

## HEALTH CARE COSTS

Scriptures: Matthew 8:28-34; Matthew 8:18-27

For the last two weeks we have seen that there are twists in the stories of Jesus healing people. Two weeks ago we discovered that Jesus can heal people at a distance. All he needed to do was say the word, and people were healed. Last week we discovered that sometimes Jesus prefers to work in person. He prefers touching people, especially those who might be considered unclean or contaminated in the eyes of others.

This week we come to one of the strangest healing stories of all. This story has not one but three strange twists. First two men who are tormented by demons come to Jesus, but instead of asking Jesus to heal them, they ask him to go away. They say, “What do you have to do with us, Son of God? Have you come to torment us...?” What kind of healing story is that? Can you imagine any of other people we have read about—the man with leprosy, the woman with the hemorrhage, the Canaanite woman whose daughter was tormented by a demon—can you imagine any of them coming to Jesus and then telling Jesus to go away? Why would these demon-possessed men not want Jesus’ help?

Eugene Lowry, a Methodist minister, once preached a great sermon on this story that I have quoted before. He says,

I remember one time when I had this horrible cold. I was sick ... and couldn’t seem to get better with home remedies, so I called my doctor. He wasn’t the Great Physician, you understand, but he was pretty good, ... and the patients knew the worship order quite well. I mean, you walk into the office and the receptionist says, “Please be seated.” That’s the call to worship. Then you wait for 45 minute ... call them moments of meditation. Then you go in and get the word. On the way out you present your tithes and offerings. It’s an act of worship.

Well, I went to my doctor. He gave me the word all right. He said, “You can’t fight off any infection; you don’t eat anything but sugar. Don’t you know those bugs like sugar just as much as you do? I taking you off all those cookies and all those soft drinks you live on.” You know what I said to him? I said, “Do not torment me!” I wanted to get well, of course, but, but ... well, you know. (Quoted in *Daemonic Imagination: Biblical Text and Secular Story*, edited by Robert Detweiler and William Doty)

Lately we have heard a lot of talk about health care costs, but sometimes the biggest cost of health care is not the money you pay to the doctor. It is the price you pay to change. Whether it’s quitting smoking, quitting drinking, losing weight, getting more exercise, there is often a price to be paid for getting well.

On numerous occasions couples have come to me for marriage counseling. They wanted their marriage to be healed, but neither of them really wanted to change. They wanted the other person to change. They wanted their circumstances to change. But they weren’t prepared to change themselves. They said in effect, “Do not torment me.”

Over the years I have had many people ask me to pray for them who do not have any relationship to a church, ours or anyone else's. I am more than glad to pray for these people. But I have sometimes wondered if they aren't a little like the men in our story. They come to Jesus, but they really don't want Jesus to mess with them. They say in effect, "Do not torment me."

Which brings me to the second great twist in this story. In verse 31 the demons speak to Jesus. This time it is not the men who speak to Jesus but the demons. They say to Jesus, "If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine." And Jesus says, "Go."

Since when does Jesus bargain with demons? Next week we will read a story from Matthew 17 about a boy with a demon. Verse 18 says, "And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly." Jesus did not bargain with the demon. Jesus did not say, "Hmm, let me see, where can I send you?" Jesus commanded the demon and it left. So why do we have this weird story about the pigs?

Once again, this strange twist in the story illustrates a lesson: When Jesus heals people, it has repercussions, even social repercussions. If we sit in this church and pray for people to be healed, we had better be prepared for changes, not just changes in the person for whom we pray but changes in us.

And that brings me to the third great twist in the story. Back in Matthew, chapter 4, when Jesus begins his healing ministry, verse 24 says, "So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them." At the beginning of Jesus' ministry when Jesus healed people, even demon-possessed people, the people did not ask him to leave. They brought more people for him to heal. Crowds came to him not asking to leave but asking him to stay.

But not here. Here people wanted to get rid of him. If you remember, we were told that the demon-possessed men were so fierce that no one could pass that way. These guys were so intimidating, people of the town could not even have a graveside service. You would think that they would be thrilled that these guys are healed. But they aren't. They want Jesus to leave. Why?

Once again Eugene Lowry has a great explanation of this. He says, "The reason the folks told Jesus to leave is simple. Very simple. You see, *they owned the pigs*." He concludes with this observation: "Any time any healing takes place, somebody is going to pay a price—one way or another. Any time any person or group gets freedom they never had before, somebody else loses some pigs" (pp. 33-35).

When Moses tried to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, Pharaoh tried to stop him. Why? He didn't want to lose his cheap labor. When Abraham Lincoln tried to free the slaves, a majority of people in 11 states tried to stop him. Why? They didn't want to lose their cheap labor. When American and other NATO troops overthrew the Taliban and allowed women and girls to go back to school, some did not want that to happen. They even committed acts of

violence to frighten the students away. Why? They claimed to have religious reasons. Well, religious reasons could explain why they want women to dress modestly. I can respect that. But it does not explain why they do not want them to have an education. That goes deeper. It is a matter of control. They don't want to lose their pigs.

Friends, if we really want Jesus to heal people, we may have to help pay for their health care, one way or another. I am not endorsing any particular health care plan. Don't go out of here misquoting me. But if we want Jesus to heal people, we may need to pay a price. We may have to give up some of our pigs. Likewise, if we want Jesus to heal us, we may have to make changes in our lifestyle. If we want Jesus to heal our relationships, we may have to let go of some of our control. If we want Jesus to bring us to heaven, we may have to get used to the idea of putting God first instead of ourselves. We may have to give up some of our pigs.

But if we do, it will be worth it.

- Ken Onstot  
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