

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper
Sunday, January 31, 2021
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

“Excluded, Broke, and Sick: The Politics and Theology of Health and Healing”
Fourth of six in a series during Epiphany entitled
“The Season of Light and Knowledge”

Scripture: Mark 5:24b-34

In the early morning of July 4, 2019, I experienced a bout of atrial fibrillation that gave me quite a scare. Stephanie was afraid to take me to the hospital herself. It would take time to get the girls up, dressed, and buckled in their car seats. What if I was having a heart attack? We called 911. An ambulance came. In the end, I was discharged by noon and we went by train to Boston to see the fireworks.



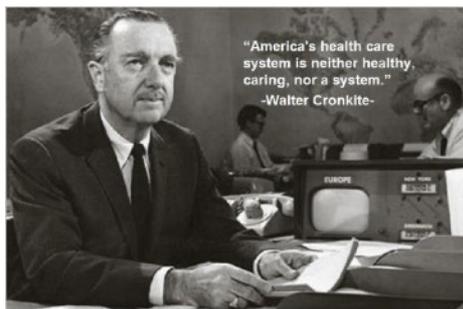
By August, I thought I paid all my medical bills. But in February 2020, I started getting letters from a collection agency. It seemed the City of Attleboro’s EMT service billed me separately from the hospital and it never sent my invoices to Vermont. I owed an incredible \$2,488 dollars for a four-

minute one-way trip to the hospital to which I could have almost walked.¹ *After* my medical insurance paid its share, I still owed \$2,091.



Note: \$21,420 per year is how much Anne Fecto and I pay for my and my children's annual United Church of Christ Blue Cross Blue Shield health care insurance premium.² So, let's put that all together. I pay \$21,420 for year for health care insurance and then paid \$2,091 for very expensive Uber trip *after* insurance only paid less than \$400.

Last story: Two weeks ago, I had my cholesterol levels checked. The laboratory charged \$288 for my tests. Insurance paid \$29. I paid \$259 this week to pay the balance.



¹ Apparently, it was an 'out of network' charge. In other words, 'You are screwed, "we" can charge whatever we want because you can't refuse!' Well, how does one choose an 'in network' 911 service in an emergency while having a heart incident while one is 'out of town'?! The point is, you can't. That's how they get you.

² Anne Fecto is the Treasurer of Centre Congregational Church (UCC) who has since the day I worked at the church always made sure I have been well taken care of by the church.

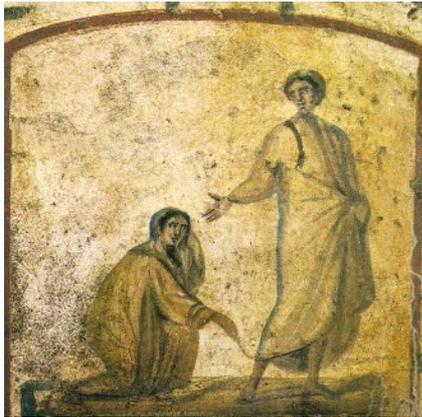
After paying my annual health care premium and my medical bills, I can only agree with Walter Cronkite when he said, “America’s health care system is neither healthy, caring, nor a system”.

Yet, I can’t complain. I am healthy. I am employed. I am loved and cared for by my local and wider church because they enable me to have the best medical care money can buy: ‘The A Plan’ (Yes, that is actually what it is called).

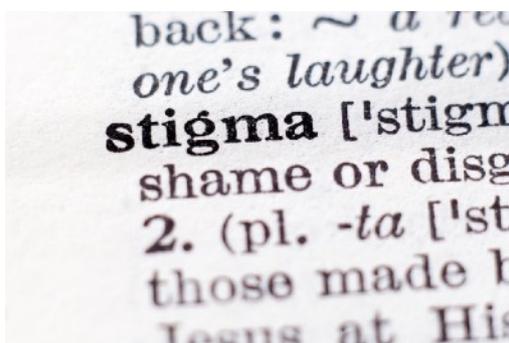


However, if you are a person of colour, if you are one of the working poor, if you suffer from pre-existing conditions, if you have little or no health insurance, if you suffer a serious accident, or a prolonged illness, you risk incurring suffocating debt, bankruptcy, poverty, and even death.

As people of faith in the twenty-first century, we are often under the misconception that the first century Palestinian context is completely foreign to our own. Yet, it is not. In fact, the Bible is the most important text in my life *precisely* because I feel it is the most relevant text for our time.



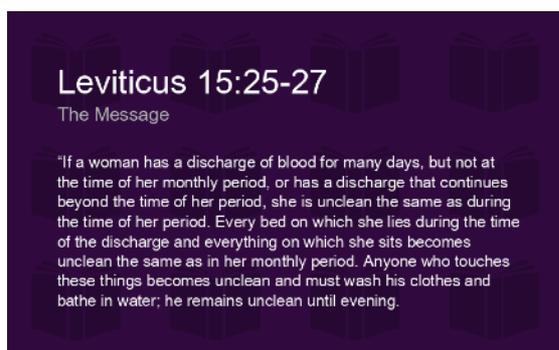
This morning's text is a beautiful example of that relevancy. We hear the story of a woman with a 'pre-existing condition'. For twelve years, she suffered bleeding. We don't know what disorder the woman had. Perhaps it was menorrhagia, a menstrual bleeding disorder. Or, it could have been the most common bleeding disorder for women: von Willebrand disease.³ Or, the disease could have been one of several different types of haemophilia. For us, it does not matter what bleeding disorder she had. What matters are the consequences she suffered from the bleeding disorder. In short, she was rendered excluded, broke, and sick.



