

## SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JANUARY 23, 2011

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Scriptures: Psalm 27:1-9; Matthew 4:12-25; Isaiah 9:1-4; Acts 28:25b-27; 1 Peter 2:24-25; James 5:14-16

**How to Live as a Christians in an Unchristian World  
In Spite of Health Problems**

In a 2006 report of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services the average annual cost of health care in this country was \$6,280 for each man, woman, and child. Twenty-five percent of the U.S. population were reported to have one or more of five major chronic conditions:

- \* Mood disorders.
- \* Diabetes.
- \* Heart disease.
- \* Asthma.
- \* Hypertension.

Expenses for people with any of those five chronic conditions are twice as high as for people without one of the chronic conditions. Those with five chronic conditions have expenses 14 times higher than those without a chronic condition. The top five medical conditions (heart disease, pulmonary disorders, mental disorders, cancer, and trauma) accounting for 31 percent of total health care spending.

Now that I have you completely depressed, there is this little bit of humor.

"A middle aged woman had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. While on the operating table she had a near death experience. Seeing God, she asked "Is my time up?"

God said, "No, you have another 43 years, 2 months and 8 days to live."

Upon recovery, the woman decided to stay in the hospital and have a facelift, liposuction and a tummy tuck. She even had someone come in and change her hair color. Since she had so much more time to live, she figured she might as well make

the most of it.

After her last operation, she was released from the hospital. While crossing the street on her way home, she was killed by an ambulance.

Arriving in front of God, she demanded, "I thought you said I had another 43 years?"

God replied, "I didn't recognize you."

The book of Proverbs has this: "A cheerful looks brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones." In spite of the depressing facts I laid before you a minute ago, I have good news, news to bring health to your bones and every other part of you as well. From Matthew— "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and **healing every disease and sickness among the people.**"

In the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, God speaks through the prophet assuring the people who are being held as captives in Babylon, that all will work out in their favor in the long run. Even though they have rebelled against God and done all kinds of wicked things, the Lord says: "Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing.....; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. Over and over again the Bible is filled with healing and the promise of healing.

Jeremiah said, "Heal me, LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise." The man with leprosy in the New Testament came to Jesus and fell on the ground at his feet and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man saying, "I am willing, be clean!" To the woman with the issue of blood who touched the hem of Jesus' garment, he said, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace." To Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue whose young daughter was very sick, Jesus said,

“Don’t be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed.”

The number of people needing healing must have been great. Imagine how many sick and dying people there would be today without antibiotics, insulin injections, high blood pressure medicine, special inhalers for COPD and asthma, chemo therapy drugs, heart medicine, and vaccines for polio, measles, mumps, diphtheria, small pox, etc. This is to say nothing of the knowledge we have today of the importance of cleanliness to prevent the spread of disease, the use of modern anesthesia methods and operating room procedures, and the importance of pre-natal care. Without all these advances and many others we would not have the life expectancy we have today.

Everywhere Jesus went he healed people because everywhere he went there were sick people. Death was an ever-present visitor to their homes, and those who were the medical people of the day were extremely limited in what they could do to help. Jesus must have been like a beacon of light in that dark world because he brought the promise of health which they had thought impossible.

Yet, even with all our medical advances, with advanced care for the critically ill and hope for the victims of accidents, fire, and even violence, still we are not well. We have health problems, and they can affect the way we live, the way we think. They bring pain and hopelessness. Because we live longer the health problems become more and more bothersome. The pain of arthritis grows worse. A bad cold can turn into pneumonia. Even children have their health problems, rashes with weird names, bugs that spread through the schools like the wind, sore throats that become a serious strep infection. Obesity is another health problem. The truth is that too many of us eat too much, exercise too little, smoke, and abuse alcohol and drugs. It is no wonder that we think a lot about health, our own and that of our loved ones.

Some people have told me that they have never had a headache, never get colds or other pesky illnesses. They don't take any pills—even at age 70 or 80 plus. All I can say to them is, God love you, you need to be down on those sturdy knees of yours thanking the good Lord for your health because you are a rarity!

Jesus fed thousands of people, yet there were surely hungry people after Jesus died. Jesus helped some fishermen to bring in a really big catch of fish, but many people go fishing and don't catch anything. Jesus took some children on his knee and blessed them, still there are millions of children who have never felt his loving touch or been told about his love. Jesus healed many, many people, however tens of thousands of people in our world die from disease every year. Jesus said that there would always be poor people in the world, and we know it is true.

We live in a kind of paradox. We know what it feels like to be hungry— sort of. And, we want our children, our grandchildren, to have a close relationship with Jesus. We get sick, and so do those whom we love. And we know poverty, either up close and personal, or at least through seeing it on TV.

The paradox is that we are both the needy and at the same time the ones who need to bring help in the name of God. We must be the helper and the one who is helped. I think of my father, a wonderful Christian man who in his mid-eighties, not long before he died of pancreatic cancer, was volunteering in the evenings at a homeless shelter sponsored by the local churches in his town. He was a man who had known poverty and hunger for a short time during his childhood, and who had fought illness much of his adult life. Those things shaped his character and molded his behavior. Because of his compassion for the less fortunate, he put down sleeping mats for homeless people and dished up bowls of hot soup.

