

## **“Christianity and Health Care”**

July 1, 2018

*Hot Topics series*

Chances are you’ve heard this story before. Maybe you know it as the parable of the Good Samaritan, or maybe you know it’s a story Jesus told. This year at Annual Conference, we heard this passage from Luke numerous times over four days, and the theme of “who is my neighbor?” was the focus each time.

There are many ways this story touches us, especially because of the unexpected turn - that the least likely person is the hero, or at least the good example of loving neighbor. Today, I invite us to consider the specific issue of health care.

That’s the first of the “Hot Topics” we’ll explore this month. For us, the crux of the issue is how we approach health care as a nation. What’s the role of the government in health care? What’s our call as followers of Jesus when it comes to health care? How do we care for the most vulnerable?

Jesus is clear that one of the ways you “love your neighbor” is by doing the things needed to bring healing and hope. The Samaritan not only tends the man’s wounds, but also shows genuine care for him. He goes beyond every expectation to offer care and bring healing. In the end, the Samaritan is the one who shows mercy and acts in spirit of Jesus.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was teaching and healing. Over and over, the Gospels tell us that Jesus healed people. He set them free from what bound them and offered them new life. His ministry showed the reality that health care is holistic - body, mind, and spirit. And yet, many times, when we think of health care, we may think of only physical needs. But our physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual are connected. They can’t be separated.

You may know that our United Methodist tradition includes Social Principles. This is a tool that helps us to engage both personal faith in Jesus Christ and social holiness. Social Principles are not church law, but our best effort to engage the world that God made and the world Christ died for. Social Principles help us to think theologically about how we care for God’s creation, how we treat one another, how we respond to issues in our contemporary world.

We start with Scripture as our foundation, but each of us is influenced by the tradition of the Christian church over the centuries. Each of us possesses a mind -

logic and reason - with which we engage the world. Each of us carries many experiences that inform how we respond.

Faith and politics were never separated for Jesus, and they aren't separated for us either. The faith that we claim matters and it influences - or at least I hope it influences - how we feel about any social or political issue that we discuss. Of course, that doesn't mean that we come to the exact same conclusions about a particular issue.

Hear what the Social Principles say about health care: **SHOW SLIDE**  
Health is a condition of physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being. John 10:10b says, "I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest." Stewardship of health is the responsibility of each person to whom health has been entrusted. Creating the personal, environmental, and social conditions in which health can thrive is a joint responsibility—public and private. We encourage individuals to pursue a healthy lifestyle and affirm the importance of preventive health care, health education, environmental and occupational safety, good nutrition, and secure housing in achieving health. Health care is a basic human right.

There isn't one of us who isn't affected by health care. Who has had a medical appointment or made a call related to your health this week? Over the last few years, health care has been in the forefront, especially in politics, and there are differences of opinion about how government should be involved or not.

It's worth offering a brief history of health care. Back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christians started hospitals under Constantine to care for the poor. Fast forward to the 1700s, and John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, focused on medical care for those who were living in poverty. In the 1800s, Christians started hospitals in the U.S. Specializations in medicine became more prevalent in the 1900's. 1929 saw the rise of pre-paid hospital care and then insurance. World War II brought health care as a benefit from employers, and it was 1965 when LBJ signed the law that created both Medicare and Medicaid. Now health care is a trillion dollar industry.

And I'll admit that I take health care for granted. I've never had to consider not being able to go to the doctor or dentist or get glasses if needed or counseling if needed. I've always had health insurance. My parents, a dairy farmer and substitute teacher, have always carried their own insurance. They've been grateful to have coverage as my dad has dealt with major health issues over the past few years. My

mom has said more than once that she doesn't know what she would do without insurance and their extra savings to cover the cost.

The same was true as my mom and her siblings cared for my grandma before she died. She was able to stay in a care facility where she was comfortable and then receive Hospice care in the days before she died.

I've had two close family members who have had emergency needs and didn't have health insurance. It wasn't a cost they had planned for, and it was difficult to navigate. As I thought about the man on the side of the Jericho road, I thought of them and how resources from others who cared helped them through a difficult time.

When I think about the conversations that I have as a pastor, many of them center around health issues and needs - whether it's a person's personal health or the health issues within a family. And mental health care is a pressing issue for many of us and our families. I think it's safe to say that all of us are affected by the need for quality mental health care, too.

The man on the side of the Jericho road had physical injuries that were easy to see. The Good Samaritan knew what to do to care for him. But what about the mental and emotional toll? This man was also dealing with the impact of a traumatic experience. His needs were physical, but that wasn't the end.

All of us are affected by health needs - body, mind, and spirit - and I hope that the video we watched today reminds us of the real need to have honest discussion about health needs, including mental health. It can be overwhelming, but we must be a part of the conversation that needs to happen.

I pray that we can work together to get rid of the stigma around mental health. I hope that we take time to look at the insert in the bulletin, digest what is there, and make an effort to respond in a way that we can right now. As we planned this series, it was clear that issues around health care, and especially mental health care, are something we've avoided in the church. Maybe we don't know what to do or how to respond.

Perhaps we can remember that a diagnosis isn't an identity. It is exactly that - a diagnosis - and doesn't define a person - just like a physical diagnosis doesn't define us. We also can work to make sure that the church is a safe space for all people. This isn't an issue of a person's faith or lack of it; it's an issue of health, and we need to respond with care.

We start to break the stigma by sharing honestly and caring for one another as we promise to do as a community of faith. We can support each other by reaching out and asking what we can do to help. We can be advocates for better access and funding for quality mental health care because we know it's needed. Ask anyone in the medical field or education or the church – it's needed.

We can also take better care of ourselves - not selfishly, but as an act of Christian discipleship, as Pastor Adam Hamilton calls it. My body is a temple, and so is yours. How are we good stewards of our own health? Clergy are some of the biggest culprits, but all of us have the call to care for ourselves well. We have the choice every day.

How do we talk about our health with the people closest to us? Whether it's our current health situation or what happens later in life. How do we talk about our wishes at the end of life? We talked last week about our struggles with death and dying and about the grief that we carry. Our discomfort with the reality of death keeps us from having the needed conversations with our loved ones about our wishes for the end of life.

How does this big issue of health care touch us right now as we're called to care for one another? How does it touch us as we consider our perspective as people whose ultimate hope is in resurrection and new life?

And to bring us back to the Good Samaritan, how do we care for the most vulnerable? We're called to care throughout the whole of Scripture - from the Old Testament to the New Testament. How are we devoted to bringing healing? Body, mind, and spirit? How will we love our neighbor? How will we show mercy?

*Jesus came that all would have abundant life.* That's not only a call to have hope in eternal life, but also a call to us to follow him in offering abundant life now.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION