

2/6/11 Sermon

“Government – Moral and/or Rational”

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We are a diverse people, woven together from different faiths, traditions, colors, ethnic origins that make up these United States. That diversity makes it unlikely we will become a monolithic culture marching in goose step to a “Big Brother” government as portrayed in the movie, “1984.” Rather, we seek a unity that does not deny our individuality and differences.

Perhaps we come closest to being a unified whole in our allegiance and support of our laws and the Constitution; yet even there we are subject to fierce debate and widely varying interpretations about the role of our government. We strive to respect individual freedom, even as we endeavor to define our collective responsibility to/for our neighbors. Our faith binds us to each other; we belong to each other in a mutuality of interest as part of the web of existence. We are, as The Bible tells us, “thy brother’s keeper.”

We are called to define for ourselves what role the government should have in our communities. I personally believe that our government and each of us individually have a moral responsibility to protect one another and the gathered community. We share a common goal to create liberty with justice for all, yet we fail miserably at times. We have laws but no justice; have equal protection but more so for the wealthy. We have a health care system that is the most expensive in the world but certainly not the best. Our infant mortality rate is deplorable; the poor go without care or are underserved.

I am not looking to offer a laundry list of things that ought to be if we lived in a utopian society; each according to their ability, each according to their need. What I am hoping to do here is draw attention to the moral duty the Government has to its citizens as it formulates domestic policy – particularly around health care.

We UUs believe that the government must protect us from the tyranny of the majority or minority when it comes to creating laws and establishing policies. No one religion should be favored over another nor set our political agenda. UUs stand in support of a healthy interaction between religion and government, and commit ourselves to work against efforts to impose religious litmus tests on public service and policy.

I believe that religions now need to turn their attention to the lack of a common moral grounding for public policy. The debate has to now focus on cost – who benefits, the private citizen or insurance companies? Who controls the disbursement of treatment – the insurance companies or doctors

- all the while ignoring the moral implications of health care coverage? We must ask the serious hard moral questions to determine what our civic priorities need to be. Should our government be concerned with the morality of health care or is it just like a business selling its services to the public in exchange for our tax dollars? If the government is just a business, can we justify spending scarce resources on advanced medical technologies for the sick and aged while infants are dying for lack of pre-natal care? These are the real questions we must debate, not with histrionics and hysterics but compassion and calm deliberation. These are religious questions and not just public policy considerations.

According to Robert Bellah, "two kinds of individualism vie for dominance (in decision making), one is moral - ultimately grounded in religion, according to which all life is sacred and each person is unique, irreplaceable and precious; the other is rational and utilitarian in which the social good is whatever best satisfies the preferences of the individual citizens and government regulators," and corporations that have no soul. Personally I don't want my well-being and life in the hands of a rational Utilitarian measuring my worth with a cost-benefit analysis.

We must determine how the government offers the services we want, but in a way that strengthens the initiative and participation of citizens and not reduce us to mere clients or numbers. At the crux of this question is our commitment to limited government and the need to solve our problems, which require an urgent government response/action. I suspect conservatives with their Strict father morality (George Layoff) have a stronger belief that individuals and not the government must find health care on their own in the private sector and not live off the dole. Self-reliance is their touchstone. Liberals with a more nurturing parent morality think government policies must nurture the health of its citizens, which I believe is more in keeping with our UU values. These are not just theoretical questions for debate. They have real and alarming life-threatening implications for people dealing with serious illness. How our government responds to this need for care will determine the quality of these people's lives and whether they live or die. It is that direct.

This past spring I became eligible for Medicare. I went from paying \$950 a month for medical insurance plus co-pays for medicines down to \$350 per month plus co-pays. That cost of the free market insurance coverage is morally unjustifiable and unsustainable for individuals and families, especially when the insurance companies and their CEOs are making record profit. These challenges exist across the country; but for many Medicare patients, it gets worse over time.

Current Medicare plans have a “donut hole” and, when we reach that plateau, all medications are full price. Its impact is devastating. Two of the prescriptions I take cost \$44 each a month, until I reach that gap. Then these same meds balloon to \$175 and \$345 each per month. Talk about sticker shock! How many of your friends and parents can afford these costs for long – especially on a fixed income? Some are forced to choose between taking medications and eating.

No, I am not being melodramatic. My parents reached that point and had to ask for help. Maybe you have asked your children for assistance. I faced that very choice. In my case I was able to get free samples for a month until the new fiscal year began. Is that what we want for our seniors who have worked a lifetime to now have to make such drastic choices? Doesn't our faith call us to expect and demand more from our government?

How in God's name can the richest country in the world not take better care of its citizens? “Obama Care” does that, in part. It reduces the price of medications in the donut hole by half – perhaps saving someone's life. Those who oppose this relief characterize it as a government takeover of an industry better managed by the private insurance companies. Oh, really?

So, we must decide what role our government will have in our lives. What should we expect for our tax dollars? Do we continue to spend obscene amounts on weapons of death and destruction, or care for the lives of our citizens?

Perhaps, if we follow Emerson and base our government health policies on the power of love, we would have a more humane government. Worth a try.