

Voices: Let us be impractically compassionate

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Two hundred seventeen Republican representatives from every corner of our nation recently voted for the House version of the American Health Care Act, also known as Trumpcare or by its initials, AHCA. The bill attempts to deal with the high premiums that recently have been the norm for insurance plans purchased under the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, or ACA.



Jeremiah Bailey All insurance essentially functions the same way, and ACA policies are no exception. Policy holders pool their money, buying into the program with their premiums, and that pool of money provides the funds to pay for those large medical expenses we all fear.

In other words, the healthy always pay for the sick. That is simply how insurance works. When the circle of policy holders is expanded to include a great number of sick people, additional money must come into the pool one way or another.

Initially, the federal government kept premiums low by essentially writing a check to the insurance companies for their losses. When those checks

stopped, the pool of money had to be expanded by charging policy holders more in premiums. The architects of the ACA hoped by the time the government checks ended, the individual penalties for failing to buy insurance would have driven enough healthy people into the circle of policy holders to prevent large premium increases. Without an effective “individual mandate” pushing healthy people to join the rolls, there is no feasible way to keep premiums down and still keep insurance affordable for those who desperately need care.

Political expediency



In response to this stark reality, our elected representatives decided the most politically expedient thing they can do is kick the feet out from under these sick people. The new AHCA still provides “insurance” to the desperately ill, but it allows insurance companies to discriminately raise the premiums of our sickest citizens. Having insurance policy premiums priced far beyond their ability to pay does not in any meaningful way deal with the problem.

Leaving aside the many other ways this bill breaks the promises made by Donald Trump and the Republican party to the American people, the AHCA fundamentally betrays the sickest among us by embracing the notion that poverty induced by medical debt is a morally acceptable outcome.

It is somewhat astonishing, then, to see that virtually all of the bill’s joyous supporters are Catholic and Evangelical Christians. These are, by their own claims, my brothers and sisters in the family of God. They presumably go to church and worship the same Christ whose messianic mantle was

confirmed in the greatest part by his treatment of those on the margins of society. In fact, when the disciples of John the Baptist enquired about the identity of Jesus, he replied, "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."

What are we to make of those who claim Jesus but whose deeds leave the blind, the lame, the sick, the deaf and the poor all worse off than they were before?

Complicated situation

The easy answer is to suppose that these men, and a smattering of women, are simply unrepentant hypocrites who clothe their selfishness in Christian wrappings. I have no doubt at least some of our representatives in Congress, regardless of party, could be described that way. Nevertheless, I expect the situation is more complicated for most.

Thinking back to my own opposition to Obamacare, I know it was not an absence of compassion that motivated me. Instead, it was a general belief that anything the government tries to run is destined to become mired in bureaucracy and expensive bloat. It was the idea we can afford only so many programs and we have to make hard choices about what those programs will be. In short, I believed my opposition was pragmatic. It was unfortunate that people would suffer, but practical decisions were necessary.

Something changed

Then, something changed in me.

Two shifts in my thinking led me to reevaluate my opposition to Obamacare.

First, my conversations with black and Latino/a theologians over the years slowly led me to interrogate the purposes of any idea that tries to reinforce the status quo. I began to notice pragmatism as a justification for action or inaction always seemed to come up just when the interests of the wealthy and upper middle class were threatened. I began to see framing decisions that negatively impact the poor as “practical” attempts to claim the high-ground of “objectivity” as a cover for a lack compassion.

Second, I heard, contrary to my expectations of healthcare shortages, the cries of relief from the desperately ill. People whose lives were upended by illness suddenly had hope. I heard their stories and did not try to shield myself from their humanity. I saw that the sick came away healthy, and this was very good news to the poor. I simply stopped trying to put barriers between the genuine empathy I had always felt for those struggling with illness and my politics.

Humble appeal

To my brothers and sisters holding onto their pragmatism and “objectivity” in the face of human suffering, I appeal once again to our Lord.

Luke 7:11-17 describes how Jesus and his disciples arrived at the village of Nain only to be met by a funeral procession. The deceased was the only son of a widow, a fact apparently known to Jesus by supernatural means. The significance of this explanatory comment often is lost on modern audiences, but in the social structures of first century Palestine, it was devastating for a woman to be childless and husbandless.

When Jesus saw the procession, he looked in on the widow and paid no mind to the people. Luke tells us that upon seeing her, he was filled with compassion, and he placed his hand on the bier, calling the son back to life. There is no hint of faith on the part of any of those present. There is no indication this was meant as a sign. He simply wanted to give the woman

her son back.

Bringing the dead back to life is the greatest miracle Jesus performed in his earthly ministry, and here, remarkably, Jesus did it for no other reason than he felt sorry for someone. It was not for faith, or as a sign, or even as a show of might or power, but for a broken heart he raised the dead.

Brothers and sisters, let us too lend all our power to compassion. Let us be impractical.

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