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Sermon  
**Healthcare: *Where's the Truth?***

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant  
Hope Unitarian Church  
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First Reading: Luke 10:25-37 (NRSV)

<sup>25</sup>Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' <sup>26</sup>He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' <sup>27</sup>He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' <sup>28</sup>And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

<sup>29</sup>But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' <sup>30</sup>Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' <sup>37</sup>He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Second Reading: William Shakespeare. MacBeth. Act IV, Second 1.

*Thunder. Enter the three Witches*

**First Witch**

Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.

**Second Witch**

Thrice and once the hedge-pig whined.

**Third Witch**

Harpier cries 'Tis time, 'tis time.

**First Witch**

Round about the cauldron go;  
In the poison'd entrails throw.  
Toad, that under cold stone  
Days and nights has thirty-one  
Swelter'd venom sleeping got,  
Boil thou first i' the charmed pot.

## **ALL**

Double, double toil and trouble;  
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

## **Second Witch**

Fillet of a fenny snake,  
In the cauldron boil and bake;  
Eye of newt and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,  
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,  
Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,  
For a charm of powerful trouble,  
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

## **ALL**

Double, double toil and trouble;  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

## Sermon

When I decided to preach this Sunday on the subject of healthcare I was faced with a dilemma: What title should I use? Titles are important, so I gave it careful thought. Several came to mind: "You Lie!" was the first one. "Merchants of Death" or "Death Panels Here We Come" were others along with "Witches Brew", "The Good Samaritan" and "Why Socialism is Good for You" or "Why Jesus Hates Socialism" or "First Let's Kill All the Lawyers". The possibilities were endless. I decided to settle for something a bit less provocative, but that's hard to do, because the question of what's true and not true in the healthcare debate – which we would like to be a matter of straight forward objective inquiry – isn't. The truth is complicated. In part that's because at the heart of the truth about healthcare is a moral dilemma and moral questions are inevitably a conflict between competing goods, between competing truths or, if you wish, between competing evils. For that reason alone I believe healthcare is a religious issue. I would also add that in part the truth about healthcare is controversial and difficult to discern because there's so much money involved – not billions, but trillions of dollars. And that, too, makes healthcare a religious issue. If you don't believe me you should try reading the bible. The majority of the stories and parables told by Jesus were about money and economic morality was a consistent theme with the Hebrew Prophets. And when you start talking about trillions of dollars even atheists will start acting with religious fervor. So where is the truth?

First, I believe the core issues are moral. That's why I used the parable of the Good Samaritan as a reading. I think it is a story that has an ironic message when it comes to healthcare reform. I say that because it's only if you misunderstand the story that it has anything to do with healthcare – and most people misunderstand it. The story is a parable, not a morality tale. As a parable it is an attack on the religious status quo of its day. Two thousand years ago in Judea when Jesus told the story everyone in his audience knew you should stop to help an injured traveler. His audience would have said, "Duh!" They didn't need to be told that. To suggest that his listeners needed to be reminded of that basic moral imperative would have been an insult. The story is

actually about the Samaritan who was a religious outcast, a religious apostate who was hated and despised by the audience first hearing the story. The story is shocking because Jesus has the Samaritan cast as the hero. The story is saying righteousness doesn't have anything to do with belonging to the right religious group. Righteousness is about right behavior, about doing what is moral. The irony, of course, is that the story is almost universally misunderstood as a morality tale about providing healthcare to the injured – and it is by misunderstanding the story that it becomes relevant to us today. I find it a sad truth that we should have to be reminded that we have a moral obligation to help those in need. Even a bunch of goat herders two thousand years ago knew that. And one final note. The traveler is not identified. We don't know if he was an illegal alien. That's because – from a moral perspective – it doesn't matter.

Here's some more truth about the healthcare debate. It's become a chaotic mix of issues, much of it having nothing to do with healthcare. It has become a witches brew worthy of a Shakespearean drama. A good example is part of the story about Representative Wilson and his outburst at President Obama and other personal attacks directed against the President – and I emphasize that it is just part of the story. Former President Carter has said those personal attacks are racial. I agree with the commentators, Juan Williams: President Carter is wrong. To claim any criticism of the President or of healthcare reform is racially motivated is false and is not helpful. I believe that at the heart of most of the anger we are seeing is not racism, but the centuries old conflict between the Hamiltonian and Jacksonian visions of what America should be. Our history shows that this kind of dispute and this kind of visceral anger is nothing new. The Glenn Becks of our time are the inheritors of the mantle worn by the leaders of the Whiskey Rebellion in George Washington's time and Father Coughlin of the 1930's.

