

***Urgent Care Centers***  
***James 5:13-20; Mark 10:46-52***  
***October 8, 2006***

Urgent care centers have emerged in recent years to provide an alternative place of treatment for minor medical conditions. We tend to use them more as urgent cure centers, seeking easy solutions to problems such as stomach aches, bleeding cuts, or sprained ankles. Thanks to medical research, there is a relatively simple remedy for some health conditions.

However, the reality is that for much of this journey of life we are confronted by troublesome situations, difficult relationships, or challenging conditions. “Quick fixes” are in short supply. In the face of the continual challenges of life, the church has a vital role to play as an “urgent care center.” We have a wonderful opportunity and calling to offer ongoing care to one another and to our neighbors through the journey of life.

In the reading from James, we are called to be a “care center,” a caring community that weeps with those who weep and rejoiced with those who rejoice. Love is the heart of the Christian life. Love is a living relationship with God, who empowers us to be God’s servants in the world. We are called to share the love of God with others. The quality of love is central to the church’s character. Love is the gift the church offers to those who are hurting. Urgent “cure centers” offers stitches for wounds, casts for broken bones, and crutches for sprained ankles. Churches have one kind of care that fits all needs: love.

We best not assume that just because we are a church, we love. Loving requires intentionality. It begins with being present to one another. It is not what we do or what we say. Sometimes it involves experiencing our own powerlessness in the face of another’s need and saying, “I do not understand. I don’t know what to do or say, but I’m here with you.” What is important is not running away from the pain, not getting busy when there is nothing to do. It is important simply to stand together with one in need of love. To care is to participate in the pain, to stand with the suffering, to share in the experience of brokenness. The ministry of presence, simply showing up, is oftentimes the most powerful expression of love and care.

Friday I walked out of a meeting with a federal judge on either side of me. I offered them a parting blessing, expressing appreciation for their work on behalf of society and acknowledging the stress their roles must bring. My comment elicited not a catharsis of the pressures of their jobs, but rather concern for friends and colleagues who had recently lost children. The

things that lay most heavily on their hearts were concern for others, not for themselves.

Those closing holy moments capped a three-day meeting in which one common thread had been fostering emotional intelligence in college students. Daniel Goleman defines emotional intelligence as “the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships.”<sup>1</sup> His newest book, titled *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, has just been released. Recent finds in biology and brain science indicate that humans are “wired to connect” and designed for sociability. We have a built-in bias toward empathy, cooperation, and altruism, provided we develop the social intelligence to nurture these capacities in ourselves and others.

Christians have long recognized the value of empathy. We have not needed the confirmation of brain science to understand the significance of supportive emotional connects with our human companions. But perhaps now that the scientific world is affirming its worth, our world will become more caring.

Spiritual guide Henri Nouwen said, “When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and to touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares.”<sup>2</sup>

Author Thomas Moore suggests that “care of the soul... appreciates the mystery of suffering and does not offer the illusion of a problem-free life.”<sup>3</sup> To care is to listen and to look at what is being revealed in the suffering.

We live in a world that “couldn’t care less.” Christians are called to be people who care more. In that caring, love is revealed. Dr. Bernie Siegel says, “Love heals. I do not claim love cures everything but it can heal and in the process of healing cures occur also.”<sup>4</sup>

I had the privilege of playing a very small role in a story of healing love. Nanci was a member of a former congregation I served. With her daughters in college, she found herself single again following a divorce. We spoke frequently about her sense of God calling her to a mission in a new place, perhaps even in another country. I shared information about mission programs through the United Methodist Church and she sent for

applications. Then as she cared for her father during a serious illness, she became reacquainted with Doug, a childhood friend. Doug had serious health problems, which meant that he might live six months or three years or who knows how long. His health had led to abandonment by his first wife. In spite of the risks, Doug and Nanci knew that they were a gift from God to one another. Her mission field wasn't so far from home after all!

I had the privilege of uniting them in marriage in the home church where they had grown up in Alameda. Four years after their wedding, Doug had a lower leg amputated, one of the prerequisites for a kidney and pancreas transplant. The dual transplant was completed successfully and within two weeks Doug was home and walking on his prosthesis. There were certainly substantial medical contributions to Doug's healing. But I believe that a significant part of Doug's "cure" has been the love of a wife, a caring church family, many friends, and God. Love heals.

Not every story has a fairy-tale ending as did Doug and Nanci's. There is not a cure for every situation. However, every story can be marked by care, love, and healing. Dr. Siegel says, "We can never cure everything...Be we can, as doctors, as family and as friends, care for everyone. And in that caring, true healing will occur—the healing of the spirit and of lives."<sup>5</sup>

James reminds us of the practices of faith that ground the church in love. We pray for the suffering. We sing songs of praise with the cheerful. We pray over the sick and anoint them with oil. We confess our sins to one another and forgive. We pray for one another. We hold one another accountable to the truth of God and seek to bring one another home after straying. These holy habits form and shape us as a caring community. These spiritual practices are expressions of our love and care. By these actions the world knows that we take seriously our mission as an "urgent care center." By our care and our love, the world will be drawn home to God, the Model Caregiver, the Divine Lover, the Ultimate Healer.

Anne Lamott tells the story about her pastor's best friend when they were seven years old. The best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until finally she saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, "You could let me out now. This is my church and I can always find my way home from here."

Anne comments, "That is why I have stayed so close to mine—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened,

when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices,  
I can always find my way home.”<sup>6</sup>

We celebrate the church of Jesus Christ, an urgent care center, where  
love heals and caring concern always leads us home to God.

- <sup>1</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), p. 317.
- <sup>2</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1974), p. 34.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 20.
- <sup>4</sup> Bernie S. Siegel, M.D., *Love, Medicine & Miracles* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. xii.
- <sup>5</sup> Bernie S. Siegel, M.D., *Peace, Love & Healing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 227.
- <sup>6</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p. 55.

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