

WORLD AIDS DAY ADDRESS
Dec. 1, 2007 Lovejoy Baptist Church
Greg Tallant

- Thank You
- Honor to be here, with this group and in this church
 - new to Rome
 - met Jeane Cahill, asked to get involved, began support group
 - Met Frank and others who are 20 yr. survivors of this pandemic

I'd like to say a word or two about my perspective before I get to the bulk of my message. First, my perspective is shaped by a belief that we were all created, all of us, by a being that loves us and wants us to exist and wants us to live fully the life we have. My perspective is shaped by the stories we have about a man who claimed a special connection to that being. My perspective filters, or should filter, how I look at the world. But my comments tonight are not about convincing you that my belief, my ideas about the nature of existence, my filters, are true. My comments are about behaviors and actions that aren't exclusive to my religious doctrine.

Second, my perspective is that of an outsider, if any of us can really be an outsider to a pandemic *infecting* 33 million people today, and *affecting* almost the entire planet's human population. It's daunting, to say the least, to attempt to say something interesting, much less meaningful, about a disease that is at the same time one of the most powerful, sweeping, global events in the history of the planet, and, for the individual who is infected, one of the most deeply personal,

spiritual, emotional, *and* physical changes one can experience. To speak of the individual experience is to dare to forget the global nature of the pandemic, is to look at the smoke damage to your kitchen while your neighbor's house is on fire. On the other hand, to focus only on the global perspective, to focus entirely, for instance, on Africa, is to ignore the life-altering experience of the individual person. It reminds one of the famous cartoon from World War II, where two soldiers are hunkered down in a foxhole and one soldier says, "What do you mean this isn't the most important foxhole in the war? It's the one I'm in."

So that's my perspective. If you share my religious beliefs or if you, too, are an outsider to the disease, you might find this familiar territory. If you don't share my beliefs or if you are here as someone who is infected or whose loved one is infected, I hope you'll grant me the hospitality to speak. And if you cannot harbor either my beliefs or my status as an outsider, well, I just ask you to relax and I'll be done in about 10 minutes or so.

I would like to suggest tonight, that there is a different world than this one. It's hard for many of us to see. It's not an extreme difference, this other world. It's not the kind of thing where you have to take a blue pill or a red pill and you either see the existence you always knew or else you wake up deep underground with a wire stuck into your brain and monsters patrolling the caverns. It's not

like that. It's not even, I think, like Plato's story of the Cave, where all we see of the world are shadow images reflected on a cave wall, where the true forms, the ideal forms of everything are sitting suspended in the air.

Maybe it's more like that old episode of Star Trek, where there are alternate dimensions that are just slightly different than ours and it turns out there's an evil Mr. Spock, whom we of course can all identify as evil because, well, he's got a goatee.

When I was a kid, DC Comics had a lot of fun with alternate Earths, with an infinite number of universes that occupied the same space but each had a slightly different frequency or vibration or wavelength or something. And so there was one Earth where the Superman and Batman of the 1940s lived and a different Earth where the Superman and Batman of the new, modern 1960s and 1970s lived.

Maybe it's like that now. Maybe it's on those days where you can't get your eyes to focus quite right, or those days where you keep seeing double images or little after-images of things, that we're actually able to see these other worlds. Maybe the optometrists are in on the conspiracy. Maybe the eye doctors are the overlords.

Maybe I need to quit reading comic books. But there ARE two worlds.

The first world is all too familiar to us. It's the world where you're powerless. It's the world where you're too scared to get tested, too scared, too alone to make a plan for treatment. It's the world where we live in fear to speak up, to stand up, to move on. It's the world where your worth is defined by your power: your wealth, your influence, your viral status; defined by whether you have the right contacts, love the right person, whether you're healthy enough to produce, produce, produce...

This world says you not only need to be in the race, you have to be winning the fight.

In my tribe, this world is the one that says you'd better be on the right team, at the right church, because one day a King's gonna come and if you've picked wrong(ly), if you've loved wrong(ly), then you're gonna get it and get it bad. And if you used to belong to my tribe and you left, there's a good chance you left because of that. I'm sorry.

