

Does Jesus Have a Health Plan?

James 2:1-10

September 6, 2009

Back-to-school time is lay-down-the law time.

As all the kids go back to school, Moms and Dads are busy laying down the ground rules to help make it a successful year.

Little ones get instructions on crossing the street, holding hands, and eating their lunch.

Middle-school kids get cautionary tales about bullying behavior, harder homework, and budgeting their time.

High school students get lectures on safe driving, curfews, and the looming threat/promise of college — which means “buckle-down, now.”

But for the first time in decades there is another back-to-school-rule that is being stressed with great seriousness and grave concern — “Wash your hands. With soap. Often!”

Along with the new backpacks and lunchboxes, and lockers, we are being told to expect a new outbreak of the H1N1 virus - the Swine flu. After a few days at the University of Washington the last week in August, a couple hundred kids have gotten sick. With no vaccine even available until sometime in October, there isn't all that much we can do to protect ourselves, and our families, except “wash our hands.”

I don't know whether it's more ironic, or fitting, that the biggest debates on health care ever to occur in this country are heating up just as the temperatures are cooling down and the red flag warnings of a swine flu outbreak are being unfurled.

The church has always been in the health care business. Jesus spent his three years of ministry preaching, teaching and healing, but Jesus was most known among the people as a healer. The crowds that followed him requested a healing touch more often than a holy word. Jesus didn't discount the diseases of the body. He offered wholeness and health to those who were in pain, in distress, in the darkness of blindness or the disarray of a troubled mind and spirit. He provided bread and fish and water and wine to the crowds that clamored about him, tending to the needs of their stomach as well as to their souls.

Through Jesus the Christ the gift of “salvation” was available to all. The most literal translation of the Greek word for “salvation” is, in fact “health.” And the Latin stem of “salvation” is the word “salve” which means “health” or “healing.” We get the word salve from it.

Down through the centuries the Church has been involved in providing healing. From the Apostles' laying on of hands, the clergy ministering to folks who were stricken with Bubonic Plague, to the building of hospitals, the church has always recognized what Jesus knew: a person's body needs healing as well as their soul.

But wait a minute. Yes, healing and health is the church's business. But to identify one political agenda or platform or party as a plank in the kingdom of God is to turn Jesus into a cause, and to make his gospel into a political agenda. To reduce Jesus to a political agenda is to do something he himself refused to be drawn into and categorized as — a political leader.

Renowned preacher Leonard Sweet puts it this way: Jesus is the Prince of Peace. You can always tell where Jesus is by looking for the presence of shalom, the gift of peace. But there is no one political ideology that has a monopoly on peace. There will be both generals and pacifists in heaven, I am sure. The resurrected Christ today is in the business of promoting peace, not promoting a political strategy for peace. To absolutize one scheme over another is to make Jesus into something other than Savior and Lord.

Someone I know recently sent me an email asking my opinion: What would Jesus say about a national health care plan?

As best I can figure from reflecting on scripture and doing other reading, just because Jesus spent a lot of time healing people doesn't mean he came with a health care initiative. He came to reconcile us to the Father. He did not come to effect political change in the Roman government (or any other government) but to effect reconciliation and soul change on the cross.

My question is: Why would the church want to cause a lot of ruckus about political issues when it can be rocking the world for Christ?

Have you noticed that everyone now must have a cause? Celebrities, sports figures, regular people — all seem to need to have a cause. If you're on Facebook, you know what I'm talking about. Every day you are bombarded with requests to support some Facebook friend's "cause." And some of my Facebook friends seem to have a cause a week.

In a world of causes, it is easy to identify Christ with a "cause" and to commit oneself to the "cause of Christ" or the "causes of Christ" rather than the person of Jesus and God's mission in the world. But to do so is to dismiss Jesus, and he will not be dismissed so easily.

In our James text this morning, the head of the Jerusalem church is telling his people that Jesus is not a "cause" to tout. No, Jesus is a path to new life, to a healthy way of living. This path is not without risks. It is not a kiddie ride. There will be real dangers, real illnesses, real sacrifices, that we will come upon on this pathway. But our ultimate health and wellness — the wholeness that

the salvation Christ has made possible for us – is always assured and always present. We are not called to be a witness, or “martyr,” for causes. Only a witness or “martyr” for Christ.

Christians ought to be uneasy about all identifications of the kingdom of God with any political agenda because all earthly power is relativized by the gospel. I love seeing Christians work in politics. But, I grieve when I see Christians confuse religion and politics. The kingdom of God is not found in a congressional bill or governmental solution. Civil government is not supposed to be salvific. Its function is to restrain evil, not save the world. The state’s category is Law, NOT Gospel. The state is not on a redemptive mission; the church is on a redemptive mission.

Here is how Martin E. Marty puts it. He says that Christians must remember that the God who sits in the heavens shall laugh at our pretensions, our parties, our causes.

This is why we all need to be uneasy around political discussions like the one we’re in the midst of right now when Christians on the right and on the left are battling it out with each other about what is “God’s will.” The message of Christianity is the ultimate frustration of power, and politics is all about the pursuit and use of power. The heart of Christianity is a shocking symbol of powerlessness the cross and its dying and rising to new life.

Jesus is in the healing business. God always heals . . . death is the final healing act. Let’s be careful: Whatever “beauty” there is in a person’s passing on is not in the death but in the healing.

While Jesus *is* in the healing business, Jesus does not have a health plan.

Christians don’t live to fight for a cause. We live to witness for Christ.