I am bringing this message to you well aware that you might be expecting me to tell you something that can make your pain, your sickness go away. I believe in miracles and in the power of God to heal us if that is God's will. I have great faith that God answers our prayers. I have seen many healing miracles.

There are no magic words which I can say to you. I cannot tell you that God will heal your loved one. I cannot tell you that you that you will not die from your disease. What I can tell you is that illness and disease, hunger and poverty, are conditions of our world just as violence, war, and natural disasters are. We are challenged to live faithfully as Christians in an unchristian world, even when the evils of the world beset us round about and we almost despair.

**I believe in the words written by the prophet Isaiah in chapter 40:**

29 He gives strength to the weary  
and increases the power of the weak.

30 Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;

31 but those who hope in the LORD  
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint. “

Our prayers for God's healing should always include praising and glorifying him. The Psalmist wrote: Praise the LORD, my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits—  
who forgives all your sins  
and heals all your diseases...

In the little book of James, people in the church are encouraged to share their burdens and to ask for prayer for their illnesses. The passage speaks of a healing service where the one requesting healing is anointed with oil. We have had healing services a few times in the past here in this church. Using the UCC *Book of Worship* resource for a healing service, we have held the service in the parlor area at the back of the sanctuary after the regular worship service has ended. I plan to hold a healing service sometime during Lent, probably in March, and it will be announced in the March Encounter. **I believe the words of James** who wrote: “And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” Each of you has the power to be that righteous person who offers up prayers for others and yourself.

In 1996 two people, Rev. Bobbie McKay, and Lewis A Musil, began a project which would have a big impact on them and on the people to whom they talked. The name of the project and the book which came out of it were called *Healing the Spirit, Stories of Transformation*. The two visited 101 UCC churches around the country, including First Congregational in Muskegon and First Congregational of Traverse City. Later they included a number of Catholic churches and Jewish congregations as well. The purpose was to get firsthand stories of how people in those churches had experienced spiritual healing. Very often the spiritual healing included physical healing. There are hundreds of stories and they are so moving. I wish I could share them all with you. There are so many and they are true, and they are mostly from UCC people who are not known to be the most emotional people! Here is just one:

“My son had been shot, and I followed the ambulance to the emergency ward. When I got there, they told me he was dead. I said, “I don’t think so.” I walked into a corner of the hospital and I said to God, “All my life I have believed in you. Now prove

it to me!" I went back to the room where my son was, and the doctor said he was sorry but that my son was dead. And I said, "I don't think so."

I went over to the table, and I said to him, "okay the doctor says you are dead, but I don't think so. So move your right arm." My son started to shake all over and I said, "Open your eyes." He couldn't do that, although you could see his eyes rolling under his lids. The doctor said that was natural with dead people, but I said, "I don't think so" and took his hand. I said, "Squeeze my hand," and he did. The doctor couldn't believe it. My son not only survived, he now has two jobs. I know God healed him!<sup>1</sup>

**I believe the words of Romans 8:28:** We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, who have been called according to his purpose."

You perhaps recall the story of the blacksmith who gave his heart to God. Though conscientious in his living, still he was not prospering materially. In fact, it seems that from the time of his conversion more trouble, affliction and loss were sustained than ever before. Everything seemed to be going wrong.

One day a friend who was not a Christian stopped at the little forge to talk to him. Sympathizing with him in some of his trials, the friend said "It seems strange to me that so much affliction should pass over you just at the time when you have become an earnest Christian. Of course, I don't want to weaken your faith in God or anything like that. But here you are, God's help and guidance, and yet things seem to be getting steadily worse. I can't help wondering why it is."

The blacksmith did not answer immediately, and it was evident that he had thought the same question before. But finally, he said "You see here the raw iron which I have

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<sup>1</sup>Mc Kay and Musil, *Healing the Spirit, Stories of Transformation*, Thomas More, Allen Texas, 2000, p. 112.

to make into horses' shoes. You know what I do with it? I take a piece and heat it in the fire until it is red, almost white with the heat. Then I hammer it unmercifully to shape it as I know it should be shaped. Then I plunge it into a pail of cold water to temper it. Then I heat it again and hammer it some more. And this I do until it is finished." But sometimes I find a piece of iron that won't stand up under this treatment. The heat and the hammering and the cold water are too much for it. I don't know why it fails in the process, but I know it will never make a good horse's shoe." He pointed to a heap of scrap iron that was near the door of his shop. "When I get a piece that cannot take the shape and temper, I throw it out on the scrap heap. It will never be good for anything."

He went on, "I know that God has been holding me in the fires of affliction and I have felt His hammer upon me. But I don't mind, if only He can bring me to what I should be. And so, in all these hard things my prayer is simply this: Try me in any way you wish, Lord, only don't throw me on the scrap heap."<sup>2</sup>

Friends, God is working out all things for your good. The heat and the hammering you experience is shaping you and making you what God wants you to be. Pray for your health problems to be healed, ask in the name of Jesus, believing that he is the greatest physician who ever lived. Pray for healing for your friend or a loved one. If the answer to your prayer is to have patience, to wait, or even if the answer is no, God is still working in your life. As a Christian you should remember that no matter what your trials, the Lord will not throw you on the scrap heap like a piece of useless iron. Instead, the Lord will make you into someone good, beautiful, and perfect in His eyes. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>2</sup>*Encouraging Christian Stories*, <http://www.christianstories.com>, "Trials."

