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***World AIDS Day Sermon
December 1, 2002
John Midwood***

We gather to praise valiant individuals who are struggling or have struggled with an epidemic. We gather to mark the memory, reason and skill which have advanced the fight against the epidemic. We gather to lament the fact memory; reason and skill are not the only dynamic operating in the worldwide AIDS arena. We gather to affirm our faith and renew our commitment as God's agents in the world.

I suspect each of us immediately connects a face with the word AIDS. Embodied faces that bear testimony to the human condition and the human spirit. Faces reminding us of our own frailty. Faces reminding us life is good. Faces declaring victory is the ultimate destination in God's creation.

One of my faces is that of a young man. I served as a hospice chaplain in the late 70s and early 80s. He was the first person I visited with AIDS. It was still a new experience for the hospital. We were instructed to wear gowns and masks – they were on a cart at the door to the room. I felt silly but followed the instructions. I entered the room and found a very sick young man. I also found his mother and sister, without gown and mask, caring and touching and loving him. I was embarrassed by inappropriate dress and felt I conveyed fear rather than care by it. I ignored the cart after that experience.

Another face is that of a peer and colleague. We sat together in the back of a very large church and laughed and joked while a very public process that involved me was occurring. He radiated grace and joy in the midst of high stress. He embraced me when the process concluded. He was diagnosed not too long afterward. He died suddenly and unexpectedly before medical advances had an opportunity to engage the disease.

Another face is that of a young woman, a teenager. She has dark eyes, a winsome smile and a very pleasant manner. She was born with the virus and is one of a growing number of adolescents who, since birth, know frequent hospital stays and endless regimes of medicine. She lost her mother not too long ago. She lost her first boy friend not long after telling him of her disease. Her adolescent struggles teach me my impatience with adolescents is self-centered and contrary to God's will.

Memory, reason and skill have changed the dynamics of AIDS in the two plus decades since my first hospital visit to someone with the disease. The road to hospice care is

no longer short or automatic. The virus can be detected and treated to delay the onset of disease. The disease can be treated and life prolonged. Children and adults around the world can be educated about prevention and treatment, about living with the disease, about living with those living with the disease.

Regrettably, an earlier societal dynamic of AIDS still challenges and, at times, controls memory, reason and skill. Prejudice, ignorance and denial continue to thrive in our culture despite scientific and medical advances. People continue to be shunned when diagnosed. Accurate information is not provided to educate young and old, diagnosed and undiagnosed, about AIDS. Individual words and corporate actions reject practices that would alleviate suffering and promote public health.

Prejudice continues to stigmatize those diagnosed. It is not just the boyfriend of that young person I described. Individuals with the virus must be secretive about themselves in order to be accepted and respected. The truth does not set them free. Rather the truth hurts innocent individuals, pains the suffering and isolates the sick. Prejudice is a disease of the spirit, every bit as life threatening as a disease of the body. Well being is more than vital signs and the absence of viruses, bacterium or wild cells. Health and wholeness is a corporate spiritual matter as much as it is a personal physical matter. The disease that challenges us requires healing beyond that of the physician.

Ignorance minimizes the skill we have to fight the epidemic. People, young persons especially, do not have accurate information about the causes of AIDS, about practices to prevent the spread of the disease, about relating to those who have the disease. Health services to reduce risk and alleviate suffering are not as available as they could be in this country and around the world. The information is available. The services are possible. But people, especially people outside North America and Western Europe, remain ignorant.

Factual information and enlightened leadership are indispensable in fighting prejudice and ignorance. My theory is many of our national leaders and popular religious figures are in denial about this worldwide public health epidemic. Some would argue politics are involved, but I would never suggest such a thing from the pulpit. It must be denial that prompts our leaders to inhibit the effective dissemination of accurate and reliable information about AIDS around the world. It must be denial that withholds funding from agencies in other parts of the world that are in the best position to provide AIDS educational and medical services because they offer a full range of reproductive health care services. Our leaders must be in denial. What other explanation could there be?

We have reasons to be hopeful on this Worldwide AIDS Day. We have reasons to be concerned. Someone offered to provide me with statistics about AIDS around the world. I thanked them kindly but chose not to accept the offer. Statistics about this matter are too cold. But there is one piece of data that does need to be highlighted even though we all know it. The burdens of this epidemic fall too heavily on the less economically privileged in this country and around the world. AIDS compounds the suffering and loss of hope already too prevalent for those living in poverty.

We note gloominess on this day. Prejudice, ignorance, denial and injustice must be mentioned as we reflect and pray and hopefully act in the midst of a worldwide health epidemic. I suspect everyone in this room is engaged in the struggle. Some work with individuals affected by the disease. Some support the work of our agencies and church bodies as we carry out Jesus' instructions to visit the sick, find blessing with those mourning, comfort the widowed and orphaned. Jesus' words were that whenever we do it, we do it to and for him.

Our work in the worldwide struggle with AIDS requires we address the issues of prejudice, ignorance, denial and injustice as well as issues of sickness and suffering. This part of the struggle requires wisdom, patience and perseverance. Prejudice, ignorance, denial and injustice are spiritual matters. Our prophetic tradition reminds us advocacy is not highly valued by established leadership. Jesus instructed us to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves in relating to the authorities. We have a simple point to make. AIDS is a worldwide public health crisis, not a moral issue. Our faith communities must make this point in the public discussions and political debates about AIDS policies. Agencies around the world must be given the freedom and the funds to strengthen the effectiveness of their work combating AIDS. We must challenge those who would limit effective public health practices for ideological reasons.

The task might seem daunting. However, our gathering today reminds us we have great strength. We are strong because of the bonds we share. Bonds established by God in creation. Eternal bonds created by the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Living bonds renewed daily by the Spirit of God. Bonds of a common mission. You know, some folks are still debating the theology of Lutherans and Episcopalians sharing ministry. As far as I can tell, the debates center on what people said and did in the sixteenth century. A Worldwide AIDS Day reminds us the sixteenth century was a long time ago. LCFS and ECS are focused mostly on works. That too was a problem in the sixteenth century. The common mission and ministries of our agencies are an answer to Jesus' prayer that we all might be one. Joint sponsorship of this event, with our host St. Mary's Church, affirms our call to common mission and strengthens the bonds we share as twenty-first century followers of Jesus Christ.

We mark Worldwide AIDS Day as two faith communities called to common mission. We gather as people touched by the worldwide health epidemic AIDS, with faces in mind and stories to tell. We gather aware of challenges, individuals challenged by physical disease, corporate bodies challenged by spiritual maladies.

Most of all, we gather to affirm faith and share hope. Our faith tells us the Holy One is preparing a banquet of the richest foods and finest wines on the mountaintop. Our faith tells us there will be an enormous crowd at the banquet – people from every race, tribe, nation and language. They will be dressed in white and singing. Our faith tells us the way to the banquet. We are on the way. We will get there together. And the tears along the way, God will wipe them from our eyes.