



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

“Does God Care?”

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“Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them” (Lk. 4:40).

February 3, 2013

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Sooner or later, you and I have a personal encounter with serious illness. A friend calls to report that another friend of many years is in the hospital and not expected to make it. You think about what to do, and what not to do, and finally decide to visit him. His face has grown gaunt, his voice is so weak you can barely understand it. His ex-wife and grown son and daughter are with him. After the awkward, opening pleasantries follows some uncomfortable silence. You have to carry the conversation, so you try to say “I’m with you, I care about you, I pray for you, I will not forget you.” Moments later you say goodbye, and everyone secretly knows it will be the last goodbye. And when you get back into your car you sit quietly and think about your own life.

Sooner or later, serious illness comes close to us. It takes hold of your parent, your spouse, yourself. It is, in a sense, never expected; it comes like a thief in the night. And part of what is so surprising about illness, is how utterly unprepared we are, how shocked, stunned, angered even that our predictable, organized lives are suddenly careening out of control.

Something else is in charge: the illness, the pain. Someone else is in charge: the doctor, the CNA taking your vitals in the middle of the night, the insurance company, the nameless, faceless person a hundred miles away who doesn’t know you but is reading the digital scan of your innermost secret places, and writing out a report, a report on which you have pinned many hopes and fears, a report that will probably take some time before the results are interpreted for you.

To be diagnosed with a serious illness is to enter a sort of medical gulag. The illness strips you of your independence, your freedom, your identity. It dresses you in a

patient's smock, which feels something like a prisoner's jumpsuit. Colorful plastic bands are placed on your wrist with the assumption that you will not always have your wits about you, to tell the white coats of your name and what risks you bring with you.

And then there are the theological questions, questions that many haven't worked through. Does God care? Or, to put it another way, if there is a God who cares, why am I sick? Isn't there a better way? Why does it feel as if he has deserted me? Why is he so quiet? Does God care?

Our text from the Gospel of St. Luke takes place at the very beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. One Sabbath, as the sun sets in the little village of Capernaum, the people start to gather outside the home of Simon Peter where Jesus is. They are bringing their sick, their little babies who are struggling to thrive, their old ones fighting for breath, their crippled ones, and the ones with symptoms no one understands. They come *now* because the Sabbath is over so they are allowed to bear burdens. They come because they have already heard about how he healed the man in the synagogue earlier in the day, and how he healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law.

They come with assumptions, with the assumption that they must have done something to deserve their illnesses. At the very least God is testing them, disciplining them, trying to refine them and consume their dross. They come wondering what kind of reception they will receive. Will this Jesus do anything for them, say anything? Will he care?

And so they come to Jesus in the cool of the early evening and he meets them, talks to them, listens to them and hears about their symptoms and their fears and worries. He takes them seriously. And then he touches them, lays his hands on them, every one of them, and quietly heals them. Of what, precisely, we don't know, nobody took pictures, and Luke doesn't bother with those details. But the sense of the text is that it's not a loud and chaotic moment. The sense of it is a quiet moment, when frightened, anxious, oftentimes isolated, lonely, desperate people are touched by his hand that conveys something of the love and grace and healing of God. Sometimes when

we're sick God seems so quiet, so absent, so far away, and it makes us wonder whether he's listening or not. It makes us question if he might be indifferent to our suffering. As the illness lingers on, drags on . . . there are setbacks and chain reactions . . . the dysfunction of this organ is affecting that organ, the potency of this medicine is causing that unbalance . . . as the illness lingers and confounds your doctors, it's easy to grow fearful and discouraged and question whether God really cares.

Remember when the disciples were caught out in the middle of the sea by a great big storm? They thought they were going to die. Yet Jesus was in the back of the boat sleeping. They shake him awake and shout at him. "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?" (We all ask that when we're really sick.) Jesus first rebukes the wind and the waves, and quiets them, and then he rebukes his disciples. "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Notice, it's easier for Jesus to quiet the brute forces of nature than it is for him to quiet the human heart. The lifeless storm shows a greater recognition and submission to His authority than do his disciples. Apparently, sin, doubt and unbelief all have a way of robbing us of the peace he would give us.

When you're really sick, it's going to feel like Jesus is sleeping again, and it will frighten you. Hear again his words to his followers. "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have you no faith?" Do not mistake his silence as sleepy indifference.

Does God care? Look at our text and see how Jesus interacted with those people of Capernaum. See how he laid his hands on them, every one of them. No illness is too big or too complicated for him, nor does he exclude any of them for who they are or what they've done.