You know this world. It's the government of this world that seems only to allocate enough resources to keep the rebellion down, only enough to placate those who would stir up trouble and point out the unfairness that this world lives with.

You know this world. It's a world where the AIDS pandemic in Africa is so big, so vast that I build a wall against it in my head. I close my eyes. I turn off my tv. You know this world.

But I'm here to tell you there's another world. There's another world where your worth as a human being is not tied to your power, not defined by your viral load, but is established at the moment of your birth and will not be diminished, not by a virus, not by a disease. Not one thing in creation can diminish your value in this other world.

In this other world a life lost to AIDS is not lost forever, but is transformed by their loved ones into a quilt that tells the story of their life, tells the world about this life that mattered, this life that transcended a virus. In this other world, the artistry of the quilt becomes a way for people to be drawn together, for strangers to treat one another as kin.¹ "Through the harmonic magic of art," writes Natalie Angier of the New York Times, "the relative weakness of the individual can be traded up for the strength of the hive, cohered into a social unit ready to take on the world."²

This other world requires our active participation in its broader life, demands that we all take our places at the tables where we worship, the tables where we work, the tables where we allocate resources,

¹ Natalie Angier, NY Times 11/27/07, "The Dance of Evolution, or How Art Got Its Start"

² *ibid*

where we move and shake the old world to get it up to speed with this one.

This other world accepts and affirms that the death of a child in the developing world, or in a developing family, is just as tragic and worthy of our attention as the death of a child in the rich world.³

The other world is the world where a Ugandan Anglican priest named Gideon Byamugisha lives. 20 minutes after hearing he had tested positive for H.I.V., he was at a podium announcing it, the first priest in Africa to admit to having HIV. In 1992, in Uganda, where he could have been stoned for admitting his infection, he went on to found an African Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV/AIDS.⁴ He founded a hospice and has discovered a new mission for his life in the church.

The other world is where the Global Fund has raised \$10.5 billion, where the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has spent \$8 billion, and where Warren Buffett has pledged \$30 billion to the Gates Foundation to increase their work, much of which has gone to fighting HIV/AIDS all over the world.⁵

³ Bill Gates, July 2007 Vanity Fair, p.54

⁴ Peter Godwin, Vanity Fair, July 07, p.186

⁵ Vanity Fair July 07, p.54

The other world is where former President Bill Clinton lead a group that persuaded drug manufacturers to make Anti-RetroViral drugs available to developing countries for \$140 / year, *and* where current President Bush has pledged \$15 billion to try and make them free.⁶ In this other world the U.S. has quadrupled aid to the African continent over the last 6 years.

The difference in the two worlds can be seen in a health facility in the capital of Rwanda, where in 2004, with fully 7% of their population infected, the Global Fund began distributing free ARV medication. To see before and after pictures of the people suffering with AIDS, to see them as soon as 40 days later, resuming productive lives, to see why it has come to be called there, "The Lazarus Effect," is to know that the difference between this world and the other one can be only half a heartbeat away and yet a universe apart.⁷

Living in this other world is hard. It requires your full participation. But it is the only way to have truly lived. The virus in one world is a death sentence, both for the one contracting it and the one who closes their eyes to the people who have it. But the virus in the other world is an alarm clock, it's the loud signal to WAKE UP, to stand up, to live fully, to reach out to our sisters and brothers in need, to shake off the fear that has held us prisoner for too long.

⁶ Alex Shoumatoff, "The Lazarus Effect" Vanity Fair July 07 p.156 and on

⁷ Alex Shoumatoff, "The Lazarus Effect" Vanity Fair July 07, p.156-forward

If you feel stuck in the first world, I'm not trying to pile on. We've all been there. Sadly, we all sometimes go back when it gets to be too much. When we feel alone it's especially hard to break through.

But there is another world. You can make it. This the real life you deserve. This is the real life you get. Take it. Take this world. Take the lead.