

## “Our Brother’s Keeper?”

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” The question is as old as the Bible, and the answer, at least in Jewish and Christian tradition, is clear that we do have obligations to each other. We are not simply consumers or competitors in an economic marketplace, but neighbors and companions in a network of mutual aid. So when God inquires into Abel’s whereabouts, Cain’s response, “I know not,” has been rejected by centuries of ethical reflection which tell us that we are in fact our sister’s and brother’s keepers, guardians, caregivers and protectors.

Some call healthcare a human right. But I’d prefer to say it’s a public responsibility, like education or the administration of justice or funding the local fire department. Civilized societies provide these services for the common good. If your house is hit by lightning, the emergency responders come to the rescue with lights flashing and sirens blaring to put out the blaze. No one stops to ask if your home is covered by insurance. No one inquires how you intend to pay for the water before the hose gets connected to the hydrant. Nobody expects that the fire department is going to earn a profit for its shareholders. And although firefighters risk life and limb to do their work, and deserve to be fairly compensated, nobody supposes that you’re going to get rich walking into burning buildings. Firefighting is like public sanitation, or maintaining the roads and bridges. It’s a function of good government.

And I’m not sure why healthcare should be so very different. Yet that’s the way it’s been seen in our country. If you’re hit with cancer (or just hit by a bus) instead of your house getting hit by lightning, then that’s your personal problem, and not our collective concern. The ambulance may still come, with sirens blaring and lights flashing, but the side of the vehicle is likely to carry a corporate logo like “Rescue, Inc.” And that makes a difference: should the fire department send an aid car, there’s no charge unless you’re actually transported to a hospital. The EMTs will work for free, pound on your chest, or put a band-aid on your boo-boo, all paid for by your tax dollars. That’s socialized medicine. Private ambulance companies of course have to bill, and if you can’t pay the invoice, you’re liable to wind up broke. For as you know, medical emergencies are the leading cause of bankruptcy in the United States ... the only country in the developed world where losing your health means you may also lost your shirt.

It’s not surprising that firefighters are near the top of ladder in surveys of which jobs command the greatest prestige in our society. Teachers and scientists and police officers are also up there in our esteem. And doctors still get plenty of respect in our culture, but the medical profession’s reputation has been slipping in recent years, and may one day be down at the bottom with bankers, stockbrokers and used car salesmen unless things change soon. For most Americans agree that our healthcare system is seriously broken.

You read the horror stories in the *New York Times*, hear them reported on *Frontline*, about the hardworking families who’ve always carried insurance but whose son develops leukemia at age twenty-one, just before graduating from college, and gets kicked off the family policy, whose treatments now cost thousands of dollars a month. I

don't know that we have any nightmares unfolding in our own congregation, but they're always waiting to happen, like for one family here who had accident insurance but no real medical coverage. The wife told her husband that if he cut himself on a power saw, just keep going, because their policy was only good for dismemberment!

An informal survey I conducted last weekend discovered a variety of smaller, more irritating complaints. One man, for example, griped that even with a Ph.D. he found it hard to understand the various plans and options available under Medicare and felt the pharmaceutical industry deliberately tries to obfuscate the real costs involved. A woman in her forties said that Blue Cross insisted she take generic versions of a pill designed to fight depression, but the generic brand wasn't time-released and made her mood oscillate like a yo-yo. Another woman with bad arthritis depended on acupuncture to keep her mobile, but found insurance wouldn't cover Chinese medicine. A psychiatric nurse saw patients being given shock therapy mainly because the physician in charge was getting so richly compensated each time he administered the juice. Meanwhile, a psychiatrist whom I know and trust confided her feelings of being at the mercy of insurance companies, harassing her on the phone to justify the extra time and personal attention she gives to clients. I'm sure you could add your own accounts of befuddling bureaucracy, confusing co-pays, exorbitant fees added-on for seemingly simple procedures. Hardly anyone is completely satisfied with the care they get or how much it costs. But we're liable to see these varied frustrations as separate symptoms, expressions of our own individual ailments, of getting old or being disabled or have special needs, rather than as connected dots that point to an underlying social malady.

For the reality is that the whole system is sick. That's why the World Health Organization ranks the United States as 37<sup>th</sup> in overall performance, trailing Chile, playing catch up with Morocco, down below Colombia and just above Slovenia, and 72<sup>nd</sup> in the world, down below Macedonia and Tunisia in terms of the actual well-being of our citizens, all while spending more per capita than any other nation on earth, \$2.4 trillion altogether last year, which works out to about \$7,900 for every man, woman and child among us.

