Complicated Healings

Bill Mefford
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Though addiction to alcohol and drugs was part of my family history, I chose not to use drugs or drink alcohol. Ever. I never did either. I grew up believing that drugs and alcohol were evil and that they were always accompanied with misery and ruin. It was later, when I was in college and started deepening my walk with Jesus that I discovered that not drinking or using drugs was a way for me to feel superior, more righteous than others. Self-righteousness can be its own addiction in many ways so, when bad things happened to people who used drugs or alcohol I would feign concern, but inwardly, I felt a sense of detached satisfaction.

The veneer of righteousness began to crack when Marti and I lived and worked in an underserved neighborhood in Waco, Texas. I worked at an urban ministry and one of the ministries was a halfway house for men. The ministry strongly believed — as did I at the time — that drugs and alcohol needed to be abstained from entirely. So, the men went to AA and NA meetings almost every day and I drove the men twice a week to the meetings. I honestly loved going. I had some of the best conversations I think I have ever had on the way to and from those meetings. And it was during the meetings that I heard some of the best theology lessons I have ever heard; theology lessons generously laced with the F-word.

I remember one time driving when one guy who I really liked named Donnie was sitting behind me and as we were talking about fall that was about to begin, and he said, almost to himself, "Man, I miss Saturdays, watching football, drinking a beer, eating pizza, and then smoking a little after the game." No one else caught it, but I did. I caught his sadness; maybe it was sadness that he was addicted, or maybe it was sadness that he had spent a significant part of his young years in prison for possession of marijuana, or maybe, just maybe, Donnie really missed drinking a beer and smoking a joint. Maybe Donnie missed the feelings of calm and even a mild sense of euphoria he received. Maybe he missed the camaraderie of watching a game with his friends while they all experienced those same feelings. Whatever it was, it was clear to me through this and other conversations that Donnie really did not buy into healing through complete abstinence.

Eventually, Donnie left the halfway house and I remember asking the guys who ran the program there what happened to him and the way it was phrased to me was something like, "Donnie just didn't want to get his life straightened out." Now, I knew that Donnie really did want to get his life straightened out. What they meant was that Donnie had fallen from grace because he refused to abstain completely. He did not merely make a decision that maybe abstinence was not best for him. It meant that Donnie chose sin over healing; he chose captivity over freedom.

I don't know what happened to Donnie, but the belief that there is only one road to healing has bothered me ever since. I kept wondering if perhaps drugs and alcohol were not the absolute evil I thought them to be. I had long believed that if a person could put aside drugs and alcohol from their lives they could go on to achieve great things. One important story showing the fallacy of this is the story of William Wilberforce. In his book, *Addiction Nation*, Timothy McMahan King shares that Wilberforce, famous for leading the decades-long charge in England to ultimately abolish the slave trade in 1833, was addicted to opium throughout his life. Both the book, written by conservative author Eric Mataxes, and the film, *Amazing Grace*, show that Wilberforce kicked his addiction to opium. He actually used opium up until his death. Obviously, the film and the book both felt Wilberforce would be a much more sympathetic hero if he was shown not to use drugs at all.

The lesson for us is clear. Even people who do heroic things are complicated and unique individuals. Addiction can and does impact all of us and solutions to addiction are complicated. Whether we achieve heroic acts, or if we find ourselves in halfway houses, we, too, are complicated and unique people, and the means of our healing will likely be complicated and unique as well.

Any cursory reading of the gospels shows us that Jesus uses many methods to bring healing. Just in Mark's Gospel alone, Jesus:

* casts out demons, heals a man with a withered hand, forgives sins, calms a storm, multiplies bread and fish, and raises a young girl all with the sound of his voice (1:25, 2:5,3:5,4:39,5:41,9:25);
* heals Simon's mom by taking her hand and lifting her up (1:30) and brings healing to the woman who had suffered hemorrhages for 12 years after she touched his cloak (5:30).
* In a method similar to the one we have read, he heals a deaf man by putting his fingers into his ears, then spits and touches his tongue (7:33). Can you imagine what the guy is thinking when this strange dude essentially gives him a wet willie? Boundaries!
* There is even a story of someone else performing healings and the disciples told Jesus because they wanted to put a stop to it (9:38), but Jesus told them to not get in the way.

I share this to show that healings happen in every which way we can imagine. And these are the ones that are documented. Not everything Jesus did is in Scripture. Did you ever stop to think of that? Not every day of his life is captured. There is so much more, so we can only imagine how many people were healed by sticking his fingers in their ears!

Jesus uses everything in his reach to perform healing and in this passage today it takes even Jesus two times to fully bring healing. Healing is hard work! It is also creative work. It is his creativity that reminds me that we must be wary of believing healing can only be attained one way. But like Jesus' disciples, we too spend far too much of our time dismissing or even impeding healings through other means. Frankly, our rigid adherence to abstinence has cost lives.

Now, I want to be careful and say that addiction is real. I am not trying to undermine the harm that addiction causes in many people’s lives. Abstinence is appropriate for some. But it is not appropriate for all. Mandating abstinence for all causes harm.

1 really want to recommend the book I named earlier, *Addiction Nation*, by Timothy McMahan King. He reminds us in our approaches to treating addiction that "threatening someone who is engaged in self-harm is not only ineffective; it can be counterproductive." (54) King goes on to say treating someone as "either good or bad, clean or using, sober or not-sober" creates an unhelpful focus on blame. (54) "Rather than motivate positive behavior, this encourages deception and disconnection." (55) Grace, King states, "is not just a gesture of benevolence, it is a practical approach for growth." (55) Yes, it is the means of our very sanctification.

