

Go and learn what this means 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' Matthew 9:13



"If the human being, Christ, and God are all described in terms of mercy, then we must be dealing with something genuinely fundamental. Of course, we may say that love is the fundamental thing, and we have the whole of Christian tradition as our warrant....But we must add that the love in question is a particular kind of love. This love is the particular praxic love that swells within a person at the sight of another person's unjustly inflicted suffering, driving its subject to eradicate that suffering for no other reason than that it exists, and precluding any excuse for not so doing." - Jon Sobrino, The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross

In the United States, people who use drugs experience an unparalleled level of systemic violence. The racist drug war separates families and decimates communities through an ever-expanding web of policing and prisons. People young and old are presented with ultimatums by courts and social service providers to enter non-evidence based (and sometimes exploitative) substance use treatment programs or face jail time. Medical systems approach patients who use drugs with suspicion, assuming that when they are seeking care they have a nefarious hidden agenda. The justification for this violence against people who use drugs is the thinly veiled belief that people who use drugs are unclean and immoral.

Many of us have come to the understanding that drug use is not a moral failing. People who use drugs aren't bad people. But what can we do now as communities of faith to fundamentally change the way our culture responds to people who use drugs?

We must desire mercy, practice mercy, make mercy manifest in the world. And Supervised Consumption Sites (SCS) are the realization of so much urgently needed mercy for people using drugs.

In 2020 over half of the states in the US experienced a 30 percent increase in overdose deaths over the previous year. This devastating uptick impacted every region of the United States. (1) Yet only two legally sanctioned SCSs are responding to the crisis. These two sites, managed by On Point NYC, intervened in 124 potentially fatal overdoses in the first two months of operation. (2) SCSs like the ones operated by On Point have long existed in other parts of the world providing sterile injecting equipment, a safe space to use free of harassment by law enforcement, and Harm Reduction educators and medical professionals who can step in to prevent or reverse potentially fatal overdoses. Like syringe access programs, already legalized in many states, SCSs prioritize the health of people who use drugs. The new injecting equipment provided by SCSs help stop the transmission of HIV and HCV and drive down the rates of potentially fatal infections like endocarditis.(3)

People who use drugs have already been forced to sacrifice so much by a country that criminalizes and moralizes substance use. Again and again the United States has taken a merciless approach to people who use drugs, particularly people of color. Supervised Consumption Sites are showing us what safety, a praxic love, an abiding mercy looks like in this moment. We are followers of a God that desires mercy. It is our role to advocate for the maintenance and expansion of these life-saving spaces.

1. <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2021/drug-overdose-toll-2020-and-near-term-actions-addressing-it>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4nMm8dJH8g&t=766s>
3. <https://www.med.unc.edu/medicine/infective-endocarditis-increases-more-than-tenfold-in-north-carolina/>

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