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Interfaith Dialogue on Universal Health Care

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote: of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane. Faith-based leaders, drawn to honor their beliefs and serve humanity, traditionally have fought to overcome social injustice. Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut is encouraging faith communities of all denominations in our state to explore their role in the movement to make quality health care accessible and affordable for everyone.

This essay is part of an ongoing dialogue about that role. Here, Efrain Agosto, professor of New Testament studies and director of Programa de Ministerios Hispanos at Hartford Seminary, looks at why Christians are called to change the health care system to serve everyone well. Dr. Agosto, also a member of the Foundation's Interfaith Fellowship for Universal Health Care Steering Committee, discusses one of history's great healers, Jesus. His ministry reached those who did not have the status or wealth to seek traditional healing. According to the Bible, he healed the poor as well as the rich and powerful. He took risks and thought radically. He charged his disciples – including Christians today - to do the same.

Those who see universal health care as part of their life journeys of compassion and justice should find thoughtful encouragement in this series. Call it helping the less fortunate. Call it doing the right thing. Call it doing God's work. Whatever calls you to the battlefield of health justice should lead you to the movement for universal health care.

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Health and Healing in the World of Jesus and Ours

~ Efrain Agosto, Hartford Seminary ~

Purpose of the Study

This study proposes to add a biblical-theological reflection to the discussion in our day and age about issues of health, healing and the health system. In particular, because the Christian community depends significantly on the life and ministry of Jesus in order to carry out our life of faith and practice today, we want to understand the healing ministry of Jesus in the context of the systems of health in the ancient world. We do this to connect the ministry of Jesus to our own, taking seriously, however, our own context, including the confrontation with the realities of health and health care systems today.

Medicine and Health in the Ancient World

In the ancient world, the basic methods to acquire health and healing were medicine, miracle, and/or magic.¹ Medicine, introduced by Hippocrates in Greece in the 5th century B.C., was a matter of diagnosis of illnesses through study of the body and of anatomy, and treatment, usually with natural medicines and sometimes with physical intervention, including surgery. Miracle entailed divine intervention, directly or

indirectly, in order to achieve health. Nevertheless, among those sick who were treated with medicine, and even among the doctors who treated them in the ancient world, there was belief that the gods (or Jehovah God in the case of Jews) were involved in bringing health to the sick individual, be it through direct divine intervention or through a divine agent, including the doctor. Moreover, sometimes miracle was considered a last resort when doctors could do no more.

Magic was different. It was based on techniques of healing through ritual, whether incantation or potion, to solve the matters that practitioners assumed lay behind an illness, including some kind of evil action or evil spirit. Magic, like medicine, cost money and was often not available to those with limited financial resources. Miracle, on the other hand, usually was accomplished as a free gift of God.

Philosophical Bases for Methods of Healing

Behind these basic systems of health and healing in the ancient world, we see several philosophical understandings. In medicine, the knowledge of the human body and correct treatment for its health was the

fundamental understanding. Access was needed to doctors and medicines, the latter usually natural and sometimes chemical. Doctors were considered by the vast majority of the sick as the agents of the divine. On the other hand, in the case of miracle, what medicine or doctors could not accomplish, it was believed that divinity could. People believed in divine intervention for human need. For those that practiced magic, illness was considered the result of some kind of evil. Therefore, a rite of expulsion was needed, many times based on some kind of financial payment. We see, then, that in each one of these systems of health – medicine, miracle or magic – a theological base: The doctor is an agent of God; the miracle stems from a divine intervention; a rite of expulsion is needed because the illness arises from some kind of evil, usually a spiritual one.

Traditions of Greco-Roman Medicine

In the history of medicine in the ancient Greco-Roman world, we see how various figures exercised the reality of divine presence – in one form or another – in their practices of the healing and the search for health. The ancient Greeks had a god of healing – Asklepios. There were temples in his honor throughout the Greek world, to which many came seeking healing. They often left gifts of petition for health and gratitude for healing. Today, one can visit a museum in the

Greek city of Corinth and view replicas of various human body parts that had been left in the ancient temples in honor of Asklepios who, it was believed, had healed these body parts after sacrifices were offered to him.

