



“Prophetic Healing”

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Jeremiah 8:18–9:1 (NRSV)***

Heart trouble is a common problem in my father’s mother’s family, the Lindgrens. While heart disease often has a genetic link, I’m thinking that the Swedish customs of making coffee with egg yolks and eating five times a day could have brought on these heart conditions.

My Grandma Nehring and one of her older sisters, my Aunt Hazel, presented with the most heart problems in my youth. Aunt Hazel had her first heart attack when my twin sister, Marlene, and I were about 8 years old. She was in the hospital recovering from her heart attack for a long time, and was never quite the same after that crisis. Aunt Hazel died at home about two years later, at the age of 75. Congestive heart failure was the cause of her death.

Grandma had heart trouble too, but hers was not as severe. She never had a heart attack. Her primary health issue was tachycardia, which as you may know is an irregular heart-beat. Though she sometimes had what she called “spells,” and had to take medication and rest for awhile, Grandma enjoyed good health most of her life, and lived well into her 80s.

Because of their heart conditions, and because my family never got the memo about child labor laws when I was growing up, my sister and I were frequently delivered to Grandma’s house and Aunt Hazel’s house to help with canning, baking, spring cleaning, holiday preparations, and family get-togethers.

Marlene and I learned at an early age how to polish the silver, make Swedish delicacies, can produce, and swap screens and storm windows on old farm houses. We also learned how to fetch Grandma and Aunt Hazel’s nitroglycerin pills, and how to call the ambulance.

II

Heart disease is common in American society. Most of us probably have a relative or friend who is living with heart disease. We may even be one in that number.

According to the American Heart Association, in 2006, 81.1M people in the US were living with heart disease, and 34% of all deaths were attributable to heart disease, which was and continues to be the leading cause of death in the US.¹

We know about congenital heart defects, about the impact of high fat, high cholesterol diets, about the result of insufficient physical exercise, about the impact of smoking, and about the adverse effects of diseases like diabetes or pulmonary ailments on hearts.

We also know that medical treatment like chemotherapy and that the use of illicit steroids may deteriorate heart function.

Any of these factors, or a combination thereof, can contribute to heart disease. But the physical deterioration of the organ is not the only kind of heart trouble that a person (or a nation) may suffer. Jeremiah knew that, and was quick to point it out to the nation of Judah.

III

In today's Old Testament reading, Jeremiah talks about another kind of heart problem which we sometimes refer to as "heartsick." In chapter 8, verse 18, Jeremiah says, "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick."

The prophet is not talking about angina, tachycardia, or a myocardial infarction. He's talking about being heartsick. He's describing feelings of desperation, despair, and depression.

I suspect that just as we all know about heart disease in our families or may even have cardiac issues ourselves, we are also acquainted with heartsick feelings.

The older generation in my family was prone to heartsickness too. When someone was struggling with a hardship, when the farmers were having an especially bad year, or when there were deaths, Grandma and Aunt Hazel and others in the family were heartsick.

When my baby cousin Roger was diagnosed with and died from Leukemia, we were all heartsick because everyone knew that there was no effective treatment or cure for this disease back then.

When the young men in my family went off to war, the old folks were heartsick, because they had seen a lot of war and they knew that war did not solve much and in fact created other kinds of problems at home and abroad.

When the farmers who worked night and day to pay the farm debts while the cost of production kept going up, and the price of grain and livestock kept going down and they

¹ <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.ihtml?identifier=4478>

couldn't afford groceries or to take their children to the doctor when they were ill, the old folks in my family were heartsick.

As it turns out, it wasn't just the old folks in my family who were heartsick. Jeremiah and the other Old Testament prophets, and Jesus taught us that God gets heartsick too.

God gets heartsick about the unmet needs of the poor, about idolatry and greed, and about the false prophets and priests who support the status quo.

Jeremiah was heartsick, and so was God. Heartsick is the feeling that Jeremiah was talking about when he said, "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!" (Jer. 9:1)

In other words, Jeremiah is saying, it is not possible to fully express the depths of my despair—and of God's despair. The intensity of these feelings is too great. Neither words nor actions can fully express the extent of their heartsick feelings.

Jeremiah goes on to say, "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.' For the hurt of my poor people, I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?"

Then answer, to Jeremiah's question, has to do with the root cause of the prophet's suffering, of God's suffering, and the suffering of the poor, in sixth century BCE. The health of the people had not been restored, because the nation of Judah had heart trouble.²

William L. Holladay, one of the leading Jeremiah scholars in the world, explains in his book *Jeremiah: A Fresh Reading* that the term "heart" in Hebrew is synonymous with a person's character. He explains further that Jeremiah was not talking about a physical heart. He was talking about moral and spiritual sickness. One's heart, in Hebrew culture, wasn't and isn't just a muscle that pumps blood through a body, the heart was and is the seat of moral decision-making (130). The heart is the center of the will. In Jeremiah's eyes, the powerbrokers in Judah had heart trouble. They had character flaws. They suffered from a lack of will to do the right thing. The king and the priests of Judah had heart trouble.

Jeremiah was as a country prophet (a country doctor) who was called out of a small village in northern Judah to go down to the capital city, Jerusalem, and speak truth to power. Who would want that job? Probably not even Jeremiah, but he accepted the assignment, and went down to Jerusalem and pronounced the diagnosis that the king and his prophets had heart trouble. As you may imagine, this was not a popular diagnosis, and Jeremiah paid dearly for his bravery with lengthy sentences in the royal jail.