Who benefits from this arrangement? Not sick people. Not the 47 million Americans without insurance. Not folks who might like to retire or switch careers but can't make a move because they're afraid of losing coverage. Corporations, on the other hand, are doing rather well. Biotech, big pharma, insurance companies and the for-profit hospital industry are all prospering, even in this recession. Last month as tax time approached, my wife and I were trying to figure out where to park our annual contributions to a Roth IRA. A quick search of the internet showed nearly fund was down. The one exception, we found on the Vanguard website, is healthcare. Every other investment has dropped forty to sixty percent over the past year, from energy to mining to real estate, small caps to large. The Standard & Poors 500 Index has lost 38% of its value in the last twelve months. That seems to be the rule, with the glaring exception of the healthcare fund, which is down less than half that amount. That's not so bad. Not bad at all. In fact, since its inception in 1984, the fund has delivered investors average returns of over 16% per year. Unless you're lucky enough to own a credit card company, where else

will you get 16% a year? At that rate, over ten years, your initial investment will quintuple. Not even Bernie Madoff promised his shareholders that kind of yield! Put your dough into healthcare and it's a virtual goldmine.

Which is part of the reason why spending on healthcare consumes one-sixth of the entire U.S. economy, why our insurance premiums keep going up at double digits each year. We're all paying through the nose so that Wall Street can deliver those enormous returns to shareholders. And I worry about the future of healthcare reform, the conversation that President Obama has started, so long as the profit motive remains primary, so long as we have to pay tribute to mammon above all other gods and worship money above all other social goods.

After all, the giver of life and health was originally considered a divine being, not only by Jews and Christians but also by the Greeks, who credited Asclepius, the offspring of Apollo, with inventing the arts of healing. The original version of the Hippocratic Oath that doctors still take today begins with the invocation "I swear by Apollo the Physician and by Asclepius ..., his son. And in his *Republic*, Plato discourses on the legendary tales of Asclepius' birth and death. "They say that Asclepius, even though he was the son of Apollo, was bribed with gold to heal a rich man who was already dying," according to the character Socrates, "and that is why he was struck by lightening," hit by a thunderbolt as a punishment from Zeus for overcharging a patient. "On the contrary," concludes Socrates, "we will say that if Asclepius was the son of a god, he was not a money-grubber, and that if he was a money-grubber, he was not the son of a god."

Remember, Socrates said that, not me. But I tend to agree. We need to restore our sense that the relationship between healer and patient is not simply a commercial arrangement or business transaction but also a sacred trust. We need to remember that how well we care for the ill, the infirm, the most vulnerable among us is the best measure of our civic character. We need a shift in fundamental values, to affirm that the bottom line isn't just measured by accountants. There's a moral accounting, too.

But the moral audit is unlikely to take place, and real change isn't likely to happen, unless thousands of ordinary people begin to raise their voices, get a little agitated even. There's too much money at stake for the "establishment" to change, unless they have to. Last year, for instance, the CEO of CIGNA, where Dori and I get our medical insurance, got paid \$11 million, down from \$28 million the year before, while even the head of Vermont Blue Cross, a supposed "non-profit" organization, made a cool \$7 million in compensation. The system's working fine for those folks! And that's where VIA comes in. Vermont Interfaith Action is designed to turn ordinary people into community activists, to bring the language of faith and values into the public square where policy-makers have to pay attention, not just to lobbyists and vested interests, but to the people who elected them. But the funny thing about community organizing is that it only works if you work. You have to get involved.

You don't have to start going to meetings every night of the week. But you do have to go to some, and begin talking with your friends and listening to your fellow congregants to understand that we're really all in this together. We're going to either succeed as a

nation—building a network of care that's truly universal, that includes rich and poor, old and young--or continue to slide downhill together, because we are in fact our brother's keeper, and you cannot have a healthy body or healthy mind when the social organism is ailing, when community you're part of is a dis-eased and decaying patchwork of inequalities.

Real change has got to start with restoring our sense of relationship, our interdependence and responsibility toward each other. Those are the ligaments and tendons, the connective tissues in the body politic. So come to the VIA meeting at 12:30 today, and raise a little Cain (if you're able). They say that brotherhood and sisterhood is powerful.

### Prayer

Friend and Listener  
Eternal Thou  
Help us to find your presence  
In our relationships with each other  
In the rapport of companionship  
In communities of mutuality and trust  
And in the healing mystery of knowing  
That even in times of sickness when we feel most troubled and afraid  
There are those who truly care.  
Open our hearts to our neighbors in need.  
Bind us together in love:  
Rejoicing in each other's joys, united in our sorrows,  
Together in our resolve  
To bring compassion to our common life,  
Members of the larger body  
Whose name is humankind.