

The Church and Healthcare Reform

Pastor Randy Burden, Sermon – April 21-22, 2012

My aunt once told me a story of a young man who came to a country church and preached. He told them about how in a dream he had seen the giant letters PC in the middle of a field and how that must have meant for him to “Preach Christ”. He went on to speak in an uninspiring way for quite some time. Afterwards one of the elderly ladies of the church shook his hand and offered some well-meaning advice – she said, “I think PC stands for plant corn”.

To those that have ears to hear, let them hear. Hear the message, and get it right. I believe the message of Jesus includes health and wellness and has a place in the church today. In light of that, I want to speak to you today about healthcare reform and the church.

But first I want to share a bit about my journey with God so you might better understand how and why I came here today to speak on this issue.

My life has been one shaped by significant events, or interventions by God. God has made the impossible possible! I was 23 years old when I graduated from the University of Nebraska College of pharmacy in 1978, and was led by God to move to rural New Mexico to work for the United States Public Health Service. My soon to be wife, Angie was finishing her nursing degree and would join me the next year. Assigned to the Indian Health Service hospital in Crown Point, we began working together in healthcare and for over the next 23 years we would live and work with Native Americans and be engaged in ministry leading Bible studies in our home and working with churches on and off reservations. Four years into our work, God opened the door leading to seminary – in order to better equip us for what lay ahead. When seminary was finished we returned to Indian Country, moving to the Zuni reservation, and resumed our work. In 1996, a decade later, God provided a way for me to complete a doctor of pharmacy degree specializing in cardiovascular risk management – while still on active duty. This was indeed a miracle and God continued to amaze me as He provided funding and favor so that I could then go on and implement and run a program in the 8 Northern Pueblo tribes to help prevent heart disease. In 2003, it became apparent that God had something else that He wanted us to do, so I retired from the service, left Indian country, moved to Valencia County and took a job with Presbyterian Medical Group in Belen where I now work as a clinician specializing in prevention and management of chronic disease. In 2009, through several key people and a series of events, God led us to start attending Grace Church, where I was recently ordained and now lead the Health and Wellness Ministry.

Over the past decade, God has been challenging me to process the relationship between the gospel, the church, faith, health and wellness. It is apparent to me that those in the church are as afflicted with physical ailments as those outside it. Over the years I have noticed that most prayer requests in churches relate to physical health and wellness. Although denominations might differ on their belief about the theology of healing, I have never seen a church where people do not pray for healing for the sick. And indeed, clearly James

instructs us to do that very thing when he says “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him...” (5:14), but I’ve wondered, is there anything else we or the church could or should be doing?

Let’s look at the ministry of Jesus. We read in Mathew 4:23 that “Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.” In his article from Health and Development, a journal of Christian Community Health Fellowship, entitled “Why did Jesus Heal?” Steven Reames quotes physician Karl Watts asking “Why did Jesus bother to heal people?” His response, “because life is sacred. It thus follows that health is sacred. The truth about healthcare is that it is a parable of the Gospel”. Reames goes on to say in his article that “reconciliation with God is a healing of our relationship broken by Sin in the Garden. Jesus provided healing as a physical manifestation of that restoration; a taste of the coming age when we will receive new bodies and death will reign no more.”

The good news that Jesus preached was healing – to do that he used his hands and his mouth. Jesus applied God’s therapy, a healing balm to the whole being resulting in the person being made whole – healed and saved. These miraculous healings validated that Jesus was the messiah and these healings also showed that God cared about every aspect of mankind – spirit, soul and body.

If this ministry of healing, health and wellness was only to validate that Jesus was the Christ, God incarnate, then it would have ended there. Instead, we see in Luke 9 Jesus sends the 12 apostles out to “proclaim the kingdom of God and to perform healing”. Again in Luke 10 Jesus sends 70 more out to do the same. And in the final chapter of Mark, Jesus sends them off again with the great commission – to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation...” Later in this same chapter, Mark records Jesus saying that believers would continue to lay hands on the sick, and they would recover. The ministry of healing in the life of the early church continues on and is well documented in the book of Acts – by an eye witness named Luke, who as you might recall, happens to be a physician.

But despite the presence and prayers of the apostles, who by the way had quite a track record when it came to miraculous healing, not everyone was healed with a touch or a prayer instantaneously. Look carefully at scripture and you will see that many in ministry struggled with illness. Paul had an illness, most likely some type of eye disease, which according to Galatians 4:13-15, was the reason he preached to the Galatians the first time. We read in 1 Timothy 5:23, that Timothy, Paul’s son in the faith, had stomach problems and frequent ailments. Some like Trophimus were left behind because they were sick (2 Tim 4:20). Paul writes in Phillipians that his co-laborer Epaphroditus had a prolonged sickness, so severe that it almost took his life and caused Paul to despair (Phil 2:24-27).

It is apparent that the “beloved physician” Luke did not take down his shingle and stop practicing medicine, but rather continued traveling and working with Paul. In response to the need around them, Luke and other gifted believers were active in the early church caring for the sick.

