

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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A Healthy and Happy New Year

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Recently several people in my life have suffered medical emergencies. One dear friend gave birth to her first son three months early. Weighing just over 900 grams he had to be driven by ambulance to a NICU at a larger hospital two hours away. He is doing well, but will spend his first Christmas confined to the neonatal unit.

Another colleague was rushed to the ER last week for emergency surgery. This woman can only be described as a super athlete. She climbs mountains and runs races, but her strength and training was no match for the illness that suddenly overwhelmed her.

And just yesterday I received word that my best friend's teenage cousin was struggling with suicidal thoughts and had requested that his grandmother take him to the hospital to keep him safe.

My first instinct in all these cases is sadness and concern for those both directly and indirectly impacted. My second is always deep gratitude that these people have insurance that allows them to receive the care they need.

Does anyone else think that is crazy?!

What kind of a world are we living in that one of my first thoughts in a crisis should be a quick calculation of a loved one's insurance status?

All three of these people were doing the right things to keep themselves healthy, and despite this, find themselves in medical crisis. Imagine what might have happened if they were not blessed with medical insurance through a job or relative. They could have died. And if they had avoided the worst and had gone to receive care at the ER despite their lack of coverage, it is likely that they would be saddled with the kind of enormous debt that leads to bankruptcy. And that unpaid debt, as anyone who watched the health care debates knows, gets passed on to all of us as consumers of insurance and medical care.

By March of next year the Supreme Court is expected to hear arguments on the constitutionality of President Obama's healthcare law. Their decision will hinge on whether the U.S. Congress overstepped its powers by requiring all Americans to buy health insurance.

I suspect the legality and implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act will be hashed out by the courts and Congress for years to come. But the bottom line is this – Who do we want to be as a Nation?

Are we, as we often claim, a country that cares about the lives of individuals? Are we a people that value others as much as we value ourselves, as we are instructed by our many faith traditions?

I think it may be too much to hope that all our elected officials will have a change of heart and come back in the New Year prepared to set aside their differences and work for the common good. And so the work falls to us.

We need to change the way we understand health care – as a right rather than a privilege. Let us all commit to this vision by supporting our neighbors in the year to come; through acts of kindness, by engaging in advocacy, and with our vote.

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