Nevertheless, already by the year 425 B.C., Hippocrates, the father of the medicine, practiced his vocation as a natural and physical science, and not as a supernatural one. Hippocrates was one of the first in promoting the need to understand the human body and its systems by means of observation in order to better understand illness and health. He gave emphasis to the importance of the balance in the body, especially among the four fundamental liquids in the body, which predecessors of Hippocrates had called the “humors.” These consisted of blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. It was believed that an imbalance among these brought illness, including mental illness. For example, some ancient doctors believed that a lot of black bile led to melancholy or depression, and a lot of yellow bile resulted in aggressiveness. Although, of course, the theory of humors has become obsolete in the practice of medicine, it was not until the 19th century that this became the case as a method of treatment. For example, for many centuries when a sick person had fever, the bloodletting was used as a treatment, that is to say, it was considered that fever resulted from hot blood and therefore the doctor had to leak some of the blood out in order to alleviate the fever. Many died from such treatment, including, it

is believed, President George Washington at end of the 18th century.

Nevertheless, it is fascinating to see the advances in medicine that took place in the ancient Greco-Roman world and continued to be practiced for many centuries afterwards. For example, it was the medical doctors Herophilus and Erasistratus in the third century B.C. that developed the practice of studying cadavers in order to better understand human anatomy. Prior to them, superstitions about handling dead bodies prevented their use to help understand the different parts and organisms of the human body. Later, in the second century A.D., another famous doctor, Galen, added to the emphasis on the four humors, the notion of three "souls" in the human body, the brain, which engaged human intellect, the heart, vehicle of human emotion, and the liver, main source of understanding human nutrition. Thus, these organisms, along with the humors, constituted the basic elements of the body and one must be kept in balance with each other, in order to maintain good health. Galen also became the doctor for Roman emperor, and this takes us to the theme of access to the medicine in the ancient world in the time of Jesus.

Access to Doctors

The education of a medical doctor in this period depended largely on apprentice-style learning of a student with an established doctor. There were no schools of medicine, nor any system of certification. In a local town, if someone knew something about medicine because he or she had once seen a doctor practice a procedure or administer a treatment, such a person might be called upon to help a sick individual in a home or local community. If the family or the local town saw that the need was more serious, and there were at least some financial resources, then they sought "professional" medical assistance, usually from a traveling doctor. Some cities had a public doctor, appointed by a local magistrate or city council, but not all towns made such a person available to the poor in terms of free or affordable fees. Many of the traveling doctors were also orators and they often took financial advantage of a health need, giving speeches, mostly philosophical ones, on medicine or any other topic, and then charging exorbitant prices to offer natural medicines, for example, that did not always work well. On account of this variety in the accessibility to medicine, and the cost of the treatment, the majority of the sick often flocked to the temples seeking divine healing, although even there they often incurred expenses beyond the reach of most poor people in the Greco-Roman cities of the ancient world.

Medicine and Healing in the New Testament

Although the ministry of Jesus and the New Testament communities as a whole emerged in the midst of this Greco-Roman world that produced so much development and advances in medicine and physical health, there is very little mention of doctors or medicine in the New Testament. Two famous instances, however, include the healing of a hemorrhaging woman in the gospels, and the reference to the companion of Paul, Luke, as “the beloved physician” (Colossians 4:14). In particular, the first instance is indicative of a negative attitude toward doctors, perhaps especially traveling doctors that were often more interested in money than the welfare of their patients. This story appears in three of the four gospels, and two of them mention how the woman, sick from a “flow of blood,” had been sick for many years and spent a lot of money in doctors without any success such that she “had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse” (Mark 5:26; see also Luke 8:43). Nevertheless, only by touching the edge of the cloak of Jesus, she was healed.

This story, like others in the gospels, shows that miracle dominates in the New Testament more so than medicine, especially because Jesus, the main figure in the stories of the gospels, ministers particularly to the poor and oppressed of his community. In the gospels and throughout the New Testament, when medicine or a doctor fails, God intervenes, either directly or through an agent – Jesus (in the gospels), the apostles

(especially in the Book of Acts), Paul (who teaches about the gifts of healing present in the church, 1 Corinthians 12), and the elders or head of the local church (The Book of James 5:14-15). In each case, divine healing comes to be a main instrument of the love of God, of God’s mercy toward humanity, especially those who have no one else who attends them. Physical and mental healing becomes the fundamental way in the New Testament of how God shows God’s love for humanity. In the remainder of this study, we will look at this reality in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Miracles of Jesus: For whom?