In closely examining scripture, it is clear that the early church offered prayer, support and medical treatment to the sick. Paul, being acutely aware of the need to care for those sick in the church, wrote in one of his earliest epistles reminding the Thessalonians to “help the weak” (1 Th 5:14). Towards the end of his ministry, in his farewell address to the Ephesians in Acts (20:35), Paul admonishes the church to “care for the weak”. The Greek words (astheneo, asthenees) used in these passages were translated as “weak”, but the same words used throughout the gospels, Acts, and James were translated as “sick”.

In addition to prayer for the sick, James (5:14) stipulates that the sick were to be “anointed” with oil. Scholars think it is very probable that when James calls for anointing (aleipho) the sick with oil, he is not referring to a sacramental anointing (chrisma; chrio) but rather an application of oil for medical purposes. The word means literally “oiling”, – like the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz, the oil was applied to help him function. In the first century, oil was commonly prescribed as therapy to promote healing. Jewish historian Josephus in the Antiquities of the Jews (Antiq XVIII 172 [vi. 5]) notes that Herod the great bathed in oil for a cure during his last illness. Dr. Luke describes the use of oil to care for wounds in Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:34).

Of note, in this story Jesus says the Samaritan showed compassion with action (in this case providing medical treatment and care) and equates that to mercy. Jesus final words on the subject were “go and do the same”. Prayer and ministry to the sick have clearly been part of the work of many Christian communities such as monasteries and convents for centuries and more recently mission hospitals and clinics.

So what does healthcare reform have to do with the church? Perhaps instead of focusing on what more the government can do to help the poor and needy with healthcare, we should be asking what the church can do to ease the burden of disease and sickness that we find in our congregations, communities and country.

I think it is clear that personal sacrifice and discipline is the first place to start in this quest. Paul urges us in Romans 12:1 to present our bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, which he calls an act of worship. The giving our whole being, spirit, soul and body, to God in a manner pleasing to him, is a sacrifice, an act of worship.

Loving God with all our heart, our mind, our soul and our strength requires sacrifice. Loving others requires sacrifice. And yes, loving ourselves requires sacrifice. This could mean giving up something that we desire or enjoy for the sake of giving our best to God or others. This is indeed tough love!

I had a patient that I was seeing to help her manage her cholesterol. Her cholesterol levels were significantly high – enough so as to warrant the use of medication, but I wanted to try an attempt at controlling them with diet first. We discussed that her best chance of doing this was cutting back on animal products high in fat and cholesterol. We put together a plan and I told her we would recheck her tests in 6 weeks. When she returned, I thought someone had put her on medication, because her cholesterol had dropped significantly. I asked her who started the medication. She replied, “no one”. I said, “then what did you do?” She replied, “just what you told me to do.” Now I had never seen this kind of reduction (and never since) in cholesterol levels with only diet before. So I asked her, “what specifically did you do?” She replied, “I stopped eating chicharrones every day.” For those of you who don’t know what chicharrones are, let me tell you that is fried pork fat – as shown in this

picture. She then had a choice to make – return to the old way, or love and take care of herself by leaving the chicharrones out of her diet.

We have the same choice. We can choose to be conformed to the world around us and become what we see, or we can choose to be transformed by the renewing of our minds and see what we may become through following God's way and His will.

Paul wrote in I Corinthians 6:19-20, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body". I believe that one of the ways we glorify God is by following a lifestyle and behavior that produces health and wellness rather than choosing to walk down a path leading to disease and sickness. Practically speaking, as we care for our bodies, we are more likely to remain active in serving God and others as we age. By being healthy, we can also potentially minimize the amount of money spent on medication and medical bills thus allowing us to joyfully give more financially to support the ministries of the church and those in need.

Prevention is the key! Time magazine, January 10, 2011 -"Starting Jan. 1, all 46.6 million Medicare beneficiaries become eligible for wellness visits". "75% of the \$2.42 trillion in annual U.S. health care costs stem from chronic diseases, many of which can be prevented or delayed by lifestyle choices." The government knows that to cut costs, chronic disease must be prevented or delayed.

Let me give you one example of this. Clinical studies have shown that weight gain, inactivity and improper diet are major contributors to the alarming rise of type 2 diabetes, heart disease and other chronic diseases that haunt our society.

The Centers for Disease Control has published and updates yearly a series of slides looking at the progression of weight gain by state in the US over the past 20 + years. These alarming slides reflect the growing state of the union: now 7 out of 10 Americans are overweight, and 3 out of 10 Americans are obese. All agree that the reason for this weight gain is that we Americans have more and more leisure time with less and less activity and we are eating more and more junk food.

We have taken physical education (PE) out of school and replaced it with computer based learning, face-book, twitter, tweeting, texting, the internet, and Netflix on demand. We have become a nation of inactive people. They say a picture is worth a 1000 words – and this picture is one I think one that many Americans can identify with. Here we see a man sitting in a chair with his soda, a bowl of munchies and his TV remote. The TV is in front of him – to his side is his dog... on a leash... running on the treadmill!