² William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Fresh Reading* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1990), 130.

Jeremiah was called by God as a youth in the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign over Ancient Judah. This same year, 627 BCE, marked the death of the last powerful king in Assyria—the nation that had held Judah as a vassal state for more than a century. Judah, like the other vassal nations, took advantage of Assyria's weakened condition and reclaimed its sovereignty. But their independence did not last long, as the Babylonians' influence began to grow, and Judah was soon subsumed into the Babylonian Empire when King Josiah died thirty years later.

The political and moral gains that Judah achieved under King Josiah's rule were lost when in 587 BCE the Babylonians conquered Judah, burned the Temple, the palace, and the main houses, dismantled the defensive wall around the city, and marched most of the survivors back to Babylon, where they were held as indentured servants for forty years.

In the eyes of the prophet, destruction, defeat, and exile were the result of divine judgment on Judah for failing to care for the poor. Destruction, defeat, and exile were the consequences of Judah's heart trouble. They were the result of a kind of moral and spiritual congestive heart failure in their land.

IV

Modern nations are no strangers to the kind of heart trouble that Jeremiah warned about—the kind that made him (and God) heartsick. The degree to which the unmet needs of the most vulnerable were being met was and is, in the prophetic tradition, the barometer on a nation's heart health.

I subscribe to the prophet's views about heart health and faithfulness, and extrapolate from this view by saying that access to high-quality affordable healthcare is a basic human right grounded in the prophetic traditions of Ancient Israel, our Judeo-Christian scripture, and the life and example of Jesus Christ. When any nation fails to provide for the welfare of the most vulnerable, then God is heartsick.

The need for access to high-quality affordable healthcare isn't a need only associated with people beyond our doors. There are families in our church right now who don't have health care coverage. There are people in my family who don't have health care coverage.

There are numerous people in our community who do not have health care coverage. In fact, Hayward ranks second among cities in Alameda County for the number of uninsured adults, and there are thousands more in our nation who don't have health care coverage, and who need it now. Since the downturn in the world economy occurred, an estimated 15,000 Americans began losing their health insurance daily.

Many more of our church families have health care coverage, but their plans don't cover all of the care that they need, and their premiums and out-of-pocket expenses have continued to soar, when they have landed in the famous "donut hole."

Practically everyone in our congregation, even people with good coverage, has lived with fears about the impact of job loss or a major medical emergency on their health insurance coverage and care. Some are afraid of losing their insurance, maxing out their benefits, and not being able to afford or receive needed care. These are just a few of the reasons why healthcare reform is so needed in our nation.

While my experience as a parish pastor keeps me keenly aware of the needs of our members and neighbors, and the statistics about our larger society, it is the teachings of Jeremiah and Jesus that repeatedly remind me that health care reform is about more than policy, money, or ideology. Health care and health care reform are moral and spiritual issues.

When thousands of people die each year because they cannot get the health care they need; when half of all families that go into bankruptcy each year file because of medical bills that they cannot afford; and when we know that low-income families often have to wait for weeks to get an appointment with a doctor—if they even have a doctor who will take them as a client—then we know that something more is at stake in our national debate about healthcare reform. We know that healthcare reform is first and foremost a moral and spiritual issue.

Reforming health care is a test of our society's moral character. Whether and how well we can come together to heal suffering in our society—including the suffering of the poor—determines our nation's character and our faithfulness to God.

To use Jeremiah's metaphor, whether and how well we address healthcare reform in our country determines whether we as a nation have heart trouble, and whether we make God's heart glad or we leave God heartsick.

V

To be sure, no social or political policy written this side of heaven is going to be perfect, nor will it save all of us. But some policies more than others will point us toward the prophetic vision Jeremiah described, and that Jesus demonstrated, and that we are called to emulate.

Universal quality health care that emphasizes health education and prevention, early intervention and complimentary treatments, and that addresses linguistic and cultural differences in our society, is the kind of response to Jeremiah's prophecy that makes God's heart glad, and improves the physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of our entire congregation and country.

Because I believe that access to affordable high-quality health care is a fundamental human right, I've been part of COR's advocacy efforts calling for health care reform at every level of our society. Together, COR and the United Church of Christ (locally, regionally, and nationally) have been advocating for more funding for local community clinics, like Tiburcio Vasquez Health Care Clinic in Hayward, and for more community clinics and services here in the unincorporated part of Alameda County.

Many others in COR, including our own Rev. Drew Nettinga, and several other members of Eden Church and area UCC congregations that are part of COR have been part of this effort too. Drew's has worked on health care reform while serving as the pastor at the San Lorenzo Community Church, UCC, and he has continued to advocate for health care reform as our Area Minister with the Bay Association, and the Northern California Conference of the United Church of Christ.

After worship today, Drew, Herman (or COR community organizer), Pedro (our MIT who's working with Eden COR this year) and I and other members of Eden COR hope that you'll join us in the Norberg Room for an update on the federal Health Care Reform policy, so that you may better understand how these policy changes affect you and your family and the rest of our community, and so that you can continue to explore how God may be calling you engage in health care advocacy for your own sake, and the sake of your family and for those who cannot advocate for themselves. See you at 11:30 a.m. in the Norberg Room. Amen.