

A BOX OF TRINKETS AT TEREZIN

I want to thank AIDS Interfaith Ministries for inviting me to return to speak at this event in such a milestone year –

- ten years of your faithful witness to that unconditional divine love that encompasses all who are HIV+ or have AIDS;
- ten years of faithful witness calling for an end to the stigmas so often associated with this disease;
- ten years of interfaith cooperation, of a united religious witness to the possibilities of a new and better day.

I am honored tonight to be part of this important tradition – a tradition I don't think many other cities could lay claim to. And I want to pay tribute to those who have organized this event over the years; to those who faithfully carried out all the tasks necessary to bring this to fruition – because your passion about the issue of AIDS seems to be shared by fewer and fewer people.

We Americans have a short attention span, living in a media dominated society where sound bite news coverage jumps from one crisis to another. It is hard to sustain interest even in a global pandemic. But you folks still care and I stand in admiration.

People often talk about the beliefs of faith communities, but it seems to me that those who founded the world's most significant living religions focused more attention on behavior than belief. They paid more attention to deeds than to creeds.

In Judaism, doing mitzvahs is of great importance; Jews look to the Torah for guidance on how to live meaningfully.

Islam focuses heavily on doing things. Only one of that faith's five pillars, the Shahadah, is about belief. The other four are about things people need to do.

In Buddhism, the Buddha taught compassion and dependent origination which means nothing exists as an entity unto itself; all of us depend on one another.

And in Christianity, even if the early churches talked extensively about belief, Jesus himself focused on ways in which people could live out love and forgiveness.

So tonight I want to look at some things we can DO – I want to look at six commitments to act that we can make. James Conant, a former president of Harvard University, once said "Behold the turtle. It makes progress only when it sticks its neck out." Well, we may have to stick out our

necks in order to make a difference in our world in relation to HIV/AIDS. So here are the six commitments:

First: We must keep telling the story that HIV/AIDS continues to be a global pandemic.

Four years ago when I spoke here, I said that there were 38 million people infected with the virus; at the end of last year that number dropped to 33 million. Things are better, but still, 33 million people's lives are affected by this nasty and often fatal virus.

In 2004, 2 million children lived with HIV/AIDS; today that's still true. It hasn't improved.

In 2004, globally there were 5 million new HIV infections each year. Thankfully that number has been cut almost in half; but nevertheless 2.7 million people were infected with the virus last year.

More than 25 million people have died of AIDS since 1981. This pandemic has now surpassed the awful reign of death brought on by Europe's bubonic plague.

Now one difference from the earliest days of the pandemic is who's dying. Today 72% of AIDS-related deaths take place in Sub-Saharan Africa, an incredibly poor part of the world. And here in the United States, the disease is increasingly affecting women and people of color.

Now the point of all these statistics is simply to say that even though things may be better, even though the major impact of the disease has shifted to parts of the world that seem remote to us, there are still phenomenal numbers of people getting infected and dying from AIDS; it is still a terrifying pandemic; and each person with the virus is still a child of God and a brother or sister to us.

So we must keep telling the story of HIV/AIDS since the voices of those affected are not often voices that people with power hear. We have to become the voices of the voiceless.

The second commitment: We must keep calling on our government and other governments to fund critical medical research until there is an accessible vaccination to prevent transmission of the virus and until there is a real cure for the disease.

Again, that will require vigilance on our part because in the midst of a global economic crisis, people will have other priorities and may be willing to cast those with AIDS aside. It will be up to us to claim that the needs of those with AIDS matter just as much as bank and corporate bail-outs.

The third commitment: We must continue preventative work in our own communities so that the virus doesn't unleash itself with vengeance yet again on a new generation. We must keep working for accurate, realistic sex education for our young people. We must continue to advocate safe sex. We must make sure that people don't fall into apathy that will pull us back where we have been.

The fourth commitment: We must affirm the dignity and humanity of all of those with HIV/AIDS. We must let them know we care about them, that their lives matter to us. And we must care for those with the disease in ways that recognize that HIV/AIDS is not just about physical illness, but that there are often painful and overwhelming feelings of fear, despair and rejection that accompany this disease.

Services like this one tonight help show that commitment to affirm the dignity and humanity of those living with the virus.

The fifth commitment is a huge one: We must struggle to remove the shame, the stereotypes and the stigmas attached to this disease, and we must repent of the fact that many of those stigmas arise from judgmental attitudes by religious people. We must also recognize that the stigmas not only hurt those infected, they also hurt their families and their loved ones.

There are many who still won't get tested because of a fear of being ostracized. There are many who have been diagnosed as HIV+ who won't talk openly about their condition because they are anxious about discrimination in the workplace, or from friends and family.

Think about one of the major risk groups in this society, gay men. Do they have anything to fear from the stereotypes and stigmas? Just look at what happened last month in my state of California. The majority of people said that it is okay for two straight teenagers to get married, often without the skills, education and resources to give that marriage any hope of success; as long as they are heterosexuals. It is okay for a convict on death row to marry someone he/she has never met but known only through pen-pal correspondence. But two women in my church who have lived together in faithful love for 42 years are not allowed to marry. It is not okay for two men in my congregation who adopted three children no one else wanted, and who have raised those children in an incredibly caring and loving way, to marry. Tell me that that is not discrimination!

Gay men, lesbians, transgender folks and bi-sexuals form the only group that it seems okay in America to still openly hate and strip of their human rights. And the folks who lead that bigoted crusade often do so in the name of their religious beliefs.

The stigmas, the stereotypes, the prejudice, the discrimination – it is all still there in relation to sexual orientation, and thus it is still there in relation to those who are HIV+ – whether or not they are gay.

