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Jesus' health care plan

by Nicole Sotelo

Jesus was perhaps one of the world's first health care reformers. During a time in history when Greeks and Romans often traveled to a temple with offerings in exchange for healing, Jesus and his early followers healed free of charge wherever they encountered the sick, often at great peril to themselves.

In fact, healing is a constitutive element of Jesus' ministry. His first miracles in the Gospel of Mark are casting a demon from a man and healing a woman with a fever. In the whole of the gospels, there are 41 distinct stories of physical or mental healing. Jesus heals the blind, cures the withered hand and stops the bleeding.

He called his followers to do the same. Jesus instructed his disciples to go into towns and "cure the sick who are there" (Luke 10:9). Religion, caste or payment is not a consideration; instead, mercy and healing is extended to everyone.

I wish that were true in the United States.

Today, the United States is the only industrialized democracy that does not offer universal health care. All other comparable countries -- from Japan to Canada -- have universal health coverage. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's report last month, the number of uninsured people living in the United States rose to 46.3 million in 2008. The number of underinsured -- those whose health coverage does not protect them from high medical expenses -- was estimated to be 25 million in 2007.

The lack of universal health care in the United States disproportionately affects young adults. Adults aged 19 to 29 are one of the fastest growing groups of people who lack health insurance. Young adults represent approximately 30 percent of uninsured adults under age 65, despite the fact that they represent only 17 percent of the same population, according to the Commonwealth Fund, a health care foundation.

If there ever was a need for intergenerational equity, it is here: without young adults, the health care system is debilitated. The insurance industry depends on young adults' relatively good health to help spread the risk of high payouts among insurance members and keep premiums low for everyone in the system. Without young adults, our health care system is bound to fail.

And yet, obtaining comprehensive and affordable health insurance is a critical problem for young adults. Low-level jobs rarely offer employer-based insurance and pre-existing conditions keep others off the rolls. Even when a young adult is able to afford health insurance, underinsurance is a problem. In a recent Commonwealth Fund survey of both insured and uninsured young adults, one in four were paying off medical debt.

As millions in our country suffer from lack of health insurance, Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kan., and Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City, Mo., issued a joint pastoral statement last month in response to the health care reform proposals from the current administration. They write that "many of the proposals which have been promoted would diminish the protection of human life and dignity."

The fact that more than 46 million people living in the world's wealthiest country do not have affordable access to health care, in my opinion, is already a great diminution of the dignity of human life.

From Jesus' early disciples who cared for the sick to today's ministries that care for the "untouchables" of our times, we are called to carry out Jesus' version of a health care plan: to care for everyone.

While we may not be risking our lives to care for the sick ourselves, the least we can do is support expanded health care for all. Really, it is the only Christian thing to do.

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