

Health Care for All!!

A Sermon for *Health Care Justice Sabbath*

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Selected verses from 1 Samuel 17:1-49 – The Story of David and Goliath

¹⁷Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle. ⁴And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. ⁵He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. ⁶He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. ⁷The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. ⁸He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. ⁹If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us." ¹⁰And the Philistine said, "Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together." ¹¹When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

¹⁹Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. ²⁰David rose early in the morning, left the sheep with a keeper, took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him. He came to the encampment as the army was going forth to the battle line, shouting the war cry. ²¹Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. ²²David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. ²³As he talked with them, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines, and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him. ³²David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." ³³Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." ³⁴But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, ³⁵I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. ³⁶Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God." ³⁷David said, "The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine." So Saul said to David, "Go, and may the Lord be with you!" ³⁸Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. ³⁹David strapped Saul's sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, "I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them." So David removed them.

⁴⁰Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd's bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.

⁴¹The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. ⁴²When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. ⁴³The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. ⁴⁴The Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field." ⁴⁵But David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to

you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.

⁴⁶This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, ⁴⁷and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand."

⁴⁸When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. ⁴⁹David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

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The story of David and Goliath is one of the best known of all biblical stories. It has inspired poetry, art, sculpture and song. Emily Dickinson's "I Took My Power in My Hand" is a David and Goliath poem. In Joseph Heller's novel *God Knows*, he writes a comic rendition of David and Goliath. The jazz group *Take 6* recorded a song on David and Goliath. And sculptures and painting of David abound in Florence, Italy where he was patron saint during the Renaissance, the favorite depiction being David holding the head of Goliath!

At one level the story is about rooting for the underdog. The rookie, the guy who has just come up from the Farm Team to the Big League always wins our support. But in the biblical narrative, David is not just the courageous underdog. David puts his faith and trust in a God is opposed to oppression. The story of David is a story of God-trusting persistence in the face of oppressive giants.

In fact, the real lesson of the David and Goliath story is a lesson about faith, David's faith, in a God who desires and even requires loyalty and trust, especially when the battle is waged against seemingly unbeatable giants of injustice and oppression. David's faith is in a God who desires wholeness and healing, abundant life for all. David's faith is in a God who will not desert those who give their time and energy combating the evils of their day. And that is why, after David's victory over Goliath, it would indeed be possible for David to recite verses from Psalm 9. "My God is a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know God put their trust in God who will not forsake them."

Over time, the church has identified many Goliaths. Contemporary giants include racism, elitism, homophobia, sexism, economic imperialism, militarism, nationalism and ecological exploitation. I'm sure that you could add your own Goliaths to that list.

This morning, as we consider the issue of universal healthcare on our Health Care Justice Sabbath, I invite us to ponder the Goliaths and Davids of health care reform. Who do you see as the Goliaths that keep people from having affordable health care coverage? Surely there are the insurance companies and the high premiums that are set. There are also the drug companies that make a fair buck. In some respects, every stakeholder sits on the side of Goliath as long as we do not address underlying issues around the cost of health care. Statistics tell us that 80% of health care spending is on chronic illness and that people only get a half of the care that they should get. Oh, insurance pays for acute care, say for the amputation of a leg of a diabetic, but it will not cover the seven tests that prevent the amputation from happening. Why are we not demanding preventative care to cut the costs of health care? Similarly, adult and child obesity accounts for a 30% rise in health care spending. How can we address this enormous cost with preventative measures? Yes, in some respects, we all represent the Goliath's of the health care system.

And what about the Davids? Surely we can see that the “underdog” position is that of the uninsured. They are among the Davids in our society today. Will it astound you to know that 46 million people, including 8 million children, in our nation are among the Davids of 2006? Eight out of 10 uninsured Americans are in working families. Either their jobs do not provide health coverage or they cannot afford their share of the premiums. These are people who cannot afford private health insurance on their own and are not eligible for public programs. Those lacking health care coverage live anxious lives even when in good health, always fearing illness in the family. Being uninsured means going without needed care. It means minor illnesses become major ones because care is delayed. It means one significant medical expense can wipe out a family’s life savings.