At the same time it is also undeniable that there is a racist element to some of the anger we are seeing. I believe the "Birther" movement is largely racial. I also believe some of the signs and comments from people opposing healthcare reform are racist in nature. I don't know what was in Congressman Wilson's mind when he shouted, "You lie", but I do know that he has, from time to time, done and said things that appear to be racist. But the truth is that to conflate any criticism of the President or of healthcare reform with racism is just plain wrong and puts at risk the hope of healthcare reform. The truth is that this debate has brought out both the best and worst of what it means to be America. The mixture of all these issues has created a witch's brew that is poisonous to reasoned debate and both sides deserve a fair measure of blame.

Here's another truth – but it's just part of the truth. Congressman Wilson's shouted accusation about the President lying isn't true. It's nonsense. There's nothing in the proposed legislation about giving healthcare coverage to illegal aliens. The argument isn't about that. It's been whether there should be provisions in the law mandating healthcare providers to question a person's citizenship or immigration status. As a matter of fact I understand that's already covered by existing statues. But it raises some interesting issues, because the only way you can be sure to exclude illegal immigrants is if we went to a national identity card with sophisticated security features – a proposal that would be certain to ignite protests from many of the people insisting illegal immigrants not be covered. In truth the controversy isn't about covering illegal

immigrants, but about whether we are going to pass redundant laws that say in essence, “cross my heart twice, pat my head and rub my tummy at the same time and spit, I promise I won’t provide healthcare to an illegal immigrant.” It’s just a bunch of nastiness. But that’s only part of the truth. Here’s the rest. The whole argument is nonsense, because if illegal immigrants aren’t covered they will continue to do what they do now – show up at emergency rooms where they will receive medical care at about ten times the cost of going to a doctor’s office in most cases and they won’t be able to pay. Guess who will end up paying? We can pretend not to cover illegal aliens, but the reality is that they will be a burden on the system – and probably a greater burden than if they were covered, making healthcare more expensive for everyone else. I’m deliberately not stating a position on whether they should be covered. I just believe it is absurd to try to make this a “yes or no” debate because I believe the reality is that whatever we do they will in fact be covered. The real question is whether we’re going to pretend they are not. The conflict on this issue is a witch’s brew.

And what about rationing? Let me tell you some stories. First, there are the horror stories such as one currently circulating about the Canadian who would have died from a brain tumor except she escaped the Canadian gulag for America’s milk and honey. Let’s assume that and all the other horror stories you’ve heard are true. Fair enough? Let me tell you some other stories. Two weeks ago I heard the news about a colleague who has a son in college. He was riding his bicycle when he went over the handlebars and landed on his face. He had neither skull nor spinal cord injuries, but his facial bones were crushed, a life threatening injury. His parents have top of the line private health insurance. It doesn’t cover dental – a normal exclusion in health care policies, but the policy explicitly covers reconstructive facial surgery from accidents – a normal coverage in healthcare policies. The insurance company denied coverage on the grounds that it was dental work. That’s nonsense. It was a deliberate, calculated decision to deny coverage despite the unambiguous terms of the policy. It was all about money. And not having the surgery was life threatening. His parents had to come up with \$60,000 in cash for the emergency surgery.

And here’s another story. Before our youngest son, Michael, died a year and-a-half ago, he was in the hospital for an extended period of time. He had excellent private health insurance coverage. While in the hospital, the insurance company denied him coverage on the grounds of a pre-existing condition. It was not. The terms of the policy were unambiguous. The facts were unambiguous. They denied coverage for one reason only: a calculated decision to delay paying in the hopes that he and/or the hospital would just give up trying to fight them. For Michael it did not make a difference. The hospital and doctors continued to treat him while the health insurance company stalled. I don’t know if the hospital was every paid by the insurance company. But I know that many hospitals and doctors just give up trying to collect in such situations because the insurance companies think it’s cheaper to pay lawyers to fight legitimate claims than to pay them. There’s another truth in there – there are two sides to lawsuit reform. Having spent over twenty years practicing law – ninety-five percent of that time for corporations and wealthy business interests, I know both sides of the question. I know there is lawsuit abuse. I know it happens on both sides of lawsuits. That is why I believe the truth is that most of the calls for tort reform are a sham, if not outright lies. If you’re going to have legitimate tort reform the solution is not arbitrary limits on the

amount of money an injured person can recover, but genuine systemic reform that addresses abuse on both sides. But doing that – trying to achieve genuine systemic reform of our legal system – truly opens up a witches brew.

