

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 21, 2009, Pentecost 3, dedicated to Rupert “Twink” Starr for his leadership in this church and the Columbus community, to my parents on their 59th Anniversary, to fathers everywhere, and always to the glory of God!

“Health Care: Fix It Now!”

Psalm 30; Mark 5:21-43

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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I want you to use your imagination for the next couple of minutes. Using your imagination, imagine that you have spent today with your father. You have taken your dad to lunch, bought him a power tool, a tie, or that new CD of Bruce Springsteen that he actually asked for. He has had a wonderful afternoon with you, his daughter, his son. Now it’s later in the day.

He turns to you and says, “I am really not feeling well at all. I have a tremendous pain my chest.” You take him to the ER at one of our area hospitals. Recently, when he lost his insurance because his company stopped paying the high premiums for their employees in an attempt to help them hold onto their jobs, you fear this hospital will not accept him.

When you check in, with no medical insurance, you find he is put on the edge of the ER where others without coverage are placed. They seem to take forever getting to him. Then, when you discover they actually have no medical plan to care for a patient with chest

pains, you are shocked. You thought they would know what to do. Every imaginable medical person on staff of this hospital walk up and walk on, but no one seems to know how to care for your dad. It's not that they are cruel, they just aren't organized. They have no emergency plan for care. It feels like a nightmare. Your father is uncared for. Now, this imaginary scenario is over.

I ask you, which part of this hospital scene could actually happen in this day and age?

First, the uninsured are – whether knowingly or unknowingly – a treated differently in our world of medical care. That is true. It is a myth that if you don't have health insurance the government will take care of you. The fact is that there is no health safety net for the 45.8 million Americas who are uninsured – over 9 million of whom are children. Approximately 57% of Americans have employer-based coverage, 4% have their own, 23% qualify for government benefits and the remaining 15.7% of Americans are uninsured.

The uninsured who are admitted to hospitals receive lower quality care, fewer services, fewer tests and they are 3.6 times more likely to die in the hospital than those who are insured. In addition, uninsured children and adults are 30% less likely to receive preventative care, increasing the likelihood that they will be diagnosed with advance conditions and face earlier death.

Clearly, all of us know that hospitals have plans in place in every ER to care for patients with chest pains. However, this part of the metaphor leads to a larger part of this story. While we have excellent doctors, nurses and other medical personnel in our congregation and nation, our nation's overall health care system is in disarray. While few of us in this room would venture out on vacation without any plan, and we certainly would not send our youth on missions with no destinations in mind, that is exactly what is happening in our health care system in America. Our health care system has evolved into a trip to nowhere.

While it is unimaginable that a hospital would have no structure in place to care for our dads in an emergency room situation, we have a health care system that has no clear goals for fixing what is broken. We have a system with no national legislative commitment to guarantee needed health care for everyone who lives in our nation today. We argue about increasing access, reducing costs, adding people or benefits to public programs, increasing the percent of poverty level that should qualify someone for public assistance, setting cost controls and the list goes on and on. We have great minds working on all these things, but we seem to lack the overall will as a nation to work together in establishing a just system of care.

While we do nothing, the situation worsens. Last year, 18,000 people died prematurely last year – roughly two deaths per hour – due to a lack of insurance. Health care insurance premiums have risen 35.9% in the last four years while wages have risen only 12% nationwide. In other words, insurance has risen three times faster than wages. Every minute, five more people are losing their insurance in America. Forty-five percent of personal bankruptcies are related to medical debt.

Even families with insurance are forced to make difficult medical decisions. Out of pocket costs for prescription drugs and dental care insured families have forced them to choose which treatments they can afford. While one in 11 whites are uninsured, the number increases to one in five for African-Americans and one in three for Latinos. (Statistics come from *Families USA* (www.familiesusa.org) and Universal Health Care Action Network (www.uhcan.org)).

