across it. For modern people, it's a challenge to take Jesus seriously. It's also expensive. Some of the cost of caring for all citizens needs be shared, just as it is for security, roads, air travel, and even the Library of Congress.

I think too many focus on believing in Jesus and then figure that's enough. It's not. **Believing Jesus** ... that's actually our challenge. And believing Jesus, taking him seriously, means standing in the fire of justice for *All*. Surely, the justice issues Jesus would speak out about today would include food enough, clean water, adequate shelter and clothing, education, and healthcare.

As the Body of Christ, these are our issues, too.

Amen.

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