

Still Here...

AIDS is still here. 37.9 million people in the world live with HIV/AIDS. There is no cure for it. There have been dramatic advances in providing ways to manage it and in preventing HIV infection, but still there are new HIV infections every year with the lion's share of new infections in the United States occurring among young African American men who have sex with men regardless of their sexual orientation. This is something that many of you have heard. But what you may not have heard is that Massachusetts is one of the worst performing states in terms of meeting its 2020 goals to address 7 key targets. Those key targets include:

- Reducing new infections
- Helping people know their HIV status
- Making new diagnoses
- Linking people to care
- Keeping people in care
- Helping people with the infection maintain viral suppression
- Reducing the death rate from HIV related complications.

In a state where we are poised to have in place legislation that will dramatically improve access to healthcare, these outcomes do not speak well for the ways in which our trailblazing healthcare system addresses HIV and populations that are most vulnerable to HIV. There is an abundance of information and data and stats that I could throw at you. There are any number of requests and pleas I could make to you. There are campaigns you can join and information you can get wise to. But really, there is only one thing I want you to take away from today.

AIDS is still here.

Those of us who came out as gay in the 1980's can never forget that it is still here. The pain of those we lost is still fresh nearly 40 years later. The way we learned sex still lives with those of us who survived. But the younger generations only know HIV as a manageable infection. As a medical inconvenience...not a death sentence.

Heterosexual couples who have had few LGBTQ friends may have only read about AIDS and may be unaware of consciously knowing anyone closely who is HIV+. Most people

are aware of the high rates among countries on the African continent but countries like Russia and China are seeing explosive rates of new infection as well and in places like this there is not only deep cultural stigma, but in many cases a total lack of access to care either to maintain or prevent. HIV is still a global pandemic.

Because HIV is still here, long after the bigots thought that gay men would take the disease with them to their graves, long after champions of acceptance, research and public advocacy like Arthur Ashe and Elizabeth Taylor have gone, long after the Catholic church would emerge as a global leader in care for those living with HIV, we are in desperate need of a spiritual strategy to own HIV/AIDS as part of human life on earth.

I wonder if maybe we need to learn how to celebrate. We have such a limited misconception of what “celebrate” really means.

celebrate (v.)

mid-15c., "to perform publicly with appropriate rites," originally of the Mass, from Latin *celebratus* "much-frequented; kept solemn; famous," past participle of *celebrare* "assemble to honor," also "to publish; sing praises of; practice often," originally "to frequent in great numbers," from *celeber* "frequented, populous, crowded;" with transferred senses of "well-attended; famous; often-repeated." Its etymology is unknown.

General sense of "commemorate or honor with demonstrations of joy" is from 1550s; formerly it also could be with demonstrations of sorrow or regret. Meaning "make widely known, praise, glorify" is from 1610s.

Related: [Celebrated](#); *celebrating*.

When I hear this definition, I understand that “to celebrate” has a complexity that is not just about throwing a party and acknowledging happy times. For the real depth of the meaning of celebration to be present there must also be a sense of obligation, duty and a solemnity that gets lost when we only think of Kool and the Gang or Madonna. What if we could muster up a celebration...a way to honor, sing praises and publicly demonstrate our ongoing and relentless battle against AIDS. What a different world we might live in...

If we could celebrate, maybe HIV wouldn't be criminalized in parts of our country and the world. Maybe medications of all kinds, maintenance and prevention wouldn't be massive revenue generators for drug companies. Maybe faith leaders from all traditions could find a unified voice of affirmation for people regardless of their HIV status or potential to acquire HIV. And maybe those who are vulnerable would be inspired to take charge of their embodied selves and access care and prevention so that their partners, families and loved ones could spend more time enjoying them in this life as opposed to potentially mourning their loss.

Faith is an interesting thing. It is incredibly personal and has the power to move entire nations to action. AIDS shook our world when it appeared on the scene. But the world very quickly relegated it first to one small segment of the population who they wanted to vilify and then when it was impossible to blame the gays for it and when it spread like wildfire across heterosexual populations, the world "pathologized" AIDS. That is there was and still is a tendency to only speak of the medical aspects of HIV/AIDS and the statistics and the data related to care and mortality. But I had a friend once say to me about his experience with this "I am not just my HIV". That is where faith can come in. This "celebration" I'm talking about is what will always compel us to put a human face on HIV/AIDS...and not just the face of tragedy in distant Zimbabwean villages. Faith that declares the "inherent worth and dignity of all" can act out this principle.

The primary way that we can act it out is by actually learning the facts. After this service, I want to invite people into an informal conversation about HIV/AIDS. Rather than focusing on the loss that too many of us have experienced, I want to use the time to answer questions. I'm willing to answer intimate and even inappropriate questions. Questions you might be embarrassed, or think are too dumb to ask, I'm willing to answer. As your minister and as someone dedicated as part of his ministry of embodiment to seeing HIV contained and AIDS fully managed in my lifetime, I know that this may be the only way you get this information. But to me, giving you knowledge, opening the door to understanding and de-mystifying something that is so common in our world is the real celebration. This work, is the only way I know to truly honor and

celebrate the generation of people, the personal friends and lovers I've lost over the years to AIDS and to make sure everyone who I know who is HIV+ knows that I have their back. Armed with knowledge, you are each potentially agents of change, if you want to be.

I'm tired of mourning. I'm tired of weeping. I'm tired of gut wrenching pain of loss, fear of infection and dread of stigma. I demand that my faith, my theology to be a way to celebrate a world that may have HIV/AIDS but hasn't and will never be beaten by it.

It will be so.