

Perspectives



Abundant Life— Here and Hereafter

THE FAITH-AS-INSURANCE-POLICY ARGUMENT HAS NEVER WORKED FOR ME: I believe in Jesus, so you won't go to hell. In its usual form, this proposition seems altogether to misrepresent the biblical God of steadfast love; more, in light of John's Gospel, it fails to recognize that Jesus' purpose is to bring life, not merely to overcome death. Of course the two are related: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him *might not perish*, but *have eternal life*" (John 3:16)—but the "If you die tonight, where will you spend eternity?" emphasis tends to turn the promise into a threat and life into something that begins only post-mortem.

Not so, insists Jesus: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Rudolf Schnackenburg gets it right. The gospel's use of "abundantly" highlights "the superabundant fullness of this life proceeding from God, which in other places is illustrated through the metaphors of the bubbling spring (4:14; cf. 7:38) or of the bread that satisfies all hunger for ever (6:35, 50, 58)." John's emphasis on "eternal life" does not "signify post-mortal life...as opposed to the life that Jesus bestows on us here; on the contrary, it stands for this last-mentioned life considered in its indestructible power that survives beyond bodily death." This is nothing other than "the attainment of that sphere where the Godhead dwells, and hence fullness and superabundance."¹

That, I think, is the basis for Christian evangelism: not the avoidance of something terribly worse, but the promise of something wonderfully better.

Further, the offer of a better and abundant life—life that, in Johannine terms, "is coming and is now here"—opens the Christian to service in this world rather than escape from the world. Christ comes into the world to transform it, not to condemn it, and Christians, reborn with abundant life, are made agents of transformation: "Those who do what is right come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" (John 3:21). John tells us, of course, that "people loved darkness rather than light" (3:19), and they (and we) still do; so, we dare not become overly enthusiastic about our hopes to transform the world. Blueprints for that project have contributed to death as much as to life. Still, the gift and mandate of abundant life embolden us to be up and about.

This call to abundant life has been one motivating factor in the work of the ELCA's Task Force on Health and Health Care (of which I am a member). Produc-

¹Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 2 (New York: Seabury, 1980) 293.

ing a study guide² and social statement³ on health care is a daunting task, requiring the task force to steer between the Scylla of trying to reinvent the health care system altogether, à la Hillary Clinton, and the Charybdis of repeating mere platitudes about our concern for all people. But the journey is a necessary one. Whatever we may think about the value of church social statements, Christians cannot avoid addressing issues of life and health in this world as well as in the world to come. You can't read the story of Jesus in the gospels and not recognize that God is powerfully interested in healing. You can't proclaim abundant life and not care about the failures of a health care system that leave many with little health and unsatisfactory care. True, we will not find a biblical or confessional mandate for a particular socio-economic model of health care, but within the biblical mandate to love the neighbor and to "pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted" (Isa 58:10 RSV) we will go at the question with our best efforts, attempting to promote the abundant life God has in store for all people.

Jesus recognized that not everyone comes as shepherd, seeking abundant life for all. Some come as thieves, seeking only "to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). And there are thieves, personal and systemic ones, that stand in the way of health care for all as well. In an early draft, our task force called these "demons": things like poverty, racism, violence, environmental toxins, and injurious personal life choices, not to mention simple greed, lack of concern for the other, and the inevitable corruption that comes wherever billions of dollars are at stake. Inevitably, then, a statement on health care will rock some boats and tread on some toes, as it must. Its point, however, will not be (or ought not be) any particular political or economic agenda but simply the promotion of health—life, here and now, as full and abundant as possible.

Meanwhile, while caring about the health now of self and neighbor, Christians proclaim a life and healing that overcomes all the efforts of darkness and death. They introduce the world to the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, they announce "that sphere where the Godhead dwells, and hence fullness and superabundance." Still and all, this concern, in the name of Christ, for health now and health hereafter is not two things; it is one.

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²*Our Ministry of Healing: Health and Health Care Today* (Chicago: Division for Church in Society, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2001).

³The schedule calls for this to be presented to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2003.