

“Affordable Care Acts”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Edina Morningside Community Church; February 5, 2017

Luke 7:1-17

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.” And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!” This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Beverly Baseman is a retired woman who lives in Willmar, Minnesota. She’s an active lay leader at Bethel Lutheran Church there. I heard part of her story last weekend when fifteen members and friends of EMC joined with thousands of others in a multiracial, ecumenical and statewide gathering at Shiloh Temple in Minneapolis. We came together through a community organization called [ISAIAH](#), to explore how biblical values guide Christian efforts in democracy and public life. Bev told her story to Senator Al Franken on stage, calling on him and other elected leaders to do more to protect families like hers.

You see, Bev’s husband had a heart attack in 1986, which turned out to be the first of many health issues the rest of his life. Because they were in rural Minnesota and time was of the essence, Bev’s husband was immediately airlifted to a hospital where he got the care he needed to save his life. But it turns out that airlifting was not covered by the family’s insurance, so they spent six months fighting with insurance to get the bill even partially reimbursed. As Bev said, in an emergency you can’t shop around to find an in-network helicopter! The family paid thousands in very high deductibles over the years afterward, and her husband’s heart attack was a preexisting condition that kept them from getting better insurance. Bev’s husband eventually lost his job, and the medical expenses forced them into bankruptcy. The foreclosure on their house was published in the paper of small-town Willmar, and a sheriff that she and her husband knew knocked on the door to evict them. Bev described the public humiliation she felt, and how embarrassed she was to ever talk about what happened. So why was she now telling her story in front of two thousand people? She wanted healing from the shame, she said, and to address what’s broken in the health care system—making sure what happened to her didn’t happen to anyone else ever again.

Would it surprise you to know that medical bankruptcy goes back thousands of years? That’s essentially what happens to the widow at Nain. Her husband and now her son have died. In a patriarchal

society, men worked jobs to make money for the family. [Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell points out](#) that now the widow “has lost her only supporter in an economic system that treated women as property. Without a husband or son to help her, she was destined to beg, or become a prostitute.” This widow faces bankruptcy due to medical distress in her family, and because of an unjust system stacked against her. As with Bev last Saturday, a great crowd surrounds this woman. They too know how wrong this is.

But things go differently when Jesus gets involved. Luke writes that when Jesus saw the woman, he “had compassion for her”. That word “compassion” is an interesting one. [It breaks into several parts:](#) “com” (meaning “with”) and “passion” (or “to suffer”). Jesus “suffers alongside” this woman. He identifies with and even takes on himself responsibility for her suffering, then intervenes to make it better. Stopping the funeral procession, he calls for the young man to rise. The dead man sits up and begins to speak. Then we read that “Jesus gave him to his mother”, effectively restoring her as well as the man to new life.

This story, as well as the one before it of the centurion’s slave being healed, show us how Jesus responds to suffering and illness. We might identify in them two core principles of Jesus in health care. First, offer healing to all. It doesn’t matter to Jesus that the centurion is not a Jew, and is likely employed by the Roman empire to suppress the Jewish people. The slave of this opponent is still healed. Likewise, a widow who would have been nothing but an afterthought to other men receives healing for her son. Jesus sees a human need and responds as he is able; he shows no preferential treatment for one over another. Second, Jesus shows that healing is about communities, not just individuals. The conditions of the slave and the widow’s son impact their families and the broader community. That’s why in both cases a whole crowd comes together to lament a loss and then to celebrate restoration. Jesus joins in the suffering of others with compassion, then creates communities of care and nurture that extend to all, no exceptions.

I have seen remarkable answers to prayer for healing, and I trust that the miracles of God are not gone from the earth even these centuries after Jesus. I also know that healing on command escapes even the best medical professionals, and faith leaders who try it usually end up revealed as frauds. But we can do this: we can follow the example of Jesus ever more closely as we act to be the body of Christ in this hurting world. We already live into this in impressive ways. Hands would go up across the room if I asked who brought a meal to one of our families in medical need over the past two weeks, or two months, or two years. As I said this week to one recipient of such care, *this* is the body of Christ at work in ways that make me so proud to be your pastor! How are we doing in other ways? Are we creating the sort of community that welcomes and cares for outsiders, including those with challenging medical conditions? Does the person with HIV, Alzheimers, PTSD, or mental health needs have a place of welcome in a church that understands and meets *their* needs? Are the policies that our elected officials consider on our behalf ones that truly reflect the spirit of Jesus? Some do, and some don’t. One current proposal takes away paid sick time from 150,000 workers in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Another opens the public insurance program MinnesotaCare to all, and it currently offers coverage with a monthly premium [capped at \\$80 per family member](#).

This is not the place to dissect the merits and drawbacks of such policy proposals. There are also a thousand ways we could respond to offer healing, and not all of them are right for us. What I hope we take from today, though, is an orientation of faith that considers the example of Jesus as our guide, especially in those two ways. In our personal, community, and broader public life, are we showing mercy to all without exception—including the centurion and the widow? Are we doing what is in our power to show compassion to those in need, offering active care when our intervention will save lives and restore community?

Let us pray: God of healing, touch us with the presence of Christ, that we might feel his power and be restored in ourselves. Equip us to serve as your courageous and merciful healers—for one another, for neighbor and stranger alike, and for the health of the entire community in Jesus’ name. Amen.