



## HEALTH DAY

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, February 27, 2011**

**(Be sure to see the great health ideas and a long list of resources in the Cultural Resources unit.)**

**Gerald Davis, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

Gerald had spent many years working as a chaplain in hospitals and is now retired and living in Jackson, MS.

**Lection – 1 Corinthians 6:12, 19-20** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 12) “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. . . . (v. 19) Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? (v. 20) For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Unless you have been living in a cave without contact with the outside world for the past 20 years, you know that too many African Americans and Americans in general are not healthy. One’s health is determined by genetics, environmental factors, access to and use of medical care, and cultural factors.

The first factor in determining one’s health is genetics. This lectionary commentary does not allow space for me to recite all of the ways in which one’s genetics impacts his or her health. Suffice it to say that healthy parents are good indices of healthy children. However, even those

born to unhealthy parents can take steps to ensure that they are healthy and break the familial cycle of unhealthiness that may have burdened a family for three or more generations.

Environmental factors are the second factor in determining one's health. Legion are the reports and news stories detailing that African Americans have lived in, and in too many instances continue to live in, environments that make them unhealthy. In most cases, these environments have not been and are not constructed by African Americans.

The third factor is access to and use of medical care. The topic of affordable quality health care was writ large in the news in 2009 and 2010 due in large measure to President Obama's fight to pass a National Health Care Bill and to the stories by those who need and cannot afford health care in America. It is a no-brainer that those with quality health care who use it are healthier. But, as always, the devil is in the financial details. How can quality health care be made affordable when there are so many poor in America (as of 2009, 14.3%—almost 44 million people—according to the Census Bureau) and when the corporations who control the health care system have as their main concern the profits of their shareholders to whom they must answer financially? That is basically how the argument has been set up in the media. But, there is a bigger question that does not garner much media attention: how can America, supposedly the richest country in the world, only provide its citizens with health care that ranks first nowhere in the world except for what we spend for treatment? The U.S. health system is the most expensive in the world, but comparative analyses by one entity after another consistently show that the United States underperforms relative to other countries on most dimensions of performance.

A fourth factor that determines one's health is his or her culture. A trek into the history of African Americans in America illuminates a picture of a people who were forced to accept unhealthy diets for several hundred years. Much of what was inculcated into African American diets during this period has been held over; in part due to a lack of literacy, in part because of preference, and in part due to socio-economic factors that continue to make others wealthy and African Americans unhealthy. I believe that African Americans must begin to fight back against the alarming number of unhealthy behaviors that pervade our community. This will require education and a willingness to challenge the American status quo that does not fight for the health of African Americans.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 1 Corinthians 6:12, 19-20**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

I grew up in a single-parent home of few means in Brooklyn, New York. My mother, now 80, was and is a smoker. She knew little about proper nutrition for herself and her children and could not afford basic health care other than what the state provided when the children were young. Although she did the best that she could, such a scenario was a natural road to bad teeth, diabetes, high blood pressure, smoking, and other ailments for my siblings and for me. However, in her late 50s my mother knew, after losing her mother and a sister to diabetes and having other family members who were overweight and carriers of a vast array of health problems, that if she continued her unhealthy ways she would follow her mother and sister, neither of whom lived to be 75.

So, after urgings from physicians (she had health care), she threw out the salt shaker, the fried foods, and the sweets and opted for baked foods, non-salt seasonings, and a three-times-a-week workout! With this regimen, she lost 40 pounds, came off high-blood pressure medicine, and to this day takes only a low-dose of diabetes medication. She retired from her job of 40 years at age 75, still works out, and often passes for 65. Her changes broke the cycle in her family and led to changes in the health habits of her five children that have continued in our children.

However, my mother is the exception, not the rule in far too many African American homes. For a plethora of reasons, we just do not seem to get sick and tired of being sick (unhealthy) and tired. Is there no way to break the grip that unhealthy living has on our community?

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Not only are those African Americans who are outside the household of faith facing a health crisis, but so are those within the household of faith. For all of our church attendance, singing, shouting, praying, and on occasion even Bible reading, we do not treat our bodies as temples of God when it comes to what we eat and drink and when it comes to the care we take of our bodies. See the cultural resource unit for the many statistics.

We are the statistics, or some member of our family, or a neighbor, a co-worker, or a church member is. We are overweight, stressed, diabetic, smokers, alcoholics, and you know the rest of the list. So, when Paul asks, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?” for most, the answer is no. I do not know (believe) that it is a temple if that means I must attend to my health. No, I do not know that it is a temple if that means I am supposed to make basic, positive health decisions every day (getting proper sleep, exercising, avoiding salt, avoiding excessive sugar, eating fruits and vegetables, avoiding fried foods, and getting at least free check-ups when they are available). No, I do not know it is a temple; we don’t talk about it in my church; every blue moon we hear a sermon with a few words about health thrown in as an aside.