Toward whom were the miracles in the ministry of Jesus directed? There is no doubt that Jesus exercised a ministry of healing to a suffering community: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). From the beginning of his ministry, even in his hometown, Jesus is identified with the poorest of his community, and what he wants for them is their physical and spiritual health. When others, including those established leaders of the community, fail to meet the needs of the poor and the sick, Jesus makes himself available, demonstrating his compassion through offering healing and health.

The Proof of Jesus' Ministry

Even when those close to him ask if the ministry of Jesus is genuine, he answers that the test revolves around his ministry to the sick: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22). Note that the summary statement about the ministry of Jesus in this passage consists of these words: "the poor have good news brought to them." The test of his fidelity to that call consists of the health and healing of the poorest members of the community: the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, even the dead. These represent the people most discarded by the authorities of the ancient world, including medical authorities. Jesus refuses to undermine those that suffer the most in his world. He directs his ministry, including his ministry of healing, especially to them.

What Type of Healing? The Most Radical

In addition, Jesus signals the importance of healing and health by exercising this ministry in outstanding and even radical ways. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, when it was assumed that no work was to be done because it was a day of rest (Mark 3:1-6). Nevertheless, Jesus taught, by means of his healings on that day, that the Sabbath was given for the good of the humanity, not evil. How is it not good to

heal on a Sabbath when it is for the well being of a fellow human being? Jesus also healed a physical illness and at the same time forgave that person's spiritual sin (Mark 2:1-12). He believed, as many more health professionals are beginning to believe in our own day and age, that there was a close relationship between physical health and mental, emotional and spiritual health. The sense of guilt from bad actions in the past can be a source of much illness. Jesus understood that spiritual and physical health walked hand in hand.

As we have said, but it is worth repeating, perhaps the most radical aspect of the healing ministry of Jesus was that he healed those most despised in his community. Jesus healed lepers, tax collectors (hated by all because of their collusion with Rome in collecting exorbitant amounts of taxes, and pocketing some of the money for themselves), hemorrhaging women, and even those who were not part of Israel, that is, non-Jews (see, for example, Mark 7:31-37). The ministry of Jesus was diverse and inclusive. He attended to the poor in particular because they did not have anyone else offering them health and healing. Nevertheless, he also attended to the well to do, including the hated tax collectors. When Jesus healed the hemorrhaging woman, he was on the way toward healing the daughter of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue (Mark 5:21-24). However, simply because this was a leader in the community, Jesus does not fail to stop for a poor woman, rejected by doctors, with no other resource, if not a

miracle by Jesus of Nazareth (Mark 5:25-34). Thereafter, Jesus also heals the daughter of the leader of the synagogue (Mark 5:35-42). This passage intertwines two instances of healing, one for a poor woman and another for the daughter of a recognized authority figure in the community. But the teaching for the reader is that Jesus stops in his attention to a person of power to attend to another need, that of a less recognized person in the community, one with an illness (an excessive flow of blood) that does not allow her to touch anybody nor to make a public appearance. Nevertheless, Jesus attends to her because healing and health is for all.

In all this, Jesus heals in a way consistent way with the traditions of Israel (see Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1). His ministry of attention to all, but especially the poor and unattended, is consistent with the scriptures of his own people. Therefore, although he is radical in his healing ministry, this is something that the God of Israel always exercised toward God's people, whether directly or through divine representatives, for example the prophets and other agents of healing. The ministry of Jesus is a ministry of renewal of these traditions of healing and health that the people of Israel know or should know very well, but many forgot under the oppression of exile in Babylonia and domination by the empires of Persia, Alexander the Great and now, in the times of Jesus, the Roman empire.

Miracles as “Parables”

The miracles of Jesus are, as the Central American scholar Plutarco Bonilla wrote, also “parables.”² In other words, the miracles of Jesus, besides attending to the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of the sick individual, also serve as signs of the message of Jesus on behalf of the people of Israel. Neither medical techniques nor magical rites were responding to human need at that time. Therefore, Jesus introduces divine intervention, which he calls the “kingdom of God” on behalf of the people of God, especially the poorest of the community. By attending to the individual in need, Jesus at the same time proclaims a message of divine justice, the good news that God, with the “kingdom” – a system of values and activities of justice – is concerned for the spiritual and physical well being of humanity, especially those for whom nobody else is concerned, the poor and oppressed in society.

