

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 Health

I was born in St. Louis at the Missouri Baptist Hospital. Why is there such a place and how did it come to be? One of the well-known health care systems in my home city (and maybe in other places too), is called, The Sisters of St. Mary (SSM). Even here in the Columbus area, most of my hospital visitation has been at the Riverside Methodist Hospital.

One does not need Google to learn about the Christian affiliation with health care and hospitals (although if one does use Google one will find out that there are 58 pages of Christian hospitals in America with names such as Deaconess, Good Samaritan, Presbyterian and Lutheran, and St. (you name it, Mary, John, Thomas, Francis, Joseph . . .), even the Mayo clinic, and hospitals that sound public like the Hoboken Medical Center in New Jersey; and these are just the hospitals, to say nothing of clinics, counseling centers, and retirement communities, and the like.

There is no need to go into the amount of money that is involved with the world's health care systems, it is undeniably trillions of dollars, all devoted to the notion that the pursuit of health is worthwhile and should be available to everyone without exception.

From where did this idea come? In a world where every single person experiences pain and everyone dies, why did the human race decide it is worthwhile to

pursue a pain free life and to forestall death as long as is possible, to make life healthy?

And to press this question further, those of us who are Christians believe that as wonderful as life on earth can be, it is not comparable to heaven, which can only be entered by dying. Why is so much value placed on this life? Why so much energy spent trying to stay a few years longer and achieve a higher quality of life?

Jesus

I suggest that chief among the factors that answer this question, (acknowledging that the pursuit of health is not inevitable and it took human beings a long time to value it), the reason our culture places a such a high value on health is because Jesus did.

For someone who came proclaiming the Kingdom of God, a kind of apocalyptic vision of the consummation of the age, it is very interesting that the depiction of Jesus in the gospels is that of a healer who went around meeting people who were sick or suffering from a variety of ailments including what we would call mental illness, and helping them.

As a matter of fact, the gospel presentation of Jesus mentions several notable cases, Lazarus, blind Bartimaeus, Jairus's daughter and the woman with the hemorrhage who touched the hem of his robe, the paralytic at Capernaum, the deaf man at the Pool of

Bethesda, just to name a few; but in the end these specific cases are examples of a more general pattern.

The text today speaks of that pattern. It comes from the 6th chapter of Mark's gospel and is what some call a summary statement because it speaks in general terms about Jesus' activities.

“So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of him. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

Then , after the Feeding of the 5,000 they tried again to get away (with the walking on the water).

“As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. They ran throughout the whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever he was. And wherever he went, into the villages, towns, and country side, they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak and all who touched him were healed.”

There is no mistake, the inspiration behind the modern pursuit of health, even the so-called “secular” effort, is largely the life and activity of Jesus. Part of the significance of this activity is that earthly life is taken

very seriously, we are not simply waiting for heaven, but even against great odds, seeking meaningful lives that require at least a certain measure of health, which is regarded as a gift from God.

(I might add that here in this text Jesus is also depicted as a teacher. When one adds to the health emphasis and the religious implications the educational endeavor that has risen up in Christian culture, especially when it is understood that Jesus did not regard education as the privilege of the elites; one can see the way in which the life of this one man has profoundly affected our life and times).

One should be slow to lament the diminishing influence of the Christian faith in our times, its influence is overwhelming, all around us. And add to that depiction of Jesus as a carpenter, someone who worked for a living, and there does not seem to be any facet of life Jesus didn't affect.

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But today let us contemplate Jesus as a compassionate healer. It must be said without reservation that the life of Jesus is meant as an example for us to follow. We are meant to be sickened enough by the suffering of others, any others, to try and help alleviate it. We do not need to mention that we ourselves participate in the typical hardships affecting humanity.

And we are meant to pursue health. There is spiritual value in the pursuit of health even though we may only hope for marginal and temporary results. We can cure some diseases and lengthen life expectancy and improve the quality of life. It is good to make these pursuits though we can't hope to achieve immortality as the result of them.

There is spiritual value in pursuing health and knowledge and meaningful work in spite of the limited nature of our potential success. These endeavors are to be distinguished from their opposites; pursuits of destruction and harm, ignorance, and ill health.

Therefore, we live in the faith that health is God's will, just like justice and knowledge, that we have the opportunity to participate in the divine plan. Health without faith will not satisfy, it will be corrupted into selfish ends, greed, blatant disregard for others instead of compassion. And it won't be healthy.

And the image of Jesus as a compassionate healer must be associated with the biblical image of Jesus as servant who sacrificed his life for others. We seek health and knowledge *so that we might also serve*.

One thinks of Paul in Romans 12 when he asks each to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, which is considered either reasonable service or spiritual worship depending on the translation. We serve by helping others also seek health and knowledge and by

seeking to use our health and knowledge to help others. This is the legacy of Jesus. And it is a revealing of divine nature.

In Christ, we are confident in the vision of a world made right, where each is judged with mercy according to their deeds, and in which the faith of those who seek service to God and humanity stands as the prime example of what it means to be healthy, to the glory of God.

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