

How Would Jesus Respond to Persons Living With HIV and AIDS?

By M. Kent Millard

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him saying, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. (Matt. 8:1-3)

Two years ago, a student attending a Protestant seminary in northeast India shared with a trusted professor that he had tested HIV positive. Obviously, that student was facing some difficult health challenges, as he would need to obtain the necessary medications that would enable him to live productively with this dreaded disease. He also faced the prospect of being ostracized by other students because of the social stigmatization that comes with being diagnosed HIV positive.

This student shared his deep personal suffering with his professor to seek guidance, counsel, comfort, and prayer in the midst of his illness. However, the professor told other leaders in the seminary about the student, and the next day they notified him that he was being expelled from the seminary.

The following day, the HIV positive student committed suicide. Here was a student who undoubtedly felt called by God to serve as a pastor in the Christian ministry, but was excluded from his seminary training by Christian leaders because of the widespread fear and prejudice toward persons who are HIV positive. Throughout the world, people are frequently reluctant to be tested for HIV/AIDS because, if they discover they are positive, they are often kicked out of their families and homes and excluded from their congregations because of our fear of AIDS and our prejudice against persons who may have this disease.

How Jesus responded to lepers

The way we treat HIV/AIDS patients today is much the same as the way persons with leprosy were treated in the time of Jesus. In the first century, when someone discovered that they had the chronic infectious disease called leprosy, they were immediately ostracized. They were kicked out of their homes, excluded from synagogue and Temple worship, had to live outside the city walls and were virtually banished from human society. People with leprosy had to shout "unclean, unclean" wherever they went, always remain at least six feet away from other people, and avoid all human contact with other people. However, Jesus followed none of these prohibitions against people with leprosy. Matthew tells us that, when Jesus came down from the mountain where he gave what we call the Sermon on the Mount, a leper came and knelt down before him and said "Lord, if you choose you can make me clean." (Matt. 8: 2).

But Jesus responded in a way that shocked them all. Rather than fearing the leper and keeping his distance, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the man with leprosy saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" (Matt. 8: 3). Immediately, the man with leprosy was healed. When others excluded, Jesus included. When others reacted out of fear, Jesus responded with compassion. When others avoided human contact, Jesus reached out and touched the excluded one with his healing hand.

Just as lepers were excluded and avoided in the time of Jesus, so persons with HIV/AIDS are frequently excluded and avoided in our world today. In his book *Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence: Christian Churches and the Global AIDS Crisis* (Fortress, 2004), Donald E. Messer tells a story about a woman in Kansas who attended the funeral of a stranger and wept profusely. When asked why she was crying so hard over a person she didn't know, she explained that her son had died of AIDS the previous week, but her husband would not allow them to have a Christian funeral. So this grieving mother came to mourn near the casket of another family's son who had died of AIDS. Unfortunately, Christians, congregations and society in general continue to exclude, ignore, and ostracize persons with HIV/AIDS in much the same way that lepers were banished in the time of Jesus.

However, Jesus not only personally reached out with compassion and healing power to the persons who were excluded because of an illness, but he also commanded his followers to do the same. In Matthew 10:5-8, Jesus sent out his twelve disciples to preach the good news that the kingdom of God had come and they were to "cure the sick, raise the dead, and CLEANSE THE LEPERS . . ." (my emphasis).

The living Christ reaches out today

In a similar way, the living Christ is among us today, reaching out to heal those excluded by church and society alike because of their illness, and sends all his faithful followers to reach out with healing and loving hands to those who are living with the HIV/AIDS disease.

I thank God that there are Christians and congregations who are reaching out with Christ's healing love to those suffering with the HIV/AIDS disease and the suffering from the exclusion that frequently comes with it. Congregations of all sizes and denominations are awakening to the needs of persons living with HIV and AIDS all over the world, receiving offerings and sending mission teams to minister to HIV/AIDS patients and their families in this country and abroad.

St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Indianapolis has partnered with other congregations throughout Indiana and with the Indiana University School of Medicine in supporting an AIDS hospital, outreach clinics, and an orphanage in Eldoret, Kenya, which is now treating about 40,000 HIV/AIDS patients each month with lifesaving medications and food. This is the largest AIDS treatment center in the world and is an approved Advance Special of the United Methodist Church.

However, we also need to reach out to those who are suffering with HIV/AIDS in our own communities. Several years ago, I visited with a pastor of a small rural congregation who told me this amazing story. A member of her congregation had a son who had lived in another city, had an advanced case of AIDS, and wanted to come home to die. The mother was not sure how this small rural community would accept him so she and her son invited the pastor to their home to share their concerns. The pastor assured them that their family was loved by Christ and the church and would continue to be welcome in the congregation and that they would pray for the son and his healing.

When the son became too ill to attend church, church members brought in meals to the family. The pastor met with him to plan his funeral and was at his bedside when he left this world and entered eternal life. All their family and friends attended his funeral service, thanked God for the gifts of his life, and surrendered him into the loving hands of God. The pastor told me that the mother wept when she thanked her and the congregation for their love and compassion during the loss of her son.

People living with HIV/AIDS are in all of our communities and around the world; the only question is, do we banish them because of our fear and our judgments, or do we follow the example of Jesus Christ and reach out to them with love and compassion?

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