

THE COMPANION

The Newsletter of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry

Summer 2021

Issue 35



Justice Blooms at Sisters Academy of Baltimore

Practicing God's Justice—By Brion Harris 2020 - 2021 Volunteer
A graduate of University of Scranton



Brion Harris

On my personal journey of developing a clearer understanding of social justice issues, I have learned that it is important not only to speak your principles but to live them out as well. This rang especially true for me when we began discussing the pillar of practicing God's justice as a community. Prior to BSVM, my understanding of practicing God's justice came primarily from a secular perspective. I viewed justice as the practice in which an individual or group who feels they have been wronged seeks what they are due in the form of compensation or from the other party acknowledging their fault. During our formation time, we learned that God's justice recontextualizes the term into a relationship, moving away from a punitive concept, and deepening the idea into the restoration of what is broken. This re-frame from my original understanding highlights the importance of right relationships with those we have hurt, in our family systems, at the community level and throughout society. Where injustice creates fractures within our relationships and society, God's justice looks to heal those wounds.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequities affecting the most marginalized throughout society, and those inequalities can be seen along racial, economic, class, and gender lines.

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Editor's Corner
By Olivia Steback
BSVM Program Manager

*God is Love
God of Love
God, My Love*

~Destiny Cates

In this edition of *The Companion*, Destiny shares the exploration of her image of God through poetry. The words above are an excerpt from her poem. Her words, so simple in nature, shine a light on a question that humans have struggled with over the millennia, “Who is God?” That question has been addressed in complex ways by theologians, biblical scholars, and others, and in simple ways, as in Destiny’s poem – mirroring the many facets of the Divine as understood by humans.

Let us focus on the vulnerable simplicity of God that is reflected in Destiny’s writing: **God is Love**. In our current realities, often busy, sometimes chaotic, almost always outward-focused, we can easily forget this truth. During a year with BSVM, staff work to create space in the volunteers’ routines and schedules to contemplate this question in a myriad of ways. We encourage them to pray, to keep Sabbath, to journal, and to take time to reflect on all of their experiences so that they may become open to God, to love.

In Brion’s reflection, he too shares about his experience of love as he writes about his interactions with the students of Sisters Academy of Baltimore. In his sharing he states, “the students actively choose words of empowerment when referring to one another and acknowledging each other’s work. When they come to disagreements, they respectfully express why they feel differently and leave space for the other individual to respond.” He is struck by ways the students live out God’s justice as they interact in loving ways – **God of Love**.

Finally, one way that BSVM alum, Faith Yusko, continues to experience the gifts of her service year is through love embodied in the very personal act of cooking from recipes shared by her community members - **God, My Love**. Faith’s connection with her community members embodies the movement from stranger to family that Fr. Sam Lupico discussed in his reflection on years of engagement with BSVM. Each one of these contributors share about real moments of God in their life, experiences that speak to the question, “Who is God?” Each time they take a moment to recognize love in their lives, they move closer to that question.

After reading this edition, we invite you to ask yourself the same question and to look for the response in your own life. May God come to you in surprising ways, may love speak to you in each moment of your life.

Many Names; One God

By Destiny Cates, 2020 - 2021 Volunteer

A graduate of the College of William & Mary



Destiny Cates

Our BSVM spring contemplative retreat in March 2021 was formative for me in several ways. First, due to COVID-19 this retreat was the first that we were able to enjoy at the Retreat and Conference Center in Marriottsville. Having access to their spacious fields and beautiful chapel helped to hallow that weekend and distinguish it from the physical and mental noise present with me in daily life. This time in the presence of our fellow volunteers helped to solidify our bonds with each other and discover some commonalities that were

previously unseen. The retreat gave me some blessed quiet to contemplate the ways in which I think about and interact with God. I wrote this poem as an extension of my reflections on my image of God.

This reflection allowed me to enter into a time of gratitude, which is a practice that I have been cultivating more and more this year. Whether I am grateful for the physical healing of a loved one or a strong feeling of comfort on a lonely day, I realize that expressing that thanks to God is necessary to

broaden my perspective and give God due honor. Through this exercise, I have constructed and challenged myself to expand my image of God. No matter what names we come up with, God is always capable of going above and beyond anything that we could ever ask or think.



Destiny celebrates her birthday.

Helper.

A present help in times of need
A help that comes with an abundance of grace
A help that reminds me of my dependence
Sometimes unexpected, always sufficient

Love.

Indescribable, uncontainable
Unfathomable, ineffable
High, deep, far-reaching, beyond all barriers
The ultimate model
God is Love
God of Love
God, My Love

Jehovah.

I pray every day to Jehovah Jireh:
"Thank you for providing me with everything I have."
Jehovah Shalom reminds me to be still
Jehovah Shammah proves to me that God is present
Even when I do not feel it

Emmanuel

Come let us adore,
Regard with loving admiration and devotion
As Webster says.
Emmanuel is a sure presence
A promise,

An act of great power, but great love
For God to choose to dwell with us
For this, we give our adoration

Friend.