The way of Jesus is the way of creative healing and social inclusion.

This has not been evident in this country's approach to drug use. In June of 1971, President Nixon initiated the War on Drugs, and it has been an unmitigated disaster.

The Vera Institute published a report in 2021 that said at that time,

Police make more than 1.5 million drug arrests each year, and about 550,000 of those are for cannabis offenses alone. Almost 500,000 people are incarcerated for nothing more than a drug law violation, and Black and brown people are disproportionately impacted by drug enforcement and sentencing practices. Rates of drug use and sales are similar across racial and ethnic lines, but Black and Latinx people are far more likely than white people to be stopped, searched, arrested, convicted, harshly sentenced, and saddled with a lifelong criminal record.

This lifelong criminal record can result in being denied food stamps and public assistance, suspended driver's licenses in some states, and numerous other effects like the denial of child custody, voting rights, employment, loans, and financial aid access.

All of this is fueled by a view of drug use as entirely bad.

We mostly know of the harms the War on Drugs has caused to communities in this country, particularly communities of color, but Nixon's War on Drugs precipitated tremendous and long-lasting harm in Latin America, particularly Mexico, as well. In an excellent article from *Time* Magazine, writer Benjamin Smith describes how Nixon’s announcement unleashed US drug agents to countries south of the border, one of those agents being a man named Joe Arpaio. By the late 60s, Mexico dominated the marijuana trade and so the presence of US drug agents came along with US funding to militarize and train the Mexican police.

The training included murder and torture, which were regularly utilized. The forms of torture included water boarding, near-drowning in sewer water, beatings, and rape. One main consequences of this is that it created the framework of viewing Mexico and other Latin American countries as lawless gangs that either need to be thoroughly defeated or we should fear so much we should build a wall.

The other consequence was the full-scale adoption of militarization and violent force by Mexican police, all of which came through the leadership of US drug agents and the funding by the US government. To show how these consequences are still reverberating, a study in 2020 showed that between 60-70% of Mexican suspects involved in the drug trade had experienced torture. What's more, as the money poured into the police, their participation in the drug trade actually increased and that has resulted in widespread corruption.

This is the extreme result when we insist on a binary approach to drug use.

But the harm of the policies of the last 50 years has also taken place at home here in DC.

At this moment, DC faces an overdose crisis. Nearly 600 Washingtonians died from accidental overdose deaths in 2021 alone. That is breath-taking to me. 600 people who had families, friends, loved ones, and all who were taken from us far too early. The overdose mortality rate among Black Washingtonians is the highest in the country. At 107 deaths per 100,000 people, the Black overdose death rate is nearly 10 times higher than the white overdose mortality rate in DC. This tragic racial disparity shows that we are in a state of emergency that requires an urgent, systemic change to how the District addresses drug use and addiction.

In DC, there is no meaningful difference in drug use between Ward 3 and Wards 7 and 8. But there is a drastically different police response. Black Washingtonians are almost seven times more likely to be arrested for drug possession.

Criminalization and incarceration significantly increase a person's chances of a fatal drug overdose. Compared to the general population, returning citizens are forty times more likely to die from a drug overdose within the first two weeks of release and ten times a greater risk at a year after release. Criminalizing drug users and then barring them from essential services is counterproductive and harmful to recovery journeys for those struggling with substance abuse disorders.

As the passage in Mark shows us, healing is complicated work. Jesus did not adopt one mode or method of healing and neither should we. But what Jesus did do that we should surely apply in all situations is that he saw all people in need of healing as individual people uniquely made in the image of God, imbued with divine worth and light. We do not derive worth once we are healed from what inflicts us. We have infinite worth even in the midst of our sickness or weakness or sin even.

The truth is, if we begin our public policy discussions by valuing those who use drugs rather than criminalizing them, then framing this discussion through a health care and harm reduction lens is natural and leads to real solutions that protect lives rather than policies that devastate communities and families and that overpopulate our already overpopulated prisons.

We are all impacted daily by the harms of drug criminalization, whether you identify as a drug user or not. Forced abstinence and criminalization of drugs have not worked and will not work. It is because of my faith in Jesus that I view criminalization of simple things like drug possession as a harmful and detrimental means of retribution on those whom God loves. This does nothing to bring about healing.

I urge us to no longer confine Christian responses to drug use to forced abstinence. For some, that works. For most, it does not. Let us remember that Jesus’ healings came in various and very creative forms. From the sound of his voice to his physical touch, to the very bizarre uses of spit and mud, healing is driven by the context and the uniqueness of the individual.

Because of these truths I am working with an amazing number of organizations and individuals working to decriminalize drug use and possession to create harm reduction centers where those who use drugs can find resources and support, where they can find referrals to treatment providers, have access to drug checking services, and where, for those who wish, there can be a space for safe usage.

I hope and pray we, as followers of Jesus, would follow the lead of those who use drugs — some of whom are indeed followers of Jesus themselves — and destigmatize drug use. And as we do, may we advocate for policies that emphasize public health rather than criminalization.

We all have experienced complicated healings in our lives. May we not impede those healings in the lives of others.