

Proper 27 Year A, November 12, 2017  
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*Matthew 25:1-13*

She was something of a neighborhood celebrity, known as the “hula girl,” who frequently hula hooped in the yard by her apartment. We learned her name, Jessica Pascual, after her body was discovered in a parking lot early one morning in June 2009. Police originally suspected she was killed by a hit and run driver, but later a toxicology report revealed a lethal combination of heroin and alcohol. Jessica was 20, worked at Elwood Thompson's, and attended John Tyler Community College.<sup>1</sup> A hula hoop hung from a tree near her apartment for several months afterwards, and until recently there was a makeshift memorial with small figurines and silk flowers nestled in a tangle of roots at the tree's base. I know this because Jessica lived and died just two blocks east of my house, and I frequently walk past that tree.

Early one evening in June 2016 as I crossed nearby Hanover Avenue I noticed emergency vehicles lining the street two blocks west of my house. Word spread that police, responding to a mother's request to check on her 21-year-old daughter, found the young woman alone in her apartment, having overdosed on heroin.<sup>2</sup>

John Bishop was one of the original clients of our laundry ministry. He quickly became one of our “favorites,” because he was always friendly and heartily engaged Sue, Judy and me in lively conversation as he waited for his clothes to finish. John volunteered at the Red Door ministry at Grace and Holy Trinity Church where he also regularly worshiped. He resided in a campsite located near MCV that he shared with several other homeless people. Last February his friends arrived on laundry day with the sad news that John had overdosed on heroin. Many tears were shed that day and the following week when dozens of people attended his memorial service just three blocks from here.

It started feeling like bodies were piling up in my personal sphere, and I began sensing a call to respond in some way. I read a myriad of articles about opioids that appeared frequently in newspapers and magazines. I learned this crisis began several decades ago, but only in recent years has it become so widely reported. By 2000 new and powerful pain medications were gaining popularity, buoyed by significant shifts in prescribing protocols and marketing strategies that communicated misleading information about the risk of addiction inherent in these drugs. As the number of people addicted to pain medication skyrocketed, heroin distributors entered the mix, offering an inexpensive and easily obtainable alternative that provides euphoria comparable to prescription pain killers but with a greater risk of death.<sup>3</sup> Addiction rates and fatalities keep soaring – in Richmond and surrounding counties 1,138 people died of opioid overdoses during 2016.<sup>4</sup> Montgomery County, Ohio, is just one locale where the coroner's office rents refrigerated trailers because opioid related fatalities have surpassed their morgue's capacity.<sup>5</sup> The bodies are indeed piling up.

The staggering number of people impacted by opioids – those addicted, their families and communities – has fueled a sense of urgency in cities and towns throughout the nation. Our Gospel reading echoes a similar tone of urgency as we hear about ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom – five of them have brought oil to light their lamps upon his arrival. The other five have no oil to light their lamps, so they find they are forever shut out from the wedding banquet.

While many of the parables Jesus tells suggest that God is patiently waiting, always ready to receive us like a lost sheep or a prodigal son, in the bridesmaids' story time is clearly running out. Jesus tells this parable to his disciples soon after he triumphantly enters Jerusalem on a palm-strewn road. Time is short as the crucifixion is just days away. The disciples will be carrying on Jesus'

ministry without him, and as we know they will experience a deep sense of uncertainty about their ability to continue the work that Jesus initiated.

Of course, Jesus understands that his disciples will be far more prepared than they realize – they have yet to comprehend the miraculous Resurrection, the promise that Jesus will always be with them, or the gift of the Holy Spirit. These gifts, along with their faith in the Good News that Jesus has taught them are represented by the lamp oil that the wise bridesmaids carry with them.<sup>6</sup> These are the gifts that will enable the disciples to continue to offer healing and reconciliation to a broken world. These are the gifts they will use to build the Church that will continue to share the Good News. The Church they build is the community where we receive these same gifts in our baptism, and we rely on them, as we fulfill our baptismal promises just as the first disciples did.

Our faith tells us that Jesus is with us in everything we do, and that these gifts are freely given so we can do the work he calls us to, but our egos often convince us otherwise. When we look at the brokenness in the world, we can become overwhelmed by our perception that these problems are greater than our ability to tackle them. When we discern God's call to move forward, to share our faith in the world, to offer these same gifts of healing, reconciliation and love, we may be tempted to say, "Not now, I'm not ready yet." At least that's how I felt when I began feeling a tug at my heart to engage in this crisis that was creeping into my comfortable life – the neighborhood where I live, the laundromat that has become a gathering place of unlikely friends, and seemingly every newspaper and magazine I open.

During Bishop Susan's recent visit, I shared my growing sense of call to the opioid crisis, though I acknowledged my uncertainty as to the precise nature of this call. That conversation led to the opportunity to serve on an Opioid Response Task Force that includes representatives from all the Mid-Atlantic dioceses. At the preliminary meeting in September I met a group of amazing

individuals who have been on the front lines addressing opioid and other addictions for decades. They offer tremendous knowledge and inspiration about what is happening and what is possible in this arena. Last Saturday our Diocesan convention passed a resolution addressing the opioid crisis, and I connected with the resolution's sponsors who are also feeling called to this work. I am reminded again that when God calls us to something, and we finally take the first step, unexpected doors begin to open before us.

In the face of an overwhelming crisis that begs for urgent response our initial reaction may be one of utter powerlessness. Surely this is how the disciples felt at times as they engaged in the work of building the Church. But they were indeed equipped to respond to God's call to them because Jesus had prepared them to receive the gifts necessary for this daunting task. At its best, the Church remains a community where present-day disciples are still nurtured by the oils of faith, love, and inspiration, where we encourage and support one another so we can continue to shine the light of Jesus, bringing love and healing to the brokenness in the world - brokenness that we inevitably stumble upon along the comfortable paths we walk every day.

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<sup>1</sup> Staff Reports, Richmond Times Dispatch 9/17/2009 Available from: URL: [http://www.richmond.com/news/update-woman-s-death-in-museum-district-ruled-accidental/article\\_272da9a4-80c5-5c81-931c-c73aa304f21b.html](http://www.richmond.com/news/update-woman-s-death-in-museum-district-ruled-accidental/article_272da9a4-80c5-5c81-931c-c73aa304f21b.html)

<sup>2</sup> Staff Reports, Richmond Times Dispatch 6/3/2016 Available from: URL: [http://www.richmond.com/news/local/crime/police-investigating--year-old-woman-s-death-in-museum/article\\_33f15821-153c-5721-8596-3155e6fededc.html](http://www.richmond.com/news/local/crime/police-investigating--year-old-woman-s-death-in-museum/article_33f15821-153c-5721-8596-3155e6fededc.html)

<sup>3</sup> For an exhaustive examination of this crisis see Sam Quinones. Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic. (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> John Ramsey and K. Burnell Evans, "Region's rate of emergency room visits related to opioids is second-highest in the state," Richmond Times Dispatch 10/22/2017, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Montgomery, photographer and Margaret Talbot, "Portfolio: Faces of an Epidemic" The New Yorker, October 30, 2017, 58-59.

<sup>6</sup> Lindsay P. Armstrong, Proper 27 Year A Matthew 25:1-13, Homiletical Perspective" in Feasting on the Word Year A: Volume 4 ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Taylor Brown, (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 287.