

A Sermon for World AIDS Day 2016
That may be used at other times
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Psalm 72:12-14

For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.

These words from the 72nd^d Psalm seemed appropriate when we were in the midst of a bitter political contest in our nation. It is a Psalm for the present (and promised) King, that justice may be promoted and righteousness advanced. While writing this, the winner of the World Series is also not decided, but it will be one of two teams who have experienced long wilderness times of losing. What brings those contemporary events together?

Once, in an earlier run by the Cubs toward the World Series prize, I posted a sermon title on the outside sideboard of my church in southern Indiana. It read: "Why God is on the side of the Cubs!" It was the only time when people actually left the highway to come in and ask its meaning. And the congregation was some larger that Sunday.

I'm not sure what text I used, but these verses would have worked. I first heard from Carlyle Marney, late Southern Baptist preacher with deep ecumenical concerns, a great sermon on God's preference for the poor, as I put it with the Cubs, for the "underdog." In these verses and many places in Old and New Testaments, it is clear that God stands with "those who have no helper." Whether it is Matthew 25 and its list of those in need (hungry, stranger, imprisoned, sick) or countless references in the Old Testament to care for the alien and oppressed, God's preference is clear. He sides with "the needy" and redeems them "from oppression and violence."

When we recognize the continued worldwide epidemic of HIV/AIDS, we remember those that have been forgotten, neglected, and continue to be marginalized. I teach Community College students, and find they have little or no knowledge of the scourge of AIDS, and how it devastated communities now in the past century. They can't comprehend the sense of rejection, the fear, the oppression, and the condemnation that often accompanied anyone with the dread disease.

I recently heard the mother of Ryan White speak. Here in Indiana, his entire community rejected him and subjected him and his family to severe persecution because he had contracted the dread disease as a hemophiliac. We are horrified at what our Hoosier neighbors did not too many years ago.

Now, the task is still up to us—to remember the alien, the stranger, the sick, the wounded, those that suffer, whatever the cause of their suffering. While the conflicts in the Middle East and the refugees in Europe demand our response, the need of those suffering with HIV/AIDS still demands our concern.

The reality in our nation is even more serious now that the Presidential election has ended, to the great surprise and amazement of many of us. It is now EVEN MORE urgent for us who champion the cause of the “underdog” to speak out.

The President of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (Michael Jenkins) put it this way:

We have occasion, I think, to fear for the plight of people who are different in our society, to fear for the safety and liberty for gays and lesbians, transgender and bisexuals. We have reason to fear for Black and Hispanic and Asian persons, for Muslims and Buddhists, Sikhs and Jews, indeed for anyone who looks differently or thinks differently or prays differently from the majority. We have cause to fear for the plight of children at the margins, the aged, the poor, the under-insured, the under-educated, the under- or unemployed. But I cannot believe that they or we will be well-served to give in to fear.

In our own community, I intend to be more intentional in my support of the large Muslim community that is present in our university setting. And the fairly significant gay community is also feeling the fear of oppression and discrimination. While our present Governor is now the Vice-President elect, there is a very real fear that his presence will continue to be unfriendly to those who have been marginalized, and discriminated against. This includes those suffering from HIV/AIDS! We must not forget them on this World Aids day.

I conclude with the words of a gay friend of mine, who posted the following on his Facebook feed a few days after the election. I understand it’s going “viral”, and that’s all right with me, if it reaches a few more people with its message—the same as mine. God also is with us in all these times and supports us still!

If you wear a hijab, I'll sit with you on the train.
If you're trans, I'll go to the bathroom with you.
If you're a person of color, I'll stand with you if the cops stop you.
If you're a person with disabilities, I'll hand you my megaphone.
If you're an immigrant, I'll help find you resources.
If you're a survivor, I'll believe you.
If you're a refugee, I'll make sure you're welcome.
If you're a veteran, I'll take up your fight.
If you're LGBTQ, I won't let anyone tell you you're broken.
If you're a woman, I'll make sure you get home okay.

And if you suffer with HIV/AIDS, or have done so in the past, or know someone whose life was lost—know that we are with you and that God Almighty—Creator of heaven and earth and of all humanity made in God's image - is with you, too!

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