In our pericope Paul begins by indicating that “all things are lawful” for him “but not beneficial.” In other words, Paul, as are we, was permitted to do with his body many things, including use it to commit sin and introduce all manner of sin into it. The law permitted it. But that was not the issue for Paul. Since he was now an advocate for Christ, a carrier of the good news, an example for others, the issue was whether treating his body any way that he wished was of benefit to living a life that glorified God. On Health Day, one might well title a sermon using this passage, “The Benefits of a Healthy Life.” For African Americans and all Americans, there are indeed benefits to leading a healthy life: avoiding diabetes, lessening strokes, lessening heart attacks, lessening cancer, giving our children healthy examples, feeling better, looking better, paying less for clothing and shoes, and the list goes on and on. For those who bifurcate their lives (into what’s sacred and what’s secular), there are spiritual advantages: when we live healthy physical lives we are walking the walk, not just talking of how much we want to be examples that glorify God through our bodies. We are letting the world know that our temples matter to us as they matter to God. No laws, regulations, or even rewards are needed for those who consider it a great blessing that their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and are great gifts. In the Anchor Commentary on 1 Corinthians it says:

Under the guidance of the Spirit Christians are supposed to have the will of the Lord so united with their wills that they freely want to do his will. In this situation no rules and regulations are necessary; threats and the rewards of the law are out of place. This ideal condition the apostle expected to see fully operative. The residual influence of paganism, however, the surrounding pressure of Gnosticizing ideas, the down-drag of human laziness, and the effect of habitual indulgence checked the emergence of the pure, new condition of responsible freedom.

What is to be done when recipients of the gospel, upon realizing that they have been invited into God's home with full privileges, as it were, start wrecking the furniture, befouling the floors, and even tearing the building apart? One set of alternatives is to case these people out or to subject them to rigid police discipline. But then the whole question of the validity of the gospel would be raised and/or the expedient adopted of going back to the way of the law. Paul was not ready to surrender the glory of the gospel to the demands of the tragic revelations of what had happened at Corinth; neither was he ready to allow the corruptions to continue without correction.<sup>1</sup>

We are wrecking the furniture (our temples) when we live unhealthy lives. God will not make us stop; that would be a return to the legalism of the law. So, personal repentance and changed behavior are called for since the corrupting of our bodies cannot continue if we want to please God. Nothing can be allowed to dominate us except the Word of God and the will of God.

I would be remiss if I did not say a bit more about why we harm our bodies. I can begin by saying that many African Americans are poor and do not have access to full-service grocery stores that provide healthy food. It is worth pointing out that this poverty is often accompanied by illiteracy and even some depression and an inability to rise above cultural behemoths whose main interest is profit and not the health of African Americans or anyone else for that matter. Further, it could be argued that although our forebears had diets that were high in bad fat and sugar (the soul food for which we are now famous), their food included fewer pesticides, poly un-saturated fats, and other ingredients that were unhealthy.

Who can argue with any of this? We've seen these things proven again and again. In 2011 one has to wonder whether we at least know that corporate profiteers have never and will never make poor black folk healthy. Functional illiteracy does not necessarily mean stupidity; even those who do not read or write well have seen all the health reports and know which behaviors and foods are unhealthy. If a lot of the food is less healthy, why not at least eat less of it? Why not walk more places? Why not at least do what we can for ourselves along with fighting for the rights to good health care of the poor?

In our pericope Paul spends a great deal of time discussing immoral (mainly sexual in nature) acts in which he believes that the Christian body is not to engage. His overall concern is not so much to provide a laundry list as it is to get believers to understand that their bodies belong to Christ. We are his physical presence in the world; our bodies are the location where he has chosen to place the Holy Spirit. This means that we cannot handle our bodies in fad-driven, inattentive, destructive ways. There are boundaries that we must not cross. Indeed, what

testimony is an obese Christian who does not take any steps to be healthy? What testimony does a Christian who smokes or is an alcoholic or refuses to fight the fight to get their diabetes under control have if asked, “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?”

Our bodies are to glorify God. We are to unite with God in corporate and individual living. Now is the time. Now is the time to show to God that we are thankful for the freedom that we have received and for the Holy Spirit that has been placed in us. Now is the time to change what we can change. So, off the couch; out of the car; down with the salt-shaker; away with the cigarettes, over-indulgence in alcohol, fried food, and sugar; done with the laziness. Now is the time to love our temples.

### **Challenge**

Someone said, “Do not ask the Lord to guide your steps if you are not willing to move your feet.” We cannot continue to ask the Lord to heal us from all manner of sickness and disease if we are not willing to co-labor with God as health police for our own bodies. No one will make us healthy if we do not step up to the plate and declare by deeds, “I will do all that I can do to ensure that my body is healthy and to treat my body as a temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells.”

### **Descriptive Details**

In terms of colors, sounds, and sights, today’s text allows us to really use our sanctified imaginations to paint for listeners, and students if using this passage in Bible Study, how healthy temples look and act. **Go easy on the negative statistics and hard on the “here’s what you must do to change your behavior.”** Instead of just describing bad foods, describe how a healthy salad looks—the leafy green spinach, the tasty tomatoes, the burnt-red beets, the white and yellow eggs, the green and red bell peppers, the pearly white onions, and the clear, filled-with-seasoning oil and vinegar salad dressing. Call out the colors of the workout gear, including the shoes, and that hat to keep the sun away. Describe what breakfast and dinner looks like at your house. Be specific and be colorful.

### **Note**

1. Orr, William F., and James A. Walther. I Corinthians. The Anchor Bible series. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1976. pp. 201–202.