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**Text:** Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelations 21:1-6a

### Fixing and Caring

There is a story told of two people who were seated next to each other at a large dinner party; one was a physician, the other a minister. Immediately after introducing themselves, the physician was heard to say boldly to the minister, and without reticence, “ I think you ought to know, Reverend, that I don’t believe in God.” The minister, without blinking an eye, promptly shot back, “That’s alright, Doctor, but you ought to know that I believe in socialized medicine.”

Now, this may be an outdated joke, insofar as a physician might no longer take offense at the idea of socialized medicine. It has now been quite awhile that outside parties have been involved in the treatment that physicians offer, and with socialized medicine one might at least get a reliable party to give reimbursement. But be that as it may, let the joke stand for what it is supposed to stand for: two cultural stock characters representing healers in our society, but, apparently, with two different views of the social good and of health. One heals the body, and does it so well and has such confidence in the ultimacy of her science, that she has no need to consider the soul or its maker. The other, the one who treats the soul, seeks a principle of justice and altruism that seems to be the one chink in the scientific armor that gives such moral superiority to the other. Yet, there actually is a sense in which the two are not entirely in disagreement. At least the way the joke tells it, neither of them actually disputes what healing is or that it is a good thing. The problem between them seems to be, as it is presently in this country, access to that healing, with the minister simply applying a moral unguent to the physician’s art. That is a problem, for what the minister ought to represent, and what we who

believe in a God, including physicians, ought to be concerned about is a different sort of healing. Not that we are unconcerned with the health of the body. Rather, the point is that we ought to be concerned about the healing of the whole human being, including the soul. Sometimes, of course, we have to go through the body to reach the soul. Still, we need to understand that the health of human beings as a whole can be very different than the health of bodies alone.

Let me explain myself. Consider what we normally take health to be. It is in the main rooted in an image of bodily health. That is not at all surprising nor a problem. We are most and first familiar with our bodies. But we, particularly in advanced Western societies now have a certain image of what counts as health that is strictly of the body -- an image of unimpaired vitality, with no blemishes, no handicaps, no inconveniences.

Now, let us be frank. Many, many physicians do not subscribe at all to this image, and many wish it would go away. Cancer researchers, I am told, learned a long time ago that they were not looking for a cure for cancer, since cancer is not one thing. They look for the best treatment for each type of cancer. In some cases, they have a reasonable hope for complete remission; in others, they offer a certain length of life, with the least morbidity. Responsible orthopedic surgeons and transplant surgeons do not say that a hip replacement or a liver transplant will make you the same as before, as if you never had a problem. It will make you better, a lot better, but it requires responsible self care by the patient, with some physical limitations and side effects. Moreover, under current conditions, the procedure is likely going to need repeating in ten years or so. All, of course, hope for improved treatment in the future, but most understand that there are limits both to technology and to the human body.

However, not everybody gets it. Many people assume that physical perfection is obtainable, and that it is obtainable by a technological fix and that it is even a birthright. As a

result of this picture capturing our imaginations, how we judge illness and how we choose to heal, how we choose to restore health, comes to be dominated by an image of a certain form of physical healing. And that is? Healing here is something that is subject to a method employed by highly skilled experts who apply the method to produce the desired results. And the desired results are? They are the continuation of what we were doing before imperfection stalled us. It is in the same vein, that sometimes, even if there is nothing really wrong with us, we seek treatment because what we do have is not quite perfect.

The shadow of this image falls elsewhere as well. Consider, particularly on this All Saints' Day, how many people treat the concept of the kingdom of God, which most simply call "heaven." According to longstanding research on the matter, most people consider it as simply a continuation of earthly life, with all good relations intact and going on forever, just without the wars, the diseases, and other inconveniences that disrupt our active life styles. Heaven thus is simply seen as the fulfillment and expansion of an earthly task. It is, in short, a technological heaven where the divine healer has made good on all his promises, a place where there are no wrinkles, scars or troubling, free floating anxieties. Of course, it is then no surprise that as our technology becomes more powerful and enables us to live longer lives that we can imagine a physician confidently saying to a minister that he doesn't believe in God; after all why should he, since the kingdom seems to be within our technological grasp? And why shouldn't a pastor then, as often happens, have legitimacy only if he or she is another healer that is one more element in that process? Why shouldn't a pastor be a therapist, and congregants not souls, but clients? To many minds that is precisely what religion is for. It complements medicine, aiding it in the only kind of health we can imagine. And so we end up confusing a sort of psychological health with spirituality, forgetting Kierkegaard's dark warning that happiness is often the favorite hiding

place for despair.

There is, however, another image of health and healing that we should consider. It is the one we read of in Isaiah and *Revelations* this morning. Far from seeing the kingdom merely as an extension and completion of what we are presently pursuing, just without the hassles, it involves a different kind of healing. It is not about people with sleek, well toned bodies; in fact, we are told elsewhere in *Revelations* that in God's kingdom people retain their scars. The "lamb slain since the foundation of the world" who sits on the throne of heaven certainly bears his scars; it is how one recognizes him. No, here the healing involved is of the sort wherein God is with his people and wherein every tear is wiped dry. It is a model of caring and presence, not one of mere fixing.

