

ONE GRAIN, ONE LIFE

Just this week I received an invitation to a town-wide discussion about developing a plan to deal with the threat of a bird flu pandemic. It reminded me of similar discussions that took place more than two decades ago when HIV/AIDS was first making the rounds.

The truth is we've been dealing with AIDS for over a quarter-century now. And while we are occasionally reminded that it is a major problem in Africa, here in America, ever since the introduction of drugs that can successfully manage HIV, we have heard less and less about it. The once ubiquitous red ribbons on evening gowns and tuxedos at events like the Academy Awards have largely disappeared. And we have conveniently forgotten the fear and ignorance that surrounded AIDS victims in the early years of the epidemic.

Back in the mid-eighties I was involved in founding one of the earliest hospice programs in upstate New York. As President of the Board it was my duty to offer the after dinner address at our annual fundraising dinner. One year I decided to speak about AIDS, for hospice is often called in when AIDS patients are dying.

I especially focused on the need to confront the prejudice that AIDS victims faced, for it was often seen in those days, even as it is by some today, as a gay disease. I quoted Cardinal John Krol of Philadelphia, who once said, and I quote, "The spread of AIDS is an act of vengeance against homosexuality." (*New York Times Magazine*, 10-11-87, 86)

Of course, that's very poor theology. God does not inflict us with diseases as punishment for anything. God does not use cancer or heart disease or AIDS or any other calamity to keep us in line.

But that didn't stop folks like Cardinal Krol from spewing their bile. And he was not, and is not, alone in his beliefs. I was heckled during that speech by folks who agreed with the cardinal. One couple even walked out, cursing me as they left. Such attitudes had their impact. I remember a gay friend of mine, an ordained pastor, who contracted AIDS, and when he went public about his disease, he was promptly evicted from his apartment.

In time, though, things did change, and attitudes for many were altered. As more and more people were affected by the disease, as brothers, and sons, and sisters and husbands, died, as even more panels were added to the AIDS quilt, people grew more and more tolerant. Out of the deaths of those first victims, came new life and hope for others.

In that same hospice address I spoke of one such early victim. His name was Gregory Hoyer.

Greg was a nurse. After putting himself through nursing school, he took up his career and developed a reputation as a superb practitioner. He took pride in providing good, conscientious care.

When he contracted HIV it soon developed into full-blown AIDS. He grew very sick and could no longer work. His parents welcomed him back into their home, and cared for him as he was dying.

Greg had a wonderful sense of humor. Just months before his death, when asked what he wanted for Christmas, he drolly replied, "Well, I wouldn't recommend a five-year magazine subscription."

As Greg wrestled with his disease, he and his parents were very open with others about what was happening. His dad was a prominent lawyer in town, and his mom didn't try to cover it up. They were honest about both his homosexuality and his AIDS. And as a result many people came to better understand both. His mother once told me that, as she put it, "an awful lot of good stuff came out of those last thirteen months."

And so it did. Our hospice eventually established an annual award in Greg's name, given each year to a nurse who exemplified hospice ideals, just as Greg had.

But more importantly, out of his dying, and out of his death, came a new level of understanding, and a new sense of tolerance, on the part of many, many folks in that small upstate community.

His funeral service was packed; hundreds came to pay their respects. And the city of Gloversville's attitude towards AIDS was forever changed. Out of Greg's death came new life.

How like the sentiment expressed by Jesus in our scripture reading from John.

This story takes place at the beginning of Holy Week. Jesus is in Jerusalem and seems to foresee that his death is imminent. It is not his first choice. Later he will pray, "Let this cup pass from me." But he also conveys his conviction that out of that death will come something new.

He uses a commonplace agricultural metaphor to make his point. All his listeners, being as close to the land as they were, would have understood.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies," said Jesus, "it remains just a simple grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit." (John 12:24)

I like the way Eugene Peterson translates it: “Listen carefully: unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never anymore than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over.” (*The Message*, 1945)

Jesus, apparently, was speaking of his own impending death. And there can be little question that out of his death came much fruit. His willingness to face it square on resulted in his resurrection. And both his death and resurrection led to the incredible growth in the movement he initiated. The number of his followers was reproduced many times over. From a tiny handful of disciples at the time of his death, Christianity grew into the largest religious movement in the Roman Empire. And the love and concern that was shown to those Jesus met while he walked the earth, was multiplied many times over by the actions of his followers.

