March 5, Ash Wednesday C (Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

Isaiah and Matthew invite us into deeper solidarity. None is well until all are well.

by Celeste Kennel-Shank in the March 2025 issue
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When I look into the bowl containing her ashes and bone fragments, I think not of death so much as of my own sense of failure. The woman I grew up with like a sister died after two decades of opioid addiction. The first time she overdosed, I was there to call an ambulance. The last time, we were estranged, and she died alone. Irrational as it is, some part of me might always be convinced that I could have saved her.

It's no surprise that my mind goes from ashes straight through mortality to the ways we fail each other. Prior to this loss, when I held a bowl of ashes it was to mark crosses on foreheads as we confront the ways we've all fallen short. While our stories vary, we have sin in common.

The opioid crisis could be a great common cause in our society. It crosses the rural-urban divide and afflicts suburban areas too. People of all levels of income, from those without housing to multimillionaire celebrities, have died of overdoses.

It is one of our society's sins that we turn away from this equalizing reality. One place to lay the blame is the myth that people can be easily separated into the law-abiding citizens and the criminals, who must be kept away from the rest of us. The result is plenty of prison cells but scant few beds in rehab and pain management programs.

I wonder if it is only after grief rends our hearts that we can see clearly: there is no separation between those of us who fall prey to addiction and those who don't. Timothy McMahan King elaborates on this in his 2019 book *Addiction Nation: What the Opioid Crisis Reveals About Us*, which incorporates both first-person narrative and research on what can prevent and treat addiction without stigmatizing those

who struggle with it. King's story of becoming addicted to painkillers after emergency surgeries in his mid-twenties defies society's stereotypes about who is prone to abuse drugs. King not only describes his own recovery but highlights the ways our society is sick, in need of evidence-based programs to help us all recover. What's needed echoes the assigned reading from Isaiah: housing, worker justice, and health care "to satisfy the needs of the afflicted."

Our failure to meet these needs has created a society in which despair has taken root in so many communities, places where the opioid epidemic now flourishes. It's easy to point a finger in contempt at each other. Perhaps the only thing that US Christians can all agree about these days is that our society has many causes for concern. Yet we differ widely as to what we see as a threat and what we see as freedom.

Recently, reading the Hebrew prophets has stirred hope in me where before I mainly saw lament and condemnation. In this Isaiah passage, the language moves from a mocking tone—"You call that a fast?" is how the Jewish Publication Society translates 58:5b—to detailing what changes the people need to make. The prophet pronounces what the people must do, suggesting that it is possible that they will indeed do it. All is not lost. This passage casts a powerful vision, one both grand and specific. It makes a longing well up that our people, our society, could be "like a watered garden," could repair breaches in our society, could restore our "streets to live in." While I frequently dance at the edge of despair in regard to social change, Isaiah's words tell us that transformation is still possible and what that transformation looks like.

Our fasting must go beyond denying ourselves something and making sure everyone knows about it. Jesus' instruction to put oil on one's head and wash one's face reminds me of what 12-step recovery groups call a living amends. One way to do this, when it isn't possible to apologize and offer restitution to someone one has hurt—even if that person is still alive—is to change the behavior that was causing the hurt.

When we recognize that we have all caused brokenness and are all in need of healing, we can go beyond offering charity and service to "the marginalized," "the least of these," "the less fortunate," or whatever our preferred appellation is for separating ourselves from those in need. Isaiah and Matthew invite us into deeper solidarity and mutual aid. None is well until all are well. Our collective light cannot shine forth until we break every yoke. Until there is no longer an us and a them, we

can’t be free from any oppression, perhaps especially that of addiction.