There is a great deal of difference between caring and fixing. Despite our technological advances, there are no guarantees to fixing. Often we can't fix things at all. And even if we could extend life another hundred years with good physical health, death will still come, despite the bombastic assurances of some researchers. Fixing health at some point comes to an end, just as does fixing a favorite pair of pants does when there is nothing left to sew patches on to. And making the body perfect may not do anything about despair and anxiety; worrying about that kind of perfection probably even makes despair and anxiety worse.

Caring is different. When genuine, it is never frustrated; the healing it brings is similarly never frustrated, even among the terminally ill. But in order to understand what healing as caring is about, we have to understand that it is not always the same thing as curing, for often where there is the most caring, there is the least curing. Often we care the most and do the most good precisely in those situations where there is little we can do to change the physical situation.

Consider an example as obvious as Mother Theresa. Few impugn her motives but she is

not free from criticism. Noble as her work of tending the dying was, many have thought her to be ethically naive. Remaining faithfully Roman Catholic, she never addressed the issue of birth control, and surely India's overpopulation contributed a great deal towards the number of dying children she had to tend. Curing the children's problem would seem to be best done by tackling the problem of overpopulation. Indeed, one philosopher in *The New York Times* last year argued that in terms of doing good, people who are simply exemplary such as Mother Theresa are pretty low ranking. Yet, that sort of criticism fails to notice what Mother Theresa's real value was. She was not, nor did she ever pretend to be a solver of problems. After all, she really was just an Eastern European peasant. She was no expert nor was it even likely that she could have become one. But exactly where there was little or no hope of curing the problem of India's population by expert means is exactly where this little non-expert did so much good, a good that no amount of expertise could ever provide. No matter how many problems we solve, the good she provided is a good that we will always need. If people didn't care for children as she did, we might never worry about fixing things. We might simply be callous if we didn't have examples like her.

There is no doubt that the care Mother Theresa provided, and that her order still provides for dying children offers a sort of healing for those whose lives are touched by it. It heals despair one of the greatest illnesses of the soul. It also heals, though, the one who is doing the caring. I do not mean simply the self-satisfaction that comes from helping somebody else, a self-satisfaction, which if we are not careful, can breed a sense of smugness. What I have in mind is, rather, the healing of the breaks between us and others. We are too often separated from each other, and in societies of autonomous individuals such as ours, our relations with others are utilitarian. However, when we are willing to wipe tears away and willing to be present with others even in desperate situations, well, then, we can also heal our own separateness from them.

There is an old story that illustrates this. It is the story of Jozef De Veuster, also known as Father Damien, the recently canonized Catholic missionary who volunteered to minister to a leper colony in Hawaii in the nineteenth century. In Hawaii, as everywhere else in the world, lepers were outcasts, and were exiled to an outlying area of the island of Molokai, that even today is accessible by land only on a donkey. As the story is told, Father Damien worked with these lepers, giving order and hope to a community that had fallen into despair and the moral chaos of those who believe themselves damned and condemned. Then one morning in December, after being there for sixteen years, it is told, at morning mass, instead of opening with the familiar words of the mass, he addressed the congregation as: “My fellow lepers...”

Far from being aghast at hearing this story, aghast at one more instance of disease, most people who have ever heard it have instead felt a sense of moral victory. For what was begun as a noble action, ended as a sublime one, one where helper and helped blur into one, one where the ultimate disease of our time, separateness and alienation, is overcome.

There is, I would suggest, in the conjunction of these two things – one, the willingness to care even there is little to be done to fix a situation, and two, the ability to overcome the distance that separates us from those whom we would heal -- a perfect image of healing and an image of the kingdom of the saints. Together they give us a way to think about where ministry and medicine are joined, not only for doctors and ministers, but also for all who would help others.

This is an image that can help to heal our understanding of healing. For far from relying on medicine solely, and making it simply a technical means of fixing and restoring the body, they insist on restoring the human being to full humanity by bringing full humanity to humanity. Traditionally, medicine, although it has always sought to heal the body when possible and to save it from death in many instances, has never been an art of prolonging life for the sake of

prolonging life. Rather, at its best it has always been an ethical practice of wiping away tears, a way of re-establishing the human where the inhuman has been all too overwhelming. But it is not only a matter of ethics because it treats other human beings, it is an ethical practice because it is also good for the practitioner. Thinking about healing this way might restore our view of medicine. But it might also let us see where healing also takes place – in ministry, for example, and not only at the level of the clergy. For all of us are to be engaged in this healing, this care for others, this overcoming of moral solitude and despair in our souls.

This is the sort of healing that God bids us to do. This is the sort of healing that God offers us in the word become flesh. And this is the sort of healing he offers us here in this meal, where he makes himself present to all of us, and where he promises that we will become, like the saints who have gone before us, forever present to God.