Does God care? See how he laid strong, healing hands on those people in Capernaum, and see how he laid those same hands on the cross for the healing of the world. He's there to forgive our sins and give us eternal life. And though we still get sick and die, we don't have to die as those who have no faith and no clue as to where they're

going. Jesus spares us those fears by winning salvation for us on the cross. In place of fear, he gives us certainty.

After the funeral, at the cemetery, we gather under a tent, and the immediate family sits in cloth covered folding chairs in front of the casket. It's called the committal, and that part of the funeral is so much easier for me than the part that happens within the church. At the cemetery, I don't have to come up with any of my own words. The preaching happened earlier in the day, and more of that is neither necessary nor welcome. The extemporaneous praying with the family happened at the hospital, and then at the funeral home, and again before the service; and now it's time for the written prayers, the ancient prayers polished by time. And it's a beautiful little liturgy for the committal. It's all Gospel out there. No need for the Law, not there, not sitting in front of a casket and surrounded by all those tombstones. The liturgy begins simply with the reading of some strong promises of the Lord. One from Job: "I know my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God." Then one from Romans which ends with: "So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." And then, finally, one from John: "I am the resurrection and the life" Jesus said. "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." It's such a pleasure to read those words at the cemetery . . . his words, not mine, well worn words, the tongue doesn't get tripped up on them. And when everything else is uncertain for those sitting in the chairs, (if you'll ever feel normal again and be truly happy again, whether or not you'll be able to keep the house, if your friends will still want to be with you now that it's just you), when everything else is uncertain, what a gift that God has given us this certainty in Christ.

Does God care? Look at how he cared for those in Capernaum. And look how stretched out his hands on the cross for us and our salvation. And try to imagine heaven. It is so unlike anything on earth that human language struggles to describe it. God's Word (limited by human language) says more about what heaven is not. "He will

wipe away every tear from their eyes” Revelation says, “and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain. . .” No congested lungs, no crippling arthritis, no HMO’s, HSA’s, deductibles, co-pays . . . there’s not even that vocabulary in heaven for it has fallen from usage.

Does God care when we are sick? Look at those whom God sends to us when we’re sick: all those medical professionals. Luther calls them “masks of God.” God uses them as his instruments, his ministers of healing and relief.

It’s true. Some have surrendered their vocation, their sense of God-given mission and have become mere hirelings. Some doctors don’t get involved or worry about basic compassion and caring. They think of that as the nurses turf. But when you go to see a doctor, you can expect basic humanness, basic sympathy. No excuse for doctors who cannot get involved that way. But the vast majority I have met are skilled and compassionate and conscientious, at their very best . . . at their very best they remind us a little of the Good Physician in Capernaum. Some are unforgettable in that way.

Does God care? Look at those whom God sends to care for us, the medical professionals, but also friends and family members, people from church with their grandma’s casserole in hand, or a prayer shawl they knit, or just a warm smile. . . the Stephen Ministers who will come, if you make the request, to listen to you without judging you. They will offer a safe place to vent, and will pray for you, and maybe even give good insights and helpful feedback. God uses them too, expresses his care through them.

As long as we are talking about caring visits, let me just say there is no more distressing thing for a pastor to hear than this: “I had surgery a couple weeks ago. I thought about calling you but you’re so busy, I didn’t want to bother you.” We hear that a lot. We hear a lot about serious illness after the fact. We want you to

let us know. Maybe you don't want us to visit. We promise we will not stay long. And we will not speak in tongues, nor try to convert your agnostic sister-in-law, nor pray in such a way that people down the hall know that your colon is all twisted and blocked. Please call us. Seeing you when you are sick is an important part of what we do.

And when we come, we will read one of those wonderful Gospel passages, because you're already feeling the sting of the Law. And we will also offer the Lord's Supper, not because we think you have one foot in the grave, but because what is good for the spirit is also good for the body. And because Luther knew "where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation." And because Jesus promised, "This is my bloodshed for you for the forgiveness of sins." And because this Supper joins you into that one communion of the saints on earth and the saints in heaven (1 Cor. 10:17ff). And because Paul wrote, "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Sooner or later, you and I have a personal encounter with serious illness, and because we are who we are, we will ask the question, "Does God care?" He cared for those people in Capernaum. He cared for the world when he stretched out his hands on the cross. And when we're sick, he sends people to us, good people.

Does God care? Yes, God does care. Amen.

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