



Developing Sermons on HIV/AIDS

by Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr.,
The Riverside Church, New York City



Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. As you develop sermons on HIV/AIDS, you will have very little to say if you limit yourself to the exact words of Jesus on these issues. Instead, you might approach the task in the awareness of John 16:12, where Jesus tells His disciples, "There is still much that I could say to you. . ." It is here that Jesus indicates that He has not revealed everything to us. We must therefore tread with Christian humility and openness in seeking to understand what Jesus wants of us as we approach issues - such as HIV/AIDS - which He did not address directly.

To provide the leadership Christians need in order to understand how to respond to this epidemic, there are several things you must do. First, know the facts about the virus: what it is; what it does to the immune system and its effects on your community or town. Most importantly, gain a sense of the attitudes of your congregation towards HIV - are they knowledgeable? Fearful? Open-minded? Answering these questions will help you formulate exactly what you want to accomplish. Then, complete this statement: In my sermon I hope to inform, persuade or motivate my audience to the end that they will _____. Fill in the blank with specific attitudes or behaviors you hope to encourage.

Make your sermon authentic. By this I mean it must be part of your theological tradition and must come from an aspect of the Gospel about which you feel very deeply. We are not asking you to preach what you don't believe just because it's the "correct" thing to do. Your job is to figure out how to build constructively even if you use just a small slice of the Gospel. I recommend you consider using the following passages: Luke 10:25-37 (the Good Samaritan); Matthew 7:7-12 (the Golden Rule); John 9:1-7 (sin and blame); John 13:31-35 (love one another).

Now for the hard part. How to approach the sexuality issues that are linked closely with HIV/AIDS? Remember, you will determine whether people die in agony or in community. Preach only from what you believe, so long as you provide constructive leadership toward ending HIV transmission and caring for those infected and affected. If your current framework prevents you from addressing controversial questions in a way that empowers your congregation to respond to the

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ravages of this epidemic, consider entering retreat to seek divine guidance regarding the approach you should take.

Let me describe my approach in handling controversial issues. I preach that like everything that is created by God, sex is a positive part of the life impulse. However, the power of sex, if misused, can destroy the bonds of society. The job of the church then, is to teach that sex, although good, must be handled responsibly. Yes, God wants us to abstain from sex outside of marriage, but as preachers, we can either be very rigid (and risk being irrelevant to people's realities) or we can preach responsibility, combined with God's grace and mercy.

Grace is an all-important concept when preaching about HIV. Luckily for all of us, God "grades on a curve," making it possible for us to do our best though we may not measure up to His highest standards at all times. Thanks to God's grace we are able to make mistakes, to redeem ourselves and to have experiences that bring us closer to Him.

It is admittedly difficult to use the Bible in defense of homosexuality. However, it seems to me that we need only look at the nearly infinite types of trees, birds, clouds, etc. to see that God delights in variety. It would be strange if God, who so loves diversity, would lock all sexual expression into a narrow standard form by which persons would be judged.

We see in the case of Mary (a woman of "ill repute"), that Jesus receives authentic affection from whatever direction it comes, even if it means contradicting social mores. God calls us to be authentic in terms of our unique personhood. Homosexual Christians have determined what is authentic for them. They have a central responsibility in determining what sexual expression reflects integrity for them. Gays and straights share the task of developing sound moral values out of the differing perspectives and experiences they have had. Society's judgment shouldn't impede a person's inner witness of spirit because after all as the song says, "you don't know what the Lord told me!"

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