

## **“The Road Back to You: Health and Healthcare and Human Dignity”**

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July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017

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Senior Minister  
Deuteronomy 15:7-11

First Congregational Church  
Los Angeles, CA

*This morning I want to take a few minutes to offer a reflection about health and healthcare and human dignity. I've been thinking a lot about it over the past few weeks, partly because of all the turmoil regarding healthcare going on in our nation, but also because of my experience with people as a clergyman.*

*One of the great things about being a minister is that you have a chance to take a very personal journey with people, and often that journey is in a hospital room or waiting with a family while a loved one is undergoing a surgery.*

*When you're a minister you learn how to enter a hospital room. To get a feel for the situation. Sometimes people want to see you. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes you're stopping by to see the family more than the patient. And of course, you learn as a minister that there is always that one patient who wants to lift up his hospital gown and show you his scars! I want to say this morning – I don't want to see any of your scars! If you want to show your scars . . . fine . . . I'll send Laura Fregin!*

*For over 30 years I have been a first responder to health challenges . . . to heart surgeries and cancer treatments, to the joy of birth and the heartache of death. I have been a first responder when people have received bad news from a doctor and good news from a doctor. And I have also seen person after person who has been devastated financially because of health issues.*

*I am not a policy expert, and so I'm not here to say what we should or shouldn't do as a nation, though I have my thoughts like everyone else. That said, even though I don't know policy, I do know people, and I know there is nothing closer to our personhood as our health.*

*I have to be honest with you this morning, I have found it infuriating over the past few weeks to hear people talk about healthcare as if there is no real-life repercussion to it. When the President made the claim a few weeks ago that he wasn't “going to own healthcare,” I thought to myself that something is terribly wrong here.*

*The President of the United States of America doesn't have a choice about owning or not owning healthcare, because healthcare is about the personal dignity of our fellow citizens. It's not theoretical. It's real. I don't have the luxury as the minister of this church to decide which members I will love and which members I will not love. I love all of you and I will be there for all of you.*

*Leaders don't have that choice. This is especially true when it comes to healthcare, because when we don't own the moral challenge of healthcare, what that really means is that we are not owning the dignity that belongs to every human being.*

*This is why the relationship between healthcare and faith is so important. Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. That's the essence of faith. Jesus said that when we help the sick and bring healing to the broken, it's as if we are doing it directly to Jesus. Jesus said that he came to bring sight to the blind and liberation to the oppressed. And don't forget that Jesus was often called the "great physician."*

*In other words, of all the people in our country that should own healthcare, that should care for the health of all God's children, that should be on the frontline advocating for universal coverage for all our citizens, it should be those of us who profess faith in Jesus Christ.*

*If you can't afford to go to the dentist, and you lose some of your teeth, and by the way that happens to people all the time, because in many cases not even our insurance will cover dental work, you lose a piece of your dignity. You don't smile. You don't eat. You're susceptible to disease.*

*If you have a skin disease that a simple prescription could clear up, but you don't have access to it because you can't afford it, you lose some of your dignity. If you're a woman and you need birth control, or if you're pregnant and you can't see a gynecologist, you lose some of your dignity.*

*This is why Planned Parenthood is so important, and right now Planned Parenthood is under assault in this country, even though they provide high-quality, affordable medical services to 2.4 million women, men and young adults each year.*

*Most of all they give people personal dignity. Some of you have gone through chemotherapy, and you know what it is like to have your bodies worn down by a treatment, and how much energy it takes to battle forward each day. You don't merely lose your hair; you lose some of your dignity.*

*What I'm trying to say is that healthcare is about as personal and essential to our humanity as anything in our whole life experience. This is why when I hear talk about millions . . . that's right . . . millions of citizens losing their healthcare in the upcoming years . . . that's not a budget problem . . . that's a problem that goes to the soul of our whole country.*

*We're talking about millions of people losing their personal sense of dignity. What does that do to a nation when that many people lose their sense of dignity? It could be me. It could be you. It could be my father. It could be your mother.*

*Our Bible passage from the Book of Deuteronomy offers a clear vision . . . that if a brother or sister is in need . . . our response must be one of generosity and understanding, justice and compassion, mercy and forgiveness . . . and that does not mean we simply have warm and fuzzy feelings toward a person in need .*

*Warm and fuzzy feelings don't cure cancer and they don't fix an infected tooth and they don't clear up a skin disease. You need medicine. And doctors. And nurses. And hospitals. And nursing homes. And treatment centers. Every society . . . not some . . . but every society . . . must find a way to deliver healthcare.*

*Now, we might differ on how healthcare should be delivered, and I understand that, but it seems to me we cannot differ on the essential nature of it. In other words: Is healthcare a luxury item? Does it belong only to the rich? Only to the employed? Only to those lucky enough to have insurance? Or is healthcare a universal human right?*

*That's one of the most important questions facing our nation right now, and I think churches have to make their voice known on the topic. I don't care if you're a Republican. I don't care if you're a Democrat. The question is this: Is healthcare a human right?*

*If it is a human right, then we have to find a way to deliver it to one another. To be sure, things have to be improved. But I have not heard one person claiming that the Affordable Care Act is perfect. And costs have to be controlled. And personal investment in wellness has to increase. And more common good must be incorporated into our society, because the costs of those who are older have to be balanced with those who are younger.*

*That's how it works. But I also think we have to move past healthcare as a commodity. There's a difference between a commodity and a right. If healthcare is a commodity, it will always favor the rich. But if medical care is a right, not a commodity but a right, then we have to find a way to deliver that to one another.*

*Friends . . . I want to encourage you to do two things this coming month . . . first of all . . . do something for your own health this summer. Get some rest. Let go of some stress. Do a little exercise. Eat a little healthier. Take care of your body. If the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, then give the temple a little attention this year. Go for more walks. Get some sleep. It's a way of coming back to your best self. The more we care for the body, the more human dignity we begin to feel.*

*But the second thing I ask is that you join me in advocating for the healthcare of others. I've decided that I'm going to write the twenty-one women of the United States Senate this week because, as Margaret Thatcher said years ago: "If you want something said, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman."*

*I'm going to reach out to the women of the Senate because, generally speaking, I think women are more in touch with their bodies and the bodies of their children and grandchildren. Plus, it's a travesty that we have had a backroom full of men making healthcare laws in America and not one woman was at the table. That's not right!*

*I have set up a table in the Forecourt this morning. We have postcard messages for these women senators, and some are Republican and some are Democrat, all you have to do is sign your name and we'll mail them for you*

*So, do something for your own dignity this summer.  
Do something for the dignity of others this summer.*

*And now, please welcome to First Church a friend, and more importantly, one our nation's leading experts on healthcare in America. I'm so glad he's in Los Angeles today and what a treat for us. Please welcome Mr. Wendell Potter . . .*