

"A Little Part of It in Every One: A Religious Response to the Heroin Crisis"
Sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
April 3, 2016

340 Souls crossed the threshold into Unity Hall last Sunday. We gathered and celebrated resurrection in all the ways it presents itself in life.

Life.

We celebrated life. You could feel the hope and joy generated by this congregation whether you arrived holding a sense of brokenness or whether you arrived feeling pretty good.

The feeling stayed with me throughout the week.

So you may wonder why we are talking about heroin today. You may be wondering what moved me to place this sermon on this particular Sunday. Truth be told, it had to land here for practical and logistical reasons and I worried about a potentially jerky shift from Easter to heroin. And as usually happens, grace intervened. I think the timing is just right.

Why are we talking about heroin at all?

Because of the damage done.

Because there are Souls in our midst suffering from the devastation this public health crisis has unleashed. And because too often they suffer under a cloud of shame and shame, like bacteria, is starved when exposed to light and air.

Because we are reminded that the religious and spiritual imperative is to move through crisis, devastation, and grief held by grace and community. Because as soul-full people we are compelled to respond – respond to those in our midst who are struggling with addiction or who are struggling with the fall out from a dearly beloved's overdose or worse, death from overdose.

Because this crisis offers a devastating example of the systems of oppression with which we concern ourselves: public health over and against the criminal justice system and as ever, bald-faced examples of systematic racism.

And Easter's powerful themes of hope and new life, themes that follow Good Friday's devastation, are in many ways the best themes with which we enter into this reflection on such a difficult topic.

So, we begin.

On Wednesday, "The Day's" front page headline said this:

"Officials hoping Murphy, Courtney can channel funds for heroin crisis"

Here's how the article begins:

Groton Town Police and other local law enforcement leaders are hopeful after a Monday morning visit from U.S. Senator Chris Murphy that the region soon will see more federal dollars to fight the heroin epidemic.

So first let us shine light on addiction as a disease - in this case, a public health crisis. My good friend, Kelly Thompson, is the Executive Director of the Alliance for Living (AFL) the region's AIDS service organization. Kelly and her colleagues at AFL know of public health crises, after all. For the past 6 months I've listened to Kelly share her experiences in advocating for appropriate response to the crisis: a public health response. Too often, however, she has been in rooms populated with many law enforcement officials and too-few public health experts. Regardless, with other like-minded public health servants, there is finally some traction to the public health approach. But remember, we began this journey at the Groton Police Headquarters.

Later, the congressional delegation moved onto United Community and Family Services in Norwich. The article continues:

Rep. Joe Courtney, ... met with officials at United Community and Family Services in Norwich to learn about the role of prescription opioids in the heroin crisis and a new training program for physicians created in response. Since prescription opioids are 'clearly the pathway to heroin addiction,' reducing the use of these medications is a critical step in address the crisis.

Okay. That's good. We want folks to get to the heart of the problem and although overly prescribed opiate prescriptions may not be at the heart of the problem, it's certainly getting us closer.

The article continues:

During the meeting at Groton Town headquarters [Sen. Murphy] was told that the detectives and officers sitting in the room, were pulled from existing staff within existing budgets to participate in the task force. In some cases, they were taken from other duties to focus on combating heroin.

Other members of the task force – ranging from prosecutors and parole officers to a member of the Navel Criminal Investigative Service – expressed similar sentiments.

Some explained that help from federal agencies such as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the Drug Enforcement Administration goes a long way, especially when it comes to cases' prosecution.

You see who is in the room?

Then the article continues on page 3 and it's not until page 3 that the Ledyard Police Chief mentions prevention and education efforts, for which we can be grateful.

But although we learn that there were 400 heroin-related deaths in CT last year out of 700 total drug overdoses, treatment receives nary a mention in this article that appeared in "The Day".

And now for something totally different: the Gloucester Initiative.