Out of his death came new life, new hope and more good than we can measure.

And out of Greg’s death, came much good as well.

Some, of course, might object to my comparing a gay man who died of AIDS to Jesus, but the principle transcends the particulars: new life can indeed come out of death.

Author John-Michael Oxeley tells a story about his work with Project Open Hand, a program providing meals on wheels for AIDS patients in San Francisco.

One day John-Michael was teamed up with a fellow named Bill. Bill was newly arrived from Wisconsin. Folks at Project Open Hand always worked in teams of two. That day John-Michael drove and Bill carried the food to people’s doors. As they stopped in front of a dilapidated building on Valencia Street, Bill looked at his list of recipients, and read, “One regular lunch, one special dinner, for Jesus.”

Oxeley writes: “As he disappeared up the side stairs to the apartment . . . I looked at the listing [and saw that] . . . ‘Heysous,’ a rather common Spanish name, was on the list, Wisconsin Bill [had just] pronounced it as most English speakers do— ‘Jesus.’”

Later, John-Michael had a chance to make the delivery himself. And an opportunity to meet Jesus. “”He was a young man,” he writes, “but now looked so old . . . [he was] covered completely with lesions . . . too weak to carry his meals into the kitchen”

Oxeley was haunted by the encounter. Later that night he remembered Jesus of Nazareth’s saying that “as you do it to the least of these, you do it to me.” And he realized that Wisconsin Bill was profoundly right.

“When I brought the bag lunch and the hot dinner to these guys, I was actually bringing a meal to Jesus After all it’s quite true. Jesus does have AIDS and does live on Valencia Street.” (*Jesus Has AIDS and Lives on Valencia Street*)

And Oxeley’s view of the world was greatly enlarged.

Out of death can come new life. Even when the cause of death is controversial. That doesn’t diminish the pain of death. That doesn’t eliminate the grief for those left behind. But it can provide hope. It can help us see things in a new way.

As we encounter death in our lives, and we often do, we can view it as the end. Or, we can understand it as part of the journey. We can see it as a portal to new life. Not just for the deceased, but also for those left behind. Not just new life in eternity, but also new life in the here and now.

Kate Munger lives in Inverness, California. Back in 1990, Kate helped care for a friend dying of AIDS. She did some housework for him, and some gardening. But she wanted to do more. Being a musician, she wondered about singing to him. But he was comatose at the time, and she wasn’t sure it would matter. Nonetheless, she pulled up a chair beside his bed, and started softly singing near his ear. His breathing, which had been quick and shallow, began to deepen, and to slow down. Clearly it had a calming effect.

A few days later her friend died. But out of that deathbed experience, a new idea was born. If it had helped her comatose friend, might not singing help others passing through their final days?

The idea continued to grow, and in time Kate decided to form a small bedside choir. She called the group the Threshold Choir. And, in April of 2000, they sang for the first time, at the bed of a friend with lupus.

Today, there are dozens of Threshold Choirs all around the country, even in Canada. And hundreds of singers. And untold numbers of folks find their last days eased by songs ranging from “Ave Maria” to “Yesterday.”

Out of the death of her AIDS-inflicted friend, has come the new life—multiplied many times over--of the Threshold Choirs. (Marijo Dowd, “Guided By Voices,” *Real Simple*, April, 2006, 238-242)

One would be rather foolish to suggest death is a good thing. On rare occasions, that may indeed be true, but more often than not it is cruel. Even if there is no physical pain involved, emotionally, it tears us apart. It can shatter our world. “But,” St. Paul once wrote, “we would not have you ignorant, brothers and sisters, concerning those who have died, that you may not grieve as other do who have no hope.” (I Thessalonians 4:13)

For while death is a fact of life, while grief is very real, it does not have to be a time without hope. For we have heard Jesus declare a simple truth: out of death can come new life.

New life for the deceased, who is resurrected to an eternity with God, and new life for those of us left behind. Just ask those who knew Greg Hoye. Or those who delivered meals to Jesus on Valencia Street. Or those who now sing songs of comfort at bedsides all across the continent.

One grain becomes many.

One life multiplies.

Death is not the end.

**Amen
John H. Danner**