



**FAITH IN
HARM REDUCTION**
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“Spirit of Harm Reduction”

– Preacher, Erica Poellot @ Judson Memorial Church, Sunday April 23, 2017

The word of God for the People of God. Matthew 11:28

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

My call came on Thursday January 2, 2003. It began with a knock on the door, a reluctant shuffle, a wrestling match between dope sick hands and a doorknob, the eventual recognition that my sole hope lay with the woman who stood on my stoop.

Sidnee Sidnee, deep dark brown and doe eyed, Sidnee, ever-generous smile, wrapping all in her warm Sidnee the beauty, clutching a box full of items she had years ago borrowed from me

Still Sidnee the beauty, and now, in a process of healing Sidnee

I hadn't seen Sidnee in years, a parting of friendship, like scores of others, crafted by incarceration, disappearings called treatment, by overdose, and by death

To be honest, I had forgotten about Sidnee.

I had forgotten a lot. It was a purposeful forgetting It was my escape.

Escape from pain, from rape, from torture, from the shame of supporting myself by whatever means necessary.

Escape from self. Especially escape from self. Forgetting was my escape and dope was my forgetting.

I had forgotten Sidnee Sidnee had not forgotten me.

Sidnee spoke Sidnee spoke in a voice both frightening and foreign. She spoke of dope, of sick, of pain she called her own She also spoke of hope of healing She spoke, her broken body up against mine, sister to sister she spoke...I will be with you.

Sidnee spoke

I went to my first gathering that Friday night I went to my first gathering because I was out of dope I went to my first gathering because I was tired of doing what I did to get by and to get off

I went to my first gathering because Sidnee had gone before

I went to that first gathering on that Friday night because the fear in me and of me outsized the hope I had in the world

I went to that first gathering because Sidnee went with me.

When I first delivered the fuller sermon detailing my call, I debated at some length whether I would begin this message in this way. Not because I imagined my story is one that people had not heard and/or experienced,

nor because I had regrets or shame about the many selves I have moved through and into up until that point.

Nor because I am apologetic about the incredibly resourceful ways I crafted and employed to move myself through trauma to surviving, but simply because it is stigmatizing.

drug use. being a person who uses drugs or is in a process of negotiating their relationship with drug use is stigmatizing.

Hiding one's whole self, the inability to truth tell, in church, in community, in relationship with the divine, is an incredible pain, is exhausting.

Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Come to me. Come to me with all of you.

This is an invitation into relationship. This is an invitation to connection. This is an invitation to the inclusion of you in the all.

For people who use drugs and the people who love them, this connection, this inclusion, this invitation shaped by compassion and loving regard for the fullness of one another's humanity is the embodiment of harm reduction... is the expression of loving welcome,

the welcoming of all stories and paths; it calls people by name, and attends to and cherishes the particularities.

It is a hospitality that seeks people out, meets them where they are at and invites them into loving community.

Harm reduction says come to me, all you. Come as you are.

the myriad ways in which people carry burdens that are beyond our ability to understand or relate to are deeply stigmatized.

stigma is the heaviest burden.

This stigma can seem insurmountable, an opaque barrier to community and connection – obscures any vision of healing movement towards wholeness.

stigma is both placed on and taken in, stigma shapeshifts.

Whole people created in the image of the most divine are redacted and fractured, reduced to behaviors, pathologies, and criminality projected upon with fear, anger, and misunderstanding.... are made other.

stigma permeates every cell, threatens to rupture the increasingly fragile tissue of life – relationships with family, friends, health care providers and communities of faith.

While a great number of expectations are placed on people who use drugs to change their behaviors, the social context that creates and reinforces drug-related stigma, that reinforces relations of power and control,

that leads to status loss and discrimination

is rarely explored or further – challenged.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Come to me, all you.

stigma renders the 'you' invisible. Stigma does not allow for the recognition of self or You in All. Stigma dehumanizes and it wounds, profoundly.

The powerful manifestation of this wound limits access to opportunities and rights, to stable and healthy housing, it ensures under and unemployment, it fuels an industry of exclusion and deportation,

it limits elevation through education.

Stigma limits access to health care to adequate funding for harm reduction services, syringe exchange programs, overdose prevention programs, and safer injection facilities.

In a vicious cycle, stigma drives people underground, deepens the harm.

I acknowledge a very significant level of privilege in my story...as a white woman, as a white woman with an (at times more robust than others) bank account, network of friends and family, employers, educational opportunities and a US passport.... with access to services and spaces that saw people who looked like me, places where I recognized my self..

I was able to pass, to move through the world beyond the gaze which 'others', which is murderously suspicious of black and brown people,



which criminalizes the conditions which contribute to problematic substance use, poverty, homelessness, mental health issues, and which incarcerates people of color who use drugs at disproportionate and oppressive rates.

My privilege afforded me a safety beyond the reach of the state which polices what substances pregnant and parenting people can put in their own body, which questions their very personhood.

Come to me, all you. I always saw reflections of me, of this you, in representations of the all. An incredible privilege.

I knew that I was welcome. Sidnee welcomed me, she welcomed me through story, through her own vulnerability, she spoke her broken body up against mine, sister to sister she spoke, Come to me, I will be with you. Sidnee went first.

In this way, it is our obligation to make intentional space, in our pulpits, in our relationships, to make sacred space which invites people, all people,

people who find themselves at the many margins, people who are creatively, desperately, intently, and faithfully struggling to find ways to carry their burdens...

It is our obligation to make space for people to tell their stories, be their stories, and to tell and be their whole stories, to show up with their whole selves...

to make intentional space, foreground, the wisdom and expertise of our leaders most affected by racialized drug policy..

It is my obligation to acknowledge the whole and the at times very complex and hard to hold to the light threads of my own story, that more people have an opportunity to see reflections of themselves in all of our communities and sacred places,

to ensure that all, see themselves reflected in this divine whole we call community. Harm reduction says come to me, all you. Come as you are.

Harm reduction is love that stands with people and the burdens that they carry, rather than with judgment at how they get through.

It is the divine invitation to Come, all you, that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Come just as you are. You are right, loved and wholly enough. Holy and enough.

Contact Faith in Harm Reduction Director, Erica Poellot at
poellot@harmreduction.org