You may've read about this approach. Here's how Chief Len Campanello says it works:

"Gloucester will NOT charge any addict who comes to us for help. We will fast track them in treatment and support their family. You will receive no judgment; just professionalism, respect and compassion."

The chief says addiction is a disease not a crime. He says we can't arrest our way out of the epidemic.

"We feel this program is the first day of the last recovery process a person with addiction will go through. We say this because we tell each of our program intakes that whatever they do after they walk into the police station, we will be there. Whether they are able to

succeed or whether they relapse, we will be there.

We will help again and again and again until they no longer want help.

We know there will be setbacks for people.

We don't care.

Come back.

You're still in recovery.

We know some people will relapse.

We will not judge you.

Come back.

Just as a cancer can go into remission only to appear later, we know addiction is hard to beat.

60 police officers, 40 Angels, and an entire community will have your back.

You must do your part, but we will refuse abandon you, forget you, or ignore you.

You will receive the respect and dignity you deserve here, without judgment, without coercion, without charges.

Your life has meaning.

Police Chief Campanello concludes:

We are partnering with almost 30 treatment facilities who feel the same way. As reported by Frank Somerville KTVU

Quite a difference in approach, right? In terms of context, Gloucester, MA is a small New England city with a population of 28,000 – a little bigger than New London.

When I first read about the Gloucester Initiative I thought that it sounded like a Unitarian Universalist approach to a difficult problem. Start here: Your life has meaning. You will receive no judgment, just professionalism, respect and compassion.

And speaking of which, since September, a team of Souls, led by Carol Thompson and Carol Cassidy, have been diligent in working on creating an addiction ministry here at All Souls. They hope to launch their efforts in the fall and in the meantime, they approach their planning in this way:

your life has meaning. You will receive no judgment – just respect and compassion.

Because there is no family who is not affected by this crisis. In my own family, one of our closest family friends – one of our daughter's godmothers, in fact – is a recovering heroin addict. Over 30 years in recovery, I give thanks for her life. For her resurrection.

And I wish I could ask you for a show of hands. A show of hands of those touched by this crisis. Remember how powerful it was when Rebecca Bryan, our ministerial intern and in recovery herself, preached a sermon on alcohol addiction and asked for a show of hands. Who of us have been affected by alcoholism in our families? Remember that virtually every hand in the sanctuary went up?

We're not at that point in opiate addiction. But I hope that moments like this one here at All Souls this morning will move us in that direction.

And finally, let's talk about racism that is, like in most unjust systems in our country, deep in this mix. For we had a similar public health crisis back in the mid-80s but crack was the drug of concern. It was readily available and it was cheap and highly addictive. The communities most harshly affected were in large urban centers populated by people of color. If we think there is little talk about treatment now – now that heroin addiction is affecting large numbers of white people – there was a judgmental and ultimately racist silence about treatment then as the “War on Drugs” was just lifting off. In her seminal work, *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander maps this public policy failure as a concerted effort to imprison black and brown bodies, which the War on Drugs has done in record numbers. I'm giving voice to what many of you have taken the time to learn more about. But giving voice is what we must do as people of faith.

We must name it: it isn't right and it has never been right.

We've seen the needle and the damage done. A little part of it in every one. (Neil Young)

As in all things, let us be there for one another in our grief; educate ourselves and others on this public health crisis; be aware of the systems of oppression that make access to treatment and justice challenging to historically marginalized communities.

We conclude with Alice Walker's wisdom:

*Love is not concerned
with whom you pray
or where you slept
the night you ran away
from home.
Love is concerned
that the beating of your heart
should kill no one.*

May our responses to complicated challenges be led by our deepest values.

Amen.

With thanks to Pat Murphy for her support and insight.

For more information on the Gloucester Initiative:
<http://gloucesterpd.com/tag/the-gloucester-initiative/>

For Ben Parent's excellent cover of Neil Young's "The Needle and the Damage Done" (Offered as the musical medication that preceded the sermon)
<https://m.soundcloud.com/goodsponge/the-needle-and-the-damage-done-live-4-3-16>