



## Sermon

It was an unremarkable afternoon at St. Michael's Hospital in downtown Toronto the day that I visited Latisha, a young woman, barely 28, who had been diagnosed with cancer. Because she was so young, and her prognosis so serious, the doctor had asked a chaplain to spend time with her. She was happy to see me and welcomed the opportunity to speak about her fears, her worries, her grief, her anxiety about the chemo and radiation. Would she see old age? Would she ever have children?

But one thing that never came up in our conversation was how she was going to pay for her treatment. It never entered our consciousness because we have public health insurance in Canada. She was unemployed, unmarried, and had a long list of pre-existing health conditions. If she had lived here in the United States, it would be next to impossible for her to get health insurance. If she was lucky, she would qualify for disability and Medicaid, but only after a lengthy intake and evaluation process. If I'd been visiting Latisha in an American hospital, she would have had a lot more on her mind than her illness and treatment. In addition to having no control over her illness, she might be even more helpless as she fell through the cracks of a health care system that is geared to profit, not need.

Moving through illness is often an arduous physical and spiritual journey that takes all of your energy. This is no different in Canada than it is here. The difference is that very rarely does illness in Canada mean poverty and homelessness. Never does it mean extended battles with insurance companies to get coverage. Here in the U.S., not only are you dealing with the very real spiritual and physical demands of healing, you're often battling a system whose central purpose is not your health, but a profit margin. At the most vulnerable time in your life, when you need all your energy, many Americans are reduced to fighting for the treatment they need.

We need to understand what is happening in this country, and why it is so imperative that we have health care reform. This is the richest country in the world and the only developed country whose health care is almost completely in the hands of largely unregulated private for-profit health insurance companies. We are the developed country with the highest percentage of uninsured citizens. It is also the most expensive health care system in the developed world. For all we spend on health care, we have the highest infant mortality rates and the lowest life expectancy rates among rich nations. Thousands die every year because they are underinsured or uninsured and thousands more, many with health insurance, face bankruptcy because they are broken by health care costs that insurance would not cover.

It seems so obvious to me and to so many others that health care reform is a moral imperative. And I have to admit, I am stunned by the resistance. Perhaps I am naïve, perhaps it's because I'm a Canadian citizen and I still don't really understand this country. Every single attempt at health care reform in the United State has faced massive opposition, from people afraid of change even if deep down they know it's needed, from corporate interests threatened by a loss of power and revenue, from those philosophically opposed to government of any kind, and always from politicians seeing an opportunity to stir the pot just in time to capitalize on discontent for the next election. So far, the resistance has been successful. Amidst the confusion and social unrest, the status quo has remained.

I am feeling that those of us who support health care reform are getting tired and disheartened. We're on the defensive, feeling backed into a corner by the passion and fire of opponents. And I don't like what is happening to me. I am growing more distrustful. I am distrusting that those we elected to make health care reform are going to be able to resist the pressure. I worry that even if we get legislation, it will offer crumbs of reform and so many loop holes that the status quo will be maintained. In



this distrust, I feel more defensive. I am getting angry and afraid. And I don't think I am alone. We're closer than we have ever been to major health care reform, and if we miss this opportunity, what if it takes another 17 years to try again?

So this morning I want us to take the time to strengthen ourselves, to restore ourselves into a place of possibility and hope by building up what I call a moral toolkit. According to George Lakoff, a progressive cognitive linguist, one of the biggest weaknesses of the progressive movement is that we often fail to articulate our values and beliefs. We talk facts and figures assuming everyone gets their meaning. So we say something like, "There are 47 million people without health insurance," assuming it will inspire widespread support for public health insurance. But it doesn't work. It keeps not working because we're not framing our message within a moral framework. Conservatives get this and have framed their message within a moral framework that people get and internalize. We have to understand our own moral framework and place those facts and figures in that moral framework. This is how we win hearts and minds, not through mere facts and figures.

Our moral framework is remarkably simple. We are all one. We are brothers and sisters. When we place health care reform in that moral framework, facts and figures now have meaning, and they are able to speak to the heart rather than the head.

I am convinced that the only way we win the battle for health care reform is by taking the risk to reach out to those in our midst – our families, our friends, our workplaces, our communities, our clients, and speaking from that moral grounding. That is what is missing right now.

Today, I've put together a list of some questions and comments that I've heard opponents to health care reform put out there, and I'm going to reframe them in a moral framework that contains our values so that we take back control not just of the answers, but of the questions themselves, because that's what we really need to do. When we simply answer the questions of our critics, we're stepping into their moral framework and thus undercutting our message, our ability to connect. When you reframe the question into your moral framework, you have stepped into the ability to change hearts and minds.

So let me give you an example. One argument put out there is that private health insurance will never be able to compete with a public option. Well, according to our moral framework, that's an inappropriate approach because the proper measure of an effective health care system cannot be whether a for-profit industry can compete. That question is actually irrelevant because health care is not about competition, it is about people. The true measure of success is in the quality of care people receive. The burden is therefore on the insurance industry to prove they can provide that quality of care, and so far, they have failed. In our moral value system, 47 million people without health care insurance means that the for-profit model as it exists has failed. The American people are in the position of submitting to an inferior product that divides us from each other. We are not all one. We are divided into those who can afford insurance and those who cannot. If Americans turn out to be better served by a public option, an inferior product which divides us from one another does not deserve to survive. That's the American way. We stand for people, not profits.

