

Our country is in a health care debate right now. Congress reconvenes this week and most of their attention will be on bills addressing health care in the US. We are hearing lots of folks express their opinion. We hear from Rush and we hear from Hannity and we hear from Beck on one side and we hear from Olberman and we hear from Maddow and we hear from Stewart on the other side.

This past week there was a local town hall meeting with Congressman Spratt and there will be a speech on Wednesday from President Obama. We've heard about death panels and socialism and public options and government bureaucrats. We've heard about uninsured and illegal aliens and people who don't work and people who depend on Medicare and Medicaid. But there is one voice that I hear silent in this debate. And it is the voice of Scripture.

The text you heard Dale read from James and the one I am about to read from Mark are part of what is called the lectionary. The lectionary are passages of Scripture which are selected for each Sunday of the year. Several months ago I decided to do a sermon series on Mark which would lead me to eventually catch up to the lectionary. Today we catch up to the lectionary in the passage we are about to read.

Both this text and the James text which Dale read were selected several months ago with no consideration whatsoever to the health care debate. But as I read each of these texts, it became clear to me that if I didn't invite these texts into the health care debate then I was ignoring my responsibility as a pastor.

In this text that we are about to read, you will be introduced to a woman described as a Gentile or a Greek or a pagan woman from the Roman province of Syria. She is an outsider and a foreigner to Jesus. Listen to what happens in this encounter.

Read Mark 7:24-30

We are told that Jesus enters into this home in Tyre and does not want anyone to know he is there. But the Son of God cannot escape detection because of this pagan woman. This pagan woman pushes herself toward Jesus and stops him in his tracks. She does not allow him to pass by. She is hostile and demanding. And what is she demanding? She is demanding health care for her child.

She begs Jesus to cast out the demon that is in her daughter. We would expect Jesus to maybe ask her about her faith or we would expect Jesus to immediately heal her daughter. But that doesn't happen. If this response came from anyone other than Jesus I would say that this response was prejudiced. Jesus tells this woman, "let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Did you hear that? This woman comes to Jesus and demands health care for her child. And Jesus responds by saying, I have not come to help you first. I have come to help the people of Israel first. You are a dog. Get in the back of the line woman. Get in the back of the bus."

Now if the Son of God had put you or me in our places, I am sure that most of us would accept that we are second class citizens in the eyes of God and take our place of submission. But this woman doesn't do that. She confronts Jesus with what he has said to her. She challenges him with quite a verbal exchange. "Sir," she responds, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

And how does Jesus then respond to this pagan, foreign woman who stands up to him and demands health care for her daughter? His response? "For saying this, you may go. The demon has left your daughter. "The woman returns home and finds that her child has been healed.

Lying beside this passage of Scripture is the passage from James that Dale read. This James passage is also one of the lectionary passages assigned for the day. In this passage, the writer James challenges his hearers for showing favoritism.

“Do you really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ by your acts of favoritism?” And then James says this, “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised?” No wonder lots of Christians have wanted to throw out the book of James. What middle class or rich person wants to hear that God favors the poor and calls the rich the oppressors?

I don't know what reformed health care in this country should look like. The reality is that when you put your offering in the plate this morning that about 11% of what goes into these offering plates goes to pay for me and Kathryn, and Rebecca, and Mary Kathryn and James to have health insurance. Health insurance that is some of the best health insurance this country has to offer right now. You don't have a choice. Our Presbyterian system dictates that you pay this for me and my family.

But what concerns me is the tone of the debate right now. A tone which shows a societal regression. We are becoming more emotional and reactionary as a society and less rational in our debates and conversations.

I want to conclude with a story about someone who witnessed this type of tone once before here in this area of the country. If you visit the campus of Methodist related Wofford College in nearby Spartanburg, you will come across the Sandor Teszler Library. Sandor Teszler was born in Hungary and was ostracized from childhood not so much because he was a Jew as because he was afflicted with club feet, requiring many painful operations.

Extremely successful in the textile business, Teszler thought that his contributions to society would protect him from the Nazis. He was wrong. He and his wife and their two sons were taken to a death house on the Danube where victims were beaten to death.

Midway through their beatings, one of his sons pointed to the poison capsule each of them bore in a locket around his neck. "Is it time to take the pill now, Papa?" he asked. One of the tormentors leaned down and said, "Not yet." But then soon afterwards, the family was rescued by an official in the Swiss embassy and taken to safety.

Tezler left Hungary for the United States in the early part of World War II. Trained as a textile worker, he made his way to Spartanburg. In the 1950's, Mr. Tezler became anxious as he saw the rise of racist rhetoric around him begin to intensify. He recognized it from his days in Europe, and he could not simply ignore it for the sake of business.

He went to his foreman and asked where the racial tensions were most hostile in the area. The foreman replied that he wasn't sure where the worst was, but it couldn't get much worse than around King's Mountain. Mr. Tezler announced that day that he would be building a new factory in King's Mountain.

When word got out, the white mayor of King's Mountain came to see Mr. Tezler, asking if he planned to hire white workers. Mr. Tezler told him to recruit the best workers he could find, and if they were good enough, he would hire them. Shortly thereafter, the black pastor of a large African-American church came to Mr. Tezler and expressed his hope that Mr. Tezler would be hiring black workers. Again, Mr. Tezler encouraged him to find the best workers he could, and if they were good enough, he would hire them.

In the end, Sandor hired 16 new employees: 8 white and 8 black. In the mill, there was one bathroom, one set of showers, one water fountain. After initial introductions and a tour of the plant were complete, one white worker boldly asked, "Is this gonna be some kind of integrated plant?" Mr. Tezler replied, "You are being paid twice as much as any other textile worker in the area. You can work with us here in the way we work, or you can go somewhere else. Any other questions?" There were none, and all 16 employees stayed.

Several months later, the plant had grown in production such that a new group of employees were hired and greeted by these 16 foremen. One of the black foremen asked the new hires if there were any questions. One of the new white workers asked: "Is this some kind of integrated plant?" And this time, one of the white foreman replied, "You are being paid twice as much as any other textile worker in the area. You can work with us here in the way we work, or you can go somewhere else. Any other questions?"

The textile industry in North and South Carolina became integrated that day. Interestingly, Teszler continued to attend classes at Wofford well into his 90s and he was affectionately known by students as Opi, Hungarian for grandfather.

When we debate health care in this country, I sure hope we don't keep the Bible out of the conversation. But from what I read, I think James and Mark have a lot to teach us. AMEN.

-Teszler story from Haythorn, Rev. Dr. Trace, "Standing in the Tragic Gap," Sept. 6, 2009 sermon on Day 1 and found at http://day1.org/1433-standing_in_the_tragic_gap

-Additional info on Teszler found at <http://disembedded.wordpress.com/2008/01/25/sandor-teszler-the-story-of-a-passionate-life/>

-Text: James 2:1-13 and Mark 7:24-30

-Given: Sept. 6, 2009 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)