We people of faith are called to challenge our society, and maybe more importantly to challenge our own faith communities, to live by compassion, not condemnation; to love all our brothers and sisters rather than judging and belittling some of them. Mother Teresa once said, “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.”

And now the sixth and final commitment, one we make to the 25 million people who have died in this pandemic – we must commit ourselves to letting them live on in our memories, affirming the differences they made with their lives, and letting their memories guide us into making a difference as well.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote: “Over the course of thirty years as a rabbi, I have seen many people come to the end of their lives. I have held their hands and prayed with them. I have seen them deteriorate. I have seen courage, love and humor in the face of death. And the dying have taught me a great lesson that I never would have learned without their help: Most people are not afraid of dying; they are afraid of not having lived. What frightens them is the dread of insignificance, the notion that we will be born and live and one day die and none of it will matter. People understand that the story of their lives has to have a beginning, middle and end. But what they desperately want is to live long enough to get it right, to feel they have done something worthwhile with their lives.”

Actress Reese Witherspoon who won an Academy Award for her portrayal of singer June Carter, recalls Carter telling her before her death, “I’m just trying to matter.” Witherspoon said, “I know what she means. I’m also just trying to matter and live a good life, and mean something to somebody.”

We need to remember those who have died of this disease and through our memories affirm that each of them did matter. Their lives were worthwhile. They did make a difference.

In 1944, Inge Auerbacher, a nine-year-old Jewish child, was imprisoned at Terezin, Hitler’s holding camp in Czechoslovakia. An awful place; of the 150,000 Jews who arrived there, about 33,000 died due to its appalling conditions, even before they could be deported to Auschwitz and other extermination camps.

Mourning the recent departure of one of her playmates to a death camp, Inge went on a walk near her barracks. As she walked, a man came running up to her, and handed her a box full of hand-made trinkets composed of bits of string; odds and ends. He said he had to give it to somebody, to anybody, before they took him away. She never saw him again. She survived the Shoah, the Holocaust. Listen to what she later wrote:

*He was a stranger; we had never met.
He wanted me to recall him, not to forget.
He handed me a box filled with treasure
And hoped it would give me much pleasure.
Odds and ends up to the brim,
For dreams of any child’s whim.
“Something to remember me by!”*

*I was startled and full of surprise.
A rainbow of color before my eyes
Things made of threads attached to eternity,
Knitted by loving hands without identity.
His eyes looked hopeless; in a daze,
He walked restless, as if in a maze,
He was a humble man – without fame,
Staying unknown – never stating his name.
“Something to remember me by!”*

*He rode away on the death train,
Filled with desperation and pain.
He rests with the ashes in sleep,
His memory I will forever keep.
The little girl, now fully grown,
Remembers him, though still unknown.
To this day, his words sound loud and clear,
His presence assured from year to year.
"Something to remember me by!"*

Novelist Frederick Buechner, said: "When you remember me it means you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years and miles stand between us. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice, and speak to me in your heart. For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost."

The 25 million people who have died from AIDS will live on if we remember. Remembering them means their lives made a difference, and remembering them also means we will make a difference by refusing to let them be forgotten.

At the height of the Balkan war, 22 people were killed by Serbian mortar fire while standing in line outside a Sarajevo bakery. For the next 22 days, Vedran Smailovic, a cellist with the Sarajevo symphony brought his chair and cello to the bombed-out shell of that bakery. Each day at 4:00 o'clock, he played an "adagio" to honor each person who died. As he did so, the Serbian shells continued to crash around him. But you see, he said, that when we name and honor and remember the dead, we wrest some meaning and comfort from the mystery of death. And I think he could have added, and we make a difference.

How realistic is it to think that any of us can make a difference in relation to a huge global pandemic? Listen to an old folktale shared by Rabbi, Harold Kushner.

He told of a village planning a gala New Year's Eve celebration. Every resident of the village was to bring a bottle of wine and to pour it into a vat in the town square. At midnight, the town leaders opened the spigots and invited people to share the wine, but when they raised their glasses, they found them filled with water.

Everyone in the town had had the same idea: If all my neighbors bring wine, nobody will notice if I bring a bottle of water instead. Each one assumed he or she didn't need to do the right thing because everyone else would.

We can't depend on others to do it for us. We need to respond to this pandemic, year after year, until it goes away. And each of us can do a part of what needs to be done. You are doing that just by being here tonight. And each of us can pledge our willingness to work on those six commitments.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “To leave the world a bit better; to know that even one life has breathed easier because you lived – that is to have succeeded.” Well, similarly we could say, “To reach out, support and affirm one person living with HIV/AIDS, to help plan one of these services, to challenge one neighbor or colleague’s stigmatization of anyone based on gender, ability, color or orientation, to write one letter to the editor, to ask your faith community to make a statement – any of that is to have succeeded.

Is it possible to really make a difference? In *Man of La Mancha*, Cervantes’ Don Quixote, the dreamer, the fantasy weaver said: “When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be practical is madness. To surrender dreams – this may be madness. Too much sanity may be madness. And maddest of all, to see life as it is, and not as it should be.”

And one final word from Brazilian liberation theologian, Rubem Alves: “Living is like dancing. As you dance, you move your body according to a rhythm and harmony which fill the space ... You may dance the tune played by the present reality and your style of life will be realistic and pragmatic. Or you may choose to move your body under the spell of a mysterious tune and rhythm which comes from a world we do not see, the world of our hopes and aspirations. Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance to it.”

As a people of compassion and hope, may we hear the melody of the future and have the faith to dance to it, as we go forth and make a difference.