

Public Health and our Faith
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1 Corinthians 12: 12-26

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it”

One would think that you could begin a faith reflection on Public Health Care with the assumption that everyone, regardless of politics, religion, culture, or station in life would regard *health* as a given, something that needs no apology or defense. That is until you read how one of the tobacco giants, Philip Morris, made the news some time ago suggesting to the Czech Republic that smoking would trim \$250 million annually from its health budget and other social costs by promoting the cataclysmic alternative of premature death.[1]

In a world of corporate giants, and neo-conservative political obsession with tax cuts, it seems even health, as a basic human necessity, can no longer be taken for granted. The harsh reality is that there are those who would want to buy and sell health as a commodity, as something accessible to the highest bidder, giving priority to those with the ability and means to pay. This is basically the system that currently flourishes in the United States, and leaves about 50 million people with no health protection, relying on charity when they get sick, where medical costs erupt into 500,000 personal bankruptcies every year.

Somehow, by some means, Canada, said a long time ago that such a “winner takes all” approach, and such a market-driven health system, was not going to be part of its life. And our Canadian values over the years have defended, even with huge costs, **public** health care, with quality accessibility for all regardless of income, race, religion, or station. We have, as Canadians, eschewed values, **in health matters at least**, that have placed more value on one person than another by virtue of wealth and power to buy.

And research has shown the goodness of that system. James Travers in the same Toronto Star article says Canadians know now that public

health care limits economic hardship. They know that in this country fear of losing insurance is not an impediment to changing jobs. And they know that in Canada the poor have more money to spend on other key determinants of health, social stability and personal well-being: food, clothing and housing. Public health makes that so.

With all that history, and practical wisdom, however, we are at it again in this country, with loud voices wanting to copy the US winner take all, market-driven system of health, arguing that private practice should be allowed to function for the wealthy, and the public for the poor. If you have the money why, in the name of God, shouldn't you be able to get ahead of the line, faster and better than the rest. I say in the name of God because many defenders of the two-tier accessibility are Christians. Need we be reminded that Stockwell Day is a devout Christian believer.

So, when Christians enter into the fray of public versus private debate these days, we do so not only on the basis of economic reason. We do so discerning what it means to be faithful and what it means to be unfaithful to the Spirit God who created us, and who came in Christ that we may have life and have it abundantly.

What I offer up in that regard is my theological and biblical perspective, and comes thus with all the limitation that implies, but with the hope it may help us discern where God is calling us to be on this vital matter.

I function with the biblical understanding that God's way in the world is very relational. We are persons created for community, and to live in community. *Being human*, in the pages of scripture, has something to do with *being in community*, keeping an eye out for the neighbour, living with the knowledge that my well-being is essentially connected with the well-being of the other, that indeed we are the keeper of our sisters and brothers in this world.

It is difficult to read the scriptures of our faith without having this understanding of human existence fall off its pages. Biblical anthropology is rooted, as Walter Brueggemann expresses it, in "neighborliness of a radical kind." [2] That's what Job experienced in the midst of his suffering when he said:

If I have withheld anything that the poor desired,
or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail,
or have eaten my morsel alone,
and the orphan has not eaten from it-
....if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing
or a poor person without covering.
..who was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep.

Job, in these words, is commenting on the obligations that rest at the heart of human existence by virtue of being human.

Brueggemann goes on to write that human obedience in relation to God "...means to care for the community, to practice rehabilitative hospitality, to engage in responsible stewardship, and quite concretely,

- to share your bread with the hungry,
- to bring the homeless poor into your house,
- to cover the naked.

New Testament writers testify to the same "neighborliness of a radical kind." The incidences of Jesus' are far too numerous to recite in which he reminded people in his teaching and preaching that living life without loving the neighbour as the self, was outside the purposes of God. Practice that did not mimic this in the structures, systems, and public arena of life was considered outside the realm of God's blessing, and thus unethical and immoral in the sight of God.

The church, of course, had its birth, as recorded in the book of Acts with that vision of neighbor care strongly before it. It is constitutive of our understanding of what church is and what it should be. "All who believed were together and had all things in common, they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need." Public accountability, and public accessibility were defining characteristics of ecclesial life from the very beginning, rooted in memory of the one who was the founding spirit of their life together.

"Neighborliness of a radical kind." It is the "piece de la resistance" for the Christian church in the debate that is raging over health care at the moment. The implication of this 'neighborliness' is that our resources are held in trust, in the Spirit of God, for the public good, and not for private benefit at the expense of others, or in disregard of the well-being of all.

Defending public health care, therefore, in a system that promises accessibility to all Canadians at the same level of quality, is a matter at the heart of our Christian confession, and thus must rest at the heart of our public witness.

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” (1Cor.12:26)

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[1] As reported by Jim Travers in the Toronto Star, in an article Defending medicare from half-truth.

[2] Brueggemann, pg. 462 in Theology of the Old Testament