Another comment I've heard is that there really aren't 47 million uninsured people in the country. That is an inflated number used by health care reformers to push their agenda. So how do we respond? Too often by trying to prove the correctness of our number. This is useless and self-defeating. You've walked into a moral framework that is not your own. Reframe the question. How many uninsured people are you willing to accept? What is an acceptable number of people to die because they don't have health insurance? And then answer your new question. There is no moral way for the United States, the richest



country in the world, dedicated to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, to justify the unnecessary death of one person because they didn't have health insurance. Right now we're losing thousands. In our moral universe, we are all one, and those people count. They are our brothers and sisters. If we as a country fail to create a system that offers everyone the same access to health care, then their blood is on our hands.

So what have we done here? Always reframe the question within a moral framework, then answer your question. Don't just offer facts and figures. We have to frame "the facts" in a value system that explains their meaning. We are all one. We are brothers and sisters. We are bound in moral relationships with one another and everything we do is measured by how well we care for one another.

Let me give you another example of how to reframe an argument against health care for all: We can't afford it. It's going to compromise small business. It's going to make us less competitive internationally. Let's reframe this. The moral measure of something is not whether it's affordable. The moral measure is about what is the right thing to do. You don't first ask what is affordable. You ask what is right. Then, you see how to make that real. America didn't end slavery only after it found a way to stay competitive internationally and protect the economic interests of the plantation owners. You ended it because it was the right thing to do. You didn't end segregation because it would be a good investment opportunity for small business and increase federal dollars for local school districts. You ended it because it was the right thing to do." These examples from our history affirm the value that we are one. ([http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2009/08/im\\_safe\\_on\\_board\\_you\\_can\\_pull.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2009/08/im_safe_on_board_you_can_pull.html)) They reframe the question and answer it from within a progressive moral value system. Then you have the power!

And through all this, it is very important to emphasize our personal responsibility in that process. That is the theological underpinning of health care reform. What we're really debating is the moral relationship within humanity. Are we responsible for each other? Our answer is yes.

The basic underpinning of the opposition to health care reform, no matter how nicely it's framed, is that we are not. Most of the arguments against health care reform try to distance us from our interdependence on one another and look at each person as an isolated unit responsible only for themselves. Our task is to break down the illusion, because that's what it is, an illusion, of separation. We are not isolated units. We are part of an interdependent web of mutuality. Break one strand of the web and all are affected. So we reframe arguments against health care reform by showing that even the attempt to live out the illusion of separateness detrimentally affects other people.

So for instance, I saw a debate with someone online who said he didn't want his tax dollars to support the uninsured. He was taking care of himself. Others should do the same as him. The response from those of in support of health care reform was wonderfully solid. His tax dollars may not have been supporting the uninsured, but his insurance premiums sure were because the uninsured depend on hospital emergency rooms for their basic care. This is the most expensive form of health care, way more than going to a family doctor. His insurance premiums are paying for this. So first, they broke down the illusion of his separateness. Then, they brought his value as a human being into the discussion. Didn't he want to be valued for his hard work? Wouldn't it be much more responsible, respectful and moral to make sure that his insurance premiums were determined by the most cost effective way of delivering care? That happens by insuring everyone. That way everyone gets to do their part, like he already is.



What is the moral value system here? We are all one. Everybody needs the chance to do their part. Universal health insurance means that everyone gets to be full partners in health care, we're all in it together, and that is freedom.

This, I think, is the winning argument for health care reform. When everyone does their part, when we live as if we are all one, we are all more free. I think the argument that angers me most of all is that health care reform will take away our freedom. We need to reframe this. The for-profit health care insurance we have now has made us slaves and it is compromising the values of our democracy upon which this country is built. We are enslaved to an inefficient expensive unjust health insurance system that stands between us and our well being. When people are afraid to leave a job because they will lose their health insurance, they are less free. When someone declines an employment opportunity because it doesn't offer health insurance, they are less free. When small business owners close their doors or don't open them in the first place because they can't afford the insurance premiums, they are less free. Health care reform is about restoring and protecting freedom. And this is the clincher. We are more free when we take responsibility for one another. When we stop living just for ourselves, when we live the reality that we are sisters and brothers, we lift each other up into freedom.

I keep thinking about a particular story in the Christian Gospels. Jesus says to the crowd, if someone asks for your shirt, give him your coat as well. He was always holding up this radical interconnection, this willingness to serve, to live for one's neighbor. This was the essence of being human. It was the essence of being alive, it was the essence of living into our freedom. I believe we are being asked not only for our shirts, but our coats as well. In fact, we could well be in a position to be emptying out the closet. The irony of this is that we do not become poorer or weaker for this, we actually become stronger, more whole, more human, and if you want to put it theologically, more faithful to the image of God in which we are made.

Health care reform is one more chapter in the ageless universal human journey to wholeness. This is what our struggle is for. This is how we serve ourselves and each other in all the days of our lives. So be strong. Be kind. Be compassionate. Live the truth that we are all one. And don't be afraid to share that with the people in your lives. Speak it loudly so that we may walk together into wholeness.

Amen and blessed be.