³ "Common Bleeding Disorders and Signs in Woman", Steps for Living, found at: <https://stepsforliving.hemophilia.org/basics-of-bleeding-disorders/bleeding-disorders-in-women/common-bleeding-disorders-and-signs-in-women>, accessed January 30, 2021.

Perhaps the most devastating aspect of many illnesses is stigma. Sexually transmitted diseases such as herpes and HIV, psychological ailments such as depression, anxiety, or schizophrenia, and dermatological conditions such as acne, psoriasis, and leprosy sadly carry so much stigma. Stigma renders one a pariah. One is marginalized. One is excluded. Rejected. In many ways, stigma is worse than poverty or pain. Stigma cuts one down, infects the soul, and renders one, in one's own mind, disgusting to others, to God, and most damaging, even to one's self. One ceases to be a creation of God. One feels unworthy of anything, sometimes not even of life.

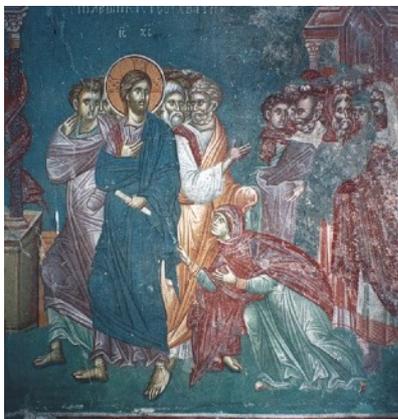
The bleeding woman's condition in first century Palestine carried multiple stigmas. First, blood itself was considered unclean. Second, if she suffered from menstrual bleeding she would have been considered doubly unclean. Let us hear The Law under which the woman lived (Leviticus 15:25-27):



²⁵ "When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge, just as in the days of her

period. ²⁶ Any bed she lies on while her discharge continues will be unclean, as is her bed during her monthly period, and anything she sits on will be unclean, as during her period. ²⁷ Anyone who touches them will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening.

Can you now imagine this woman's life? For twelve years?! Anything she sat on was unclean and even one that sat where she sat was declared unclean. Her life must have been excruciating lonely. Those of us who live alone during COVID know how difficult it is. How much more terrible if anything we touched became unclean, so much so to make others unclean. Stigma around illnesses can render people's lives not worth living. And in her case, the stigma was inspired and enforced by her faith tradition.



After exclusion, the bleeding woman suffered financial devastation. The scriptures state that she suffered under the care of doctors who had not only taken all of her money but actually made her condition worse. Surely she had no husband, and if she did he would have long since abandoned her, for what husband would be willing to always be unclean? Being a woman who was

unclean, she likely could only beg for food. As a woman, let alone a woman in her condition, employment (even prostitution!) would have been impossible.

What must it be like to be completely ostracized and marginalized *and* completely broke and destitute?! I can't bear to contemplate the misery.



Last but not least, the woman was sick. Persistent bleeding would decrease the number of red blood cells. A decrease in red blood cells would reduce the amount of oxygen for the body resulting in a hypoxic state. One would be rendered weak and anaemic. Headaches can result. Bleeding causes one to be vulnerable to many other ailments and prevents healing.

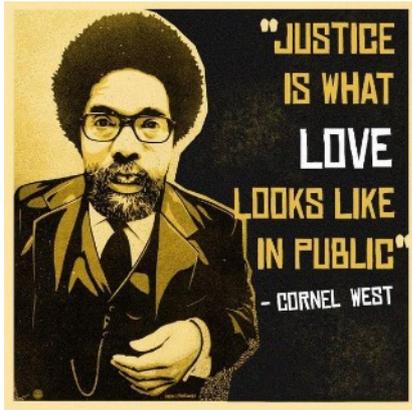
The bleeding woman took a massive risk in touching even Jesus' cloak. Remember, the scripture from Leviticus? Anyone she touched will be unclean! And what did she do? She secretly touched Jesus. She knew it – for she felt healed. He knew it – for he felt his power escape him. The woman was rightfully terrified! She touched another, making him unclean. She touched *a man*, making him unclean! She touched *a Rabbi*, making him unclean! She touched, the very representative of God, and made that representative unclean! No wonder she trembled in fear!

At the end of the story, Jesus had compassion. Jesus' role as a person of faith was that of a healer.



We as people of faith are compelled like Jesus to be compassionate and to desire and work to provide affordable health care for all. I realize that 'affordable health care for all' is a political slogan. Yet, I pray you know me well enough by now to understand that my gospel is not sourced from liberal nor conservative pundits nor elites. My gospel comes not from the font of the Democratic nor the Republican party. My gospel, and my positions, are motivated by Jesus the Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of my faith.

Friends, we are called as private individuals to foster compassion and healing. Yet, we are also called as the church to advocate for compassion and healing on a societal level, that is in the public sphere. And yes, this is called 'politics'. The compassionate gospel that heals *is* a political gospel (or at the very least, it has political implications, thus making it 'political'). The Bible advocates for justice and love. The two are synonymous.



One of my favorite quotes of all time is by the great contemporary theologian Cornel West who one prophetically stated “Justice is what love looks like in public”. This is the lesson of the bleeding woman healed.⁴

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.

⁴ The full quote is actually much better for the purpose of emphasizing my thesis in this message.

“Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private”.

Takin Williams, “#InContext: Cornel West”, The Human Trafficking Institute, February 22, 2017. Found at: <https://www.traffickinginstitute.org/incontext-cornel-west/>, accessed February 1, 2021.