Chances are, as we gather today for our Health Care Justice Sabbath, in our midst sits an adult who can’t see a doctor because he/she doesn’t have insurance. Chances are, in our midst is a child without health insurance and his/her worried parents, who fear an injury or worry about the dangers of untreated illnesses, who regret the checkups and preventative care that the child is missing out on. Chances are, you know someone who does not have health care coverage.

Susan Webb, our Parish Nurse, was sharing with me the story of her friends George and Mary who run a small auto repair business. George is a type 2 diabetic, suffers from high blood pressure and depression. As a small business owner, they discovered that health care premiums were outrageously expensive. And what was worse was when they finally bought insurance and used it for other than preventative care, the insurance company raised their rates! They live on the edge financially. They pay what they can of their medical bills but when they do not pay their full bill, they are harassed by collection agencies. They are committed to honoring their debts, but try to sell this to a collection agency! George and Mary’s story is replicated tens of thousands of times in our society.

Surveys show that George and Mary are among the 12 percent of white Anglo Americans who cannot afford health care. In comparison, more than a third of Hispanic Americans and over 25% of Native Americans are uninsured. The uninsured rate among African Americans is 22% and among Asian American 20%. Our health care system segregates not only between the haves and have nots, but blatantly between minorities and the majority. This calls for action.

As a community of faith, we believe that God is the source of life. And that this Creator God calls us to seek the health, well being and wholeness of life – body, mind and spirit. Like David, our faith is in a God who will companion us as we work to combat injustice. As a Christian community, we are followers of the One whose mission was to heal the sick and care for the poor and release the oppressed. Matthew reports on Jesus’ ministry at its very beginning, “Jesus went throughout Galilee...curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matt 4:23). The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church state that we believe that health care is a basic human right and responsibility to all.

The Good News this morning is that in our Commonwealth of Massachusetts, action has been taken to insure medical coverage for the uninsured. The Health Insurance Bill was approved by the state Legislature this past April 4th and on Wednesday, April 12th, Gov. Mitt Romney signed the bill into law, while vetoing several of the provisions, including a fee on certain businesses that do not provide health insurance. The Health Insurance Bill requires all residents to purchase health insurance by July 1, 2007 and creates a low-cost, state-subsidized health insurance program for residents with incomes up to 300% of the federal poverty level. Experts figure that there will be sustainable health insurance coverage for 90 – 95% of Massachusetts residents over the next 3 years.

That is indeed Good News! But it does not insure that this fantastic reform will be sustained. To insure the insurance, the mandate for health coverage for all needs to find its way onto our November ballot. It will be in the form of a constitutional amendment calling for affordable, comprehensive health insurance which covers medically necessary health and mental health care services including prescription drugs and devices for all Massachusetts residents. Only if this amendment passes, will the next step be taken to insure health care as a constitutional right, sustainable through the next and the next and the next administration. For those of us who watched the employer mandate component of the Dukakis universal health care initiative evaporate within months of enactment, there is understandable concern.

Here, on this Health Care Justice Sabbath, we have an opportunity to communicate with our legislators, asking them to assure a constitutional right for health insurance. On July 12th, our 200 state senators and representatives will meet as a Constitutional Convention to vote on Constitutional Amendments. Currently, the health care amendment is second on the agenda. It needs 50 votes to put it on the November ballot. Polls show that 75% of Massachusetts voters across age and political spectrum support making health care for every Massachusetts resident a constitutional right. Prayer, phone calls, e mails, personal visits to your legislators, and postcards are the 5 smooth stones that will put pressure on our senators and representatives to put this critical issue on the November ballot. It is the only way of insuring the insurance!

So let us be Health Care for All advocates this morning. I would like to ask the ushers to pass out a list of our Mass. Senators and Representatives along with 2 postcards regarding the July 12th Constitutional Convention when it will be decided whether or not to put the Health Care Amendment on the November ballot. And I would like to ask you to take a moment to fill out the 2 “postcards” and address them to your senator and representative. These postcards will be mailed to the Health Care for Massachusetts Campaign and will be hand delivered to your senator and your representative prior to the July 12th Constitutional Convention.

Let us not only sing but also act for a world where goods are shared and misery relieved. Where truth is spoken, children spared, equality achieved.... A world in which the poor are rich, the weak are strong, the foolish ones are wise...a world where time and tears will be no more, and all but love will cease. So be it. Alleluia. Amen.