Here's another truth. We have healthcare rationing today. Private insurance companies ration healthcare on the basis of how much profit they make. Any reform to healthcare will have some form of rationing. The question is not whether healthcare will be rationed, but on what basis. Should it be rationed on the basis of profit and loss or on the basis of need?

But let me add a little more truth to this witch's brew. Regardless of what kind of healthcare system we have, there will be horror stories about rationing or availability of care. There are such stories to be found in Canada and France and England and all the other countries of the world that have universal health coverage. And such stories exist in this country as well within private health insurance coverage. I know that first hand. Here's a question: Should healthcare policy be made on the basis of anecdotal experience or general experience? Should we make policy on the basis of what happens ninety-eight percent of the time or on the basis of what happens two percent of the time? I believe it is a witches brew to believe we should create our healthcare policy on the basis of that two percent, but that's the basis for many of the current arguments. Focusing the argument on individual examples and ignoring the fact, the truth, that America spends more money on healthcare and still ranks 37<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of quality of care overall is pernicious and evil.

And there is the question of money. There's just too much money involved. We need to be concerned about money. Personally, I am a fiscal conservative. I believe balanced budgets should be the rule, not the exception. I am concerned about reports that healthcare reform will increase healthcare costs by a trillion dollars. But I am even more concerned that those who complain the loudest about such cost issues seem unconcerned that under the current system those costs will increase far more and to the point that last year's near economic collapse bringing us to the edge of another Great Depression will look like a walk in the park. The truth is that money matters. The truth is that there are too many politicians taking intractable positions not because our healthcare system today is so good, but because they are being paid so much money to keep it that way. Money is always a primary ingredient in a witch's brew.

And there is one final truth I would mention. It is one of those ironic truths. It relates to charges of death panels and a suggestion that we are on the verge of a wave of euthanasia driven by the evils of Social Darwinism. Presumably this is why some people are calling President Obama both a communist and a Nazi. At the heart of opposition to healthcare reform lie some intertwined issues. First is the fear by people who have healthcare today that healthcare reform means they will lose what they have. It is an idea that has been widely and wildly promoted – the idea that I can only have what I need by denying it to others. It is the idea that since I have what I need – which is just another way of saying I have power – that my power puts me in a morally superior position. Second, is the ideological insistence that all problems can be solved by the market. Just let the invisible hand solve everything. But think about what that means. It means that might makes right. It reduces us to the law of the jungle. That is the heart and soul of the ethical argument behind Social Darwinism – the idea that

might makes right. Social Darwinism argues that the result of natural selection is good. It is an argument that confuses “is” with “ought”. It is ironic that those who are shouting out lies – and they are lies – about government run death panels and the dangers of Social Darwinism are in fact philosophically grounding their opposition to healthcare reform in Social Darwinism. It is, indeed, a witch’s brew.

It is difficult to find the truth in all the arguments about healthcare, but I have a suggestion. We need to stop shouting about it – everyone. We need to stop taking positions solely on the basis of fear or ideology. We need to start talking about the morality of healthcare. We need to ask ourselves questions such as, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” and “Who is my neighbor?” We need to look for answers on the basis of general experience, not specific examples because one can always find a specific example that ‘proves’ anything. And because money does matter we need to fairly judge the costs of different models of healthcare. The sad reality, however, is that the current healthcare debate is a witch’s brew of competing interests that makes a reasoned approach almost impossible. I continue to hope it’s not impossible. It’s too important. And it may silly, it may seem naïve – I suspect it is – but I would like to see the debate influenced by these words of William Shakespeare. I would like to see every discussion and debate about healthcare begin with a reading of these words.

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown;  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice.

Amen.