

Meeting AIDS with Grace and Truth

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, November 12, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11; Romans 8:31-34; Luke 13:1-5

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I. Julia was a young drug addict. She called Dennis Sawyer, pastor of a church in Chicago. "Pastor, I'm pregnant. I don't want this baby." They met and discussed options: abortion, adoption, or raising the baby. The last option was hardly realistic. But Julia couldn't bring herself to choose abortion. "What about adoption?" she asked. Sawyer called an adoption agency. They said, "A lot of childless couples jump at the opportunity to adopt a baby. We'd be glad to take the baby." Six months later, however, Julia was diagnosed with AIDS. Doctors said the baby probably would be born with the virus. The adoption agency immediately dropped the case.

Meanwhile, Carl and Michelle had been desperately trying to have a baby without any luck. They dreamed of having a daughter. They wanted to name her "Christina". But after many tests Carl and Michelle came to the conclusion that they couldn't have a baby. Then they heard pastor Sawyer ask if anybody in the congregation wanted to adopt a four-day-old baby with AIDS. The baby's name is "Christina". Christina was God's answer to Carl and Michelle's prayers. They adopted Christina. They bought toys for her. They bought clothes. They decorated her room. They also thought about the implications of their decision. AIDS babies rarely survive the first three years. They realized that Christina might not live beyond her third birthday. They read up on the disease's horrific symptoms. They knew the emotional risk

they were taking. But Carl said, "God has chosen us to take care of Christina. We feel that as long as she's on this earth she needs to be loved and comforted."

2. Jerome was 32 years old. He walked through the doors of an Episcopal Church in Dallas, Texas. Jerome asked Father Karpf, the rector, "I have AIDS. Will you bury me when I die?" Three churches had already refused his request. Father Karpf said "Yes". Jerome found himself immersed in a community that loved and accepted him. Twenty members of the congregation volunteered to take care of him. They cooked. They cleaned. They shopped for him. They prayed. They laughed. They cried with him.

But trouble loomed ahead. Some members feared they might catch AIDS from Jerome by sharing the communion cup. Father Karpf called the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. They said the virus had been found in saliva but there'd been no reports of anybody catching AIDS through sharing utensils, plates or communion cups. In fact, Jerome was the one with the most to fear. His immune system was so weak, he was far more likely to pick up somebody's bug that would quickly become pneumonia. Jerome was risking his life everytime he took communion. Still, by the end of the summer two-thirds of the members of the church left in fear. The church went down to fifty members. The vestry met to decide what to do. They made a public statement that welcomed people with AIDS. And they came. Best of all, Jerome's faith in Christ came alive even as he was physically dieing. He reaffirmed his faith in Christ and became an official member of the church. It was his last Sunday in church. He came with a

106 degree fever. He came wheezing and gasping for breath. Thirty-eight days later Jerome died. The church comforted one another in their grief. They realized that Jerome had given their church a new sense of mission. Today two hundred people worship there. It's a center for AIDS ministry. Thirty members have died of AIDS in the last twelve months. They've died within the fellowship of Christ's church - surrounded by men and women who love and comfort them.

3. Luz and her husband, Louie, were personal friends of our family. I first met Luz before we were married, when she lived with Kay's parents in Lewistown. An exchange student from South America. Flashy, sassy, and bright spirited - she brought excitement into the rather staid Ziegler household. We all came to love her. ~~We stayed in touch when she returned home. Then~~ she moved to New York. She married Louie. Several years later we were shocked to hear she had AIDS and Louie had the virus. Several years passed. The disease progressed. One day Luz called the Zieglers. "I don't know how much longer I have. Can we come visit?" "Yes! Come as soon as you can." But Kay's dad was emotionally torn between his love for Luz and his anxiety for the health of his family. He called doctors. "What danger are we running?" "You can't catch AIDS by casual contact. You catch AIDS through sexual contact, through the exchange of bodily fluids, or through sharing needles." So Kay, the boys and I went up to join the rest of the family and to see Luz. My thoughts: How did she get AIDS? I repressed my desire to ask. Is it safe to give her a hug and a kiss as we usually do? Well, when we saw

one another we immediately embraced, hugged, and kissed. Luz shared with me how her faith in Christ had come alive since she discovered she had AIDS. "Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life' I always believed. But now I trust. Everything is going to be alright." She wasn't in denial. She knew she was dying. But she knew that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Months later Luz died. Kay's parents and her two sisters went up to New York City to be with her near the end.

II. I tell these three stories to show that AIDS has a human face. AIDS is not an abstraction. Each square on this quilt represents a real person who died with AIDS - a young married woman like Lou-ise. A gay man, like Jerome. A little baby, like Christina. Each person was somebody's son or daughter; perhaps ~~somebody's sister or brother, mother or father.~~ AIDS has a human face.

I also tell these stories in the context of our faith that God has come to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the human face of God. God is not an abstraction. "We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God:... healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.... Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal."

Some Christian leaders declare that AIDS is God's judgment on people whom they believe are living in violation of God's

will. They echo the words of people who asked Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Jesus responded, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Anthony Campolo writes, "You're on very shaky ground theologically whenever you look at any single disease like AIDS and say 'God has singled out one group of people because they displease him in ways that warrant special condemnation.' If God gave us all we deserved we would all be dying of AIDS."

God reveals himself in Scripture as One who comes to us in Jesus Christ, not to curse, but to save us sinners. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." In Jesus, God took upon himself all our sins and all our suffering. Our actions, of course, have consequences. If you share needles to pierce your ears or to do drugs your liable to get AIDS - not as a curse, but as a consequence of foolish choices. If you have sexual relations with someone who has AIDS you very likely will get AIDS.

Rejection of people with AIDS also has dire consequences. "The plague of AIDS tests the spiritual credibility of the church which claims to follow its gracious Lord into suffering communities." The church is in a unique position to minister to people with AIDS. We believe in healing (whether physical or eternal). God calls us to comfort his people. It's time to spend less time on judgment and more time on ministry. We have

an obligation to minister to people rejected by society. The AIDS epidemic gives us a chance to say those suffering with the disease, "When everyone forsakes you, we won't. We want you to know that the Lord has not rejected you."

I applaud our Social Justice and Peacemaking Committee, and especially the chairperson, Jo Durbin, for leading us to respond to AIDS as Christians. The covered dish suppers. The Sunday School classes. The Oxford Presbyterian Church statement on AIDS/HIV. And, today, the AIDS quilt.

Loving Creator, you have given us the love of family to sustain us and the joy of friendship to make our journey through life one of light and enduring value. As our brothers, sisters, parents, children and friends face the crisis of AIDS, let us remember that your Son walked among us to bring strength and hope to all who suffer and to all who love them. Give the families and friends of those with AIDS, the wisdom and courage to fight prejudice and ignorance and to provide for their loved ones the strength which Jesus brought to all people. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Sources:

Andres Tapia, The AIDS Crisis: The Facts and Myths about a Modern Plague, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois 60515.

"To Meet AIDS with Grace and Truth", 200th General Assembly (1988).