In Ohio, a lack of adequate health care affects over 1 million Ohioans, a number also growing daily. More than three of four uninsured people in Ohio (76%) live in households below 300% of the federal poverty line, meaning these families can afford to contribute little to nothing to health coverage. Wages in Ohio make health care unaffordable for many Ohioans. In Ohio, a single mother with two children at home must earn more than \$38,000, or 225% of the federal poverty line, to contribute to health care costs. Couples with

two children at home must earn more than \$43,000, or 210% of the federal poverty line, before they afford contributing to health care costs, meaning that they must sacrifice other basic needs.

You don't have to be poor to be uninsured in Ohio. Seventy-eight percent of uninsured Ohioans live in families with at least one full-time or part-time worker – 63% living in a household with a full-time worker, 15% in a household with part-time worker. People with pre-existing conditions are unlikely to receive coverage. In Ohio and 26 other states, insurers can exclude coverage for pre-existing conditions for up to one year. In Ohio there are also no objective standards for defining pre-existing conditions. We have faced this situation on our own church staff. (Statistics come from the Ohio Family Health Survey, 2004, and the Urban Institute and Kaiser Commission on Medicaid, 2005).

No plan for digging America out of our economic woes can include turning a blind or unknowing eye to the health care system in America. For example, General Motors has relocated plants in recent years across the border from Ohio and Michigan to because they can save up to \$1,500 per automobile because health care costs for Canadian employees are lower than for American employees! Say what you want to about Canada's system, but that is a compelling statistic and reason for change from an economic point of view.

We need a plan so that we can get well as a nation – in every imaginable way!

I have been a part of a campaign to “Fix It Now!” In Ohio and across the country, coalitions of people and organizations from the Salvation Army and AARP to We Believe Ohio and UHCAN Ohio have come together to push for reform now. From the grassroots, people are organizing and calling upon elected leaders and business people to get their acts together. This is no vacation! It is our future and our children's future, and we cannot continue to this crisis.

People are going to Washington, D.C., this week to worship on

Wednesday at the National Cathedral and march on the Capitol on Thursday. We will demand equitable health care reform and coverage for all – coverage that doesn't sink the boat of our economy and coverage that is not borne on the shoulders of the poor, the middle class or the wealthy. We are calling for coverage that is fair and good for all. I encourage you to go Washington this week or contact your congressional and Senate reps to encourage them to “fix it now!”

In today's passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus “fixes it now” for two women. He heals the woman with a hemorrhage that has been afflicting her for years. He also raises Jairus' daughter from the dead. Against all odds and all protests, Jesus sees the need for healing and does it. In each case, the women or their familial representatives come to Jesus. The woman hemorrhaging has been bleeding for 12 years and has been treated as ritually unclean and an outcast. She has been isolated from the mainstream of Jewish religious and social life. She can't get a job because of her condition. She can't take it anymore. Jesus heals her and saves her life – religiously, socially, economically and physically.

The experts in this woman's case and Jarius' daughter's case say it can't be done. They say their situations are beyond help. Jesus cuts against the grain and shows that healing can happen. Faith draws these people to Jesus. They have faith in his ability to heal, to get things done. My friends, we are Jesus' people. We have to get things done as well.

I spent last week working with 13 teens and five adults from First Church in Hinton, West Virginia. We got things done. Day in and day out in rain, sun and heat, we got things done. It wasn't easy, but we got it done. We took a house in need of help and turned it into one of the prettiest houses in Hinton.

Fixing things is never easy. Healing is never easy work. Changing a sick health care system is even harder. But now is our time! Now is our time to get on the phones, get letters in the mail, twitter, or make email contact and go with our bodies and ourselves to

Washington D.C., and our own Statehouse to get things done in health care reform.

Remember, follow your leader. Jesus got things done through the power his faith matched by the power and belief of the two women and their families around them. We have to do the same. “Fix it Now!” means all of us, working together to get the wheels back on the system where the wheels have come off. Fixing it now is work for all of us to do. Amen.

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