In the Gospel of John, only seven miracles are described and four of them involve healing. John call these miracles “signs,” which is exactly the point of all the miracles of Jesus described in all four gospels. They are signs of the kingdom, of what God, in Christ, is doing in favor of humanity, especially the part of humanity that most needs divine intervention – the poor and the oppressed, symbolized by their physical illnesses in a world that reserved the little medical attention that was available to those most well off and well connected to resources of medicine.

Jesus Calls the Disciples to A Ministry of Healing

Jesus invites others to join him with this message of salvation and health:

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. (Matthew 9:35-10:1)

This call to the disciples includes a summary of the ministry of Jesus – teaching and preaching the good news of the kingdom through healing the sickness of the people. Jesus had compassion on the multitudes because they had been abandoned by others and because there were so many in need. Therefore, he calls for help in attending them and invites his disciples to be part of this ministry of healing. In addition, by including this invitation from Jesus to his disciples, the writers of the gospels extend it to their readers. Now, 2000 years after the life and ministry of Jesus, his disciples and the earliest believers, this invitation to a ministry of health and healing extends itself to us.

The Call Today Includes Health and Healing

Jesus heals not only to demonstrate his own authority, but also to announce good news – the arrival of God's spiritual reign of justice and health. Our ministry as Christian leaders is to assure health for our people today in our own context. Sometimes such a ministry involves prayer and a miracle of God for the sick, but at the same time, one must be involved in securing the best possible medical attention for our communities, both for those who attend our churches as well as the people in the neighborhoods where our churches are situated. If health care systems fail our communities, then we are called to a prophetic ministry of health and healing that proposes somewhat better – health care systems that respond justly – or proposes a change of the system so that it responds to the people with the greatest needs in our communities, especially those who are poor and marginalized. This was in essence the ministry of Jesus, of his disciples, and is now ours.

1 See Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

2 Plutarco Bonilla, *Los milagros tambien son parabras* ["Miracles Are Also Parables"] (Miami: Editorial Caribbean, 1978). Efraín Agosto.

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Efraín was born and raised in New York City; his parents came to New York from Puerto Rico in the 1950s. He attended New York City public schools and received his B.A. from Columbia University in 1977. Efraín was nurtured in New York Hispanic Pentecostal churches and became a licensed minister with the Hispanic Assemblies of God in 1984. He has served on the pastoral staffs of Hispanic Pentecostal, Baptist and Congregational churches in New York, Boston, and East Hartford,

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In his work in New Testament studies, Efraín teaches, researches and writes on the Pauline Epistles, especially the leadership and ministry of Paul and others in these communities. He has published several articles and book chapters on these topics. His book, *Servant Leadership: Jesus and Paul* (Chalice Press), was published in November 2005. It studies issues of social status, leadership practice and theology in the Jesus movement and Pauline Christianity, with implications for the practice of religious leadership today. Efraín has taught courses in Paul and His Urban Churches, New Testament Introduction, Readings in Pauline Theology and Ministry, and with Professor Carl Dudley of Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research, New Testament Tensions and Contemporary Issues. Agosto and Scott Thumma, also a sociologist from the Institute, team-taught a course on Pentecostalism. Efraín

has also taught a Doctor of Ministry course on Leadership in the New Testament: A Case Study Approach, in which he and the students employ biblical cases to explore issues of leadership in Jesus and Paul.

Efraín's wider service has included the Final Selection Committee and Mentor for the Hispanic Theological Initiative, a scholarship and mentoring organization housed at Princeton Seminary, which seeks to develop Latino and Latina doctoral candidates in religion and theology. Efraín also served on the Executive Committee of the Association of Theological Schools, Committee for Underrepresented Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession (CUREMP) of the Society for Biblical Literature and was formerly a faculty representative to the Board of Trustees of Hartford Seminary. Currently he serves as chair of the Seminary's Center for Faith in Practice.

Efraín lives with his wife, Olga, a public school teacher, and their two teen-aged children, Joel and Jasmin, in West Hartford, Connecticut.