Many of us, like the man in the picture, have an aversion to activity. One of my patients was on the road to developing diabetes. He was overweight and inactive. His laboratory tests showed elevated triglycerides and fasting blood sugars with low HDL or good cholesterol – all this led me to believe that it was just a matter of time, before he would become a diabetic. I discussed with him that activity might be able to change the picture and reverse or delay the process. He told me that he didn't like to exercise, and wouldn't walk outdoors, but did have a treadmill that he could put together and put in a place where he would use it. We agreed on a plan that would increase his walking on the treadmill to 30 minutes a day over the next several months until he would

see me again. When he returned, I asked him how the treadmill and walking were going. He replied with a sheepish grin, "I did get the treadmill put together and moved to a place where I could use it." He is on medication today – and still not walking, despite the urging of both myself and his wife!

Healthy eating over the past few decades has become a challenge with the advent, availability and affordability of fast food. In his 2004 documentary *Super Size Me*, Director Morgan Spurlock takes a look at the effects of fast food on the human body, using himself as the proverbial guinea pig. For one month, Spurlock ate three meals a day at McDonald's. Whenever asked, he opted to super-size his meal. In just 30 days, he gained over 25 lbs and his health started to fail so his physician told him to stop the project.

The Good News! It has been shown that healthy eating and daily activity along with maintaining a healthy weight can prevent and delay the progression of chronic disease. Unlike Lot's wife, who turned back and became a pillar of salt, it is not too late for us to turn our gaze to the pursuit of health and wellness!

So what does caring for the body look like? Some simple action points: eat right – a diet rich in fruit, whole grains and veggies, get 30-60 minutes of activity in most days of the week, get 7-8 hours of sleep every night, maintain a healthy weight, and don't smoke, just to mention a few. If you are like me, we need all the help we can get in order to be successful in caring for our bodies. One of my favorite cartoons shows an overweight healthcare provider telling an overweight patient sitting on the exam table that he needs to "lose 40 pounds, quit smoking and come back and tell him how the heck he did it!" The point is that we often know what we should and need to do, but like the cartoon, to be successful we need support in the way of role models, encouragement, accountability, dedication and a real desire to be healthy in our daily living.

Ah, healthcare reform. A resource that we often overlook for this support is the local church. Many churches have healthcare and fitness providers who are more than willing to help with this journey. Opportunities exist for one-on-one holistic counseling and prayer, health fairs, screening programs, health education, fitness classes, medical missions and even church based clinics.

One example of this comes from my dearest friend from seminary days, Bob Tice, who grew up in inner-city Buffalo, NY. After seminary, he returned to Buffalo to live in one of the poorest and roughest parts of the city. He planted and pastored RiverRock church – made up of refugees and immigrants from 15 different countries. The church building has offices where social workers help these folks adjust to American life and get jobs. The building also has a busy clinic ministering to the needs of those in the church and the surrounding community – run and staffed by healthcare providers, many of whom are members of RiverRock church. What a wonderful example of how the church and its members can be involved in the whole life of an individual – spirit, soul and body!

Following in what we believe are the footsteps of Jesus, Grace Church started the Health and Wellness ministry in January. Some of you helped us to evaluate the congregational health and wellness needs when you filled out a survey we handed out during one service. In response to this, the Health and Wellness Ministry offers a weekly class taught by healthcare providers and fitness experts as noted in the bulletin, with topics

announced each week, all geared to help you integrate faith and health, and minister to your needs. Some of the topics we have covered have been preventing disease through lifestyle and behavioral modification, weight loss, healthy approaches to eating, stress management and exercise and fitness. For the next few months we will be covering prevention and management of chronic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol.

We have identified medical and fitness providers that attend Grace and invited them to become involved with the ministry. If we missed you, please let me know!

From this group, God has raised up a leadership team that has identified the purpose of this ministry to be four-fold:

1. to lay a biblical foundation about health and wellness of the spirit, soul and body through preaching and teaching
2. to integrate a biblical health and wellness culture into the church, into the ministries and into the lives of each believer
3. to facilitate wholeness in the Body of Christ by offering services such as weekly blood pressure monitoring and classes to educate, guide and motivate people
4. to reach others with the gospel of Christ through programs and medical missions. We would be a resource for other congregations wishing to start a similar ministry.

In conclusion, I have laid a Biblical foundation that clearly shows that the health and wellness of the entire person was central to the message and ministry of Jesus, it continued through the early church and is here for us today. This message remains unchanged.

I have given you a Biblical rationale for why believers should strive for optimal health. What is your health plan? God loves you and cares about your spirit, soul and body. He desires that you in turn love yourself and love others as yourself. As you embark on this journey to care for the temple of the Holy Spirit, I encourage you to take advantage of the benefits of the healthcare ministry – learn what you can, get help from God and those in the Body who have been called into this ministry, and put it in to practice.

Please pray for this ministry. Pray that we would be led by the Holy Spirit to discern what God would have us do and the wisdom and ability to do just that.

Paul says in Romans 12, “since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given us, let each exercise them accordingly”. Pray and see if God would have you use your gifts to help in this Christ-centered healing and helps ministry.

I think today we have an opportunity for the church to lead the country in true health care reform as we proclaim the holistic gospel of Christ through words and action.

I would leave you with this final exhortation from III John “Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health just as your soul prospers” (III Jn 1:2 NASB)