Episode 83 – Debbie Warren – Pastoral Care

The Best of Who We Are

And now a personal word,

I came of age as a young man exactly when what would become the HIV/AIDS crisis emerged, and the years of my adult life since have tracked the evolution of the disease and our response as a nation. HIV/AIDS has exposed the worst and best of who we are.

I went to college in the fall of 1981. I was eighteen years old. I had the same desire then that I have now: wanting to do good work and to love someone who loves me. As I made my way on campus, I had intimate moments with classmates that did not lead to anything lasting, and meaningful moments in one relationship that would last throughout my college years.

A US government timeline of HIV/AIDS reports these facts: in June 1981 the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the CDC, published a report describing cases of a rare lung infection, Pneumocystis pneumonia, in five young, previously healthy, gay men in Los Angeles. They developed other unusual infections as well, indicating that their immune systems were compromised. Within days of the report, the CDC received news of similar cases of pneumonia, including reports of a cluster of cases of a rare, unusually aggressive cancer called Kaposi sarcoma, among a group of gay men in New York and California. These reports marked the first official notice of what would become an epidemic.

During the fall and spring semesters of my freshman year, the national news began reporting about a "gay cancer." Bobbi Campbell, a San Francisco nurse, became the first Kaposi sarcoma patient to go public, posting images of his lesions on posters to alert the community of the disease. By the end of my freshman year, in the spring of 1982, hundreds of cases of severe immune deficiency among gay men had been reported, with nearly half the men having died. No one knew what was happening.

On my campus, students might have heard reports of what was being called gay-related immune deficiency or GRID, but it didn't slow down any of our sexual behaviors. We knew to take precautions to avoid STDs and unwanted pregnancies, but whatever was happening among gay men in New York and San Francisco had nothing to do with otherwise healthy, heterosexual undergraduates in Florida. It wasn't our problem until it became our problem.

By the time my sophomore year started, in the fall of 1982, the disease had a name, AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome. Every week it seemed AIDS presented among new groups of people: Haitian refugees, hemophiliacs, drug users, female sexual partners of men living with AIDS, breastfeeding infants, and heterosexual partners. Panic set in. Fear spread of random contagion. AIDS was not a gay-related disease anymore. It was an infectious agent spreading throughout the nation.

Many AIDS patients were shamed and shunned. People who showed any sign of the disease were fired from work to protect the health of coworkers. People living with AIDS were evicted from apartments, disowned by their families, and feared by people who were once friends. A number of religious leaders said AIDS was God's vengeance against sin and condemned those living with AIDS. Politicians appropriated only a small amount of money for AIDS research worried about conservative backlash.

During my junior and senior years of college, 1984 and 1985, AIDS had spread to every corner of the world. In the midst of the epidemic, in the midst of ignorance and fear, there was also love. There were doctors and nurses, ministers and activists, and friends and lovers who devoted themselves to caring for those living with AIDS. Dedicated researchers began making progress. In 1984, doctors isolated a retrovirus that caused AIDS. In 1985, the FDA licensed the first blood test to screen for the virus. In 1986, an international steering committee on infectious disease declared that the virus that caused AIDS would be officially known as human immunodeficiency virus or HIV.

I graduated in the spring of 1985. That year, an Indiana teenager named Ryan White who had contracted AIDS from a contaminated blood product to treat his hemophilia was refused entry to his middle school. Months later, actor Rock Hudson died of an AIDS-related illness. It was only then that President Reagan mentioned AIDS for the first time. In 1987, investigative journalist Randy Shilts published the book *And the Band Played On* about the failure of the nation to respond adequately to what was considered, at first, a gay disease and about the heroic individuals who responded with bravery and compassion.

In the years that followed, through the late 1980s to mid-1990s, tens of thousands of people contracted HIV, and thousands of people died of AIDS. Brilliant artists, musicians, athletes, writers, scientists, and everyday citizens suffered and died. In 1994, AIDS became the leading cause of death for all Americans ages twenty-five to forty-four.

At the height of the epidemic, Debbie Warren devoted herself to people living with HIV/AIDS. She had to leave a faith community that she loved that did not accept whom she loved to do her work of ministry. She held the hands of those who were sick and dying. She prayed with them. She gathered resources for them. She helped newly diagnosed persons live longer and healthier lives. Debbie launched the Regional AIDS

Interfaith Network that united the caregiving efforts of compassionate congregations. Her work has evolved as health care for HIV/AIDS has evolved. Today the organization now simply known as RAIN helps people with HIV/AIDS live full and complete lives.

Thirty-seven million people worldwide have HIV/AIDS. Nearly 2 million people with HIV are children. Since the beginning of the epidemic, more than 75 million people have lived with HIV, and over 35 million people have died of AIDS-related causes. Nearly 5,000 people get HIV every day. A cure for the disease remains elusive.

Yet there is hope. There are powerful new treatments and methods of prevention. There is love. There are countless people devoted to raising awareness and improving lives. And there is a future. Millions of people with HIV are contributing to the world.