Available to talk day and night
(which is great for my random 2am thoughts)
I feel heard,
Seen,
Accepted at all times.
Treats me better than I do most days
An example for the friend that I want to be to others

Sisters' Corner

By Olivia Steback
BSVM Program Manager

Although the volunteers were unable to visit with the sisters in-person at the beginning of the service year, they were blessed with the opportunity to spend time with them in the spring. In April, Sister Elaine traveled down to Virginia. As part of her trip, she stopped by the Richmond volunteer house to join Mikayla and Destiny for their Monday-evening community night, including dinner, prayer, and reflection. The volunteers enjoyed hearing Sr. Elaine share about her past experiences of working as a nurse in Richmond. She traveled the rural counties surrounding the city providing services for people struggling to gain access to healthcare. The volunteers also bonded with Sr. Elaine over a shared love of gardening. Sr. Elaine keeps a beautiful garden at her residence in Marriottsville and the volunteers in Richmond have continued to tend the garden that past volunteers had created and nurtured.

The volunteers in Baltimore also shared a meal with two sisters in their neighborhood. Sr. Nancy and Sr. Pat live just around the corner and invited them over for dinner in April, as well. The sisters shared about the history of Bon Secours in Southwest Baltimore and about the history of the volunteer house on Mount Street. The volunteers were surprised to learn about the history of ministry within the home. They were also quite impressed by Sr. Pat's cooking skills and grateful for a beautiful prayer service that the sisters prepared for them.

BSVM is grateful for the sisters' presence in the volunteers' lives via Zoom or in-person. The volunteers are always touched by their interactions with the sisters, whether they are planned or spontaneous, informal or formal. Each one is an important part of their year.



2020 – 2021 BSVM Ministry Volunteers join the sisters for dinner during their retreat.

Justice Blooms at Sisters Academy of Baltimore
Practicing God's Justice
Continued from Cover

Individuals have had to isolate from one another, and connection has been designated largely online. This virtual dynamic has had a significant effect on our volunteer service, altering how we interact and accompany individuals in our city. I have been fortunate for online experiences that have shown me God's justice through relationships. Over the past several months, I have embraced the relationship-building opportunities with students and staff at the Sisters Academy of Baltimore. As BSVM volunteers, we initially started helping distribute food boxes to families on the weekend around Thanksgiving, and that engagement has gradually grown into getting to know the middle school students, working closely with teachers, and creating clubs and programs for the students.

I had the opportunity to create and lead a club called Community Action Club, which looked to highlight current events and have students discuss ways they could use their voices within their school and the local community for change and education. Seeing violence as a dimension of their lived reality, students are encouraging teachers to speak about current events and issues they are witnessing in the classroom. Students are using their voices to spread awareness, first and foremost, by their interactions with one another.

Outside of the club, I have also noticed how conscious they are in the way that they speak to and about one another. They learn about how often violence rises from an individual's inability to communicate with one another. Issues often arise from petty grievances or misunderstandings. Acknowledging this, the students actively choose words of empowerment when referring to one another and acknowledging each other's work. When they come to disagreements, they respectfully express why they feel differently and leave space for the other individual to respond. In the hopes of having aspects of school intertwine with their personal lives, the students take a pledge of nonviolence at the beginning of the year. Students from 5th-8th grades attended weekly, sharing qualities they looked for in leaders, ways they could rise up in their communities, and their hopes for changes they wanted to see in society.

As I learned more about how the students lived out the pillar practicing of God's Justice, I marveled at the growth and maturity they showed over the course of year, particularly in the Community Action Club. The subjects were difficult to discuss at times, but the students spoke authentically from their perspective, illustrating a sense of vulnerability. Their interests and questions were not contained in the confines of the club, as they challenged me and one another to think critically about important issues within their community and expressed an openness to learn more from each other.

Looking back, one moment that I felt God's justice shown to me by the students was during a conversation we had on gun violence within their neighborhoods. Baltimore has developed a reputation throughout Maryland and the country synonymous with violence, with gun violence garnering the most attention. In the year 2020, there were 335 homicide victims alone. At the time I write this reflection, 194 people have been killed in Baltimore City. With each news story and name added, it hurts to think of the family and loved ones they leave behind. Even more so, it has impacted the dynamic within communities. The students shared instances in which they felt unsafe in their communities, afraid that someone they knew would be taken or affected by gun violence. The conversation branched into various areas, with some asking why individuals choose to hurt one another, some talking about the repercussions and effect it has on loved ones, and some talking about the mistrust of those in the community with the systems at large that are meant to protect them.

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I was moved not only by how open and honest the students were, given we had only known each other for a short time, but also by how much their conversation invited me to grapple with some difficult conversations early in my year. As a young adult, I sometimes forget that the issues and injustices occurring in society are not only affecting adults but also have a significant impact on children and their social, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Talking to the students, I realized my privilege in experiencing childhood and a home environment devoid of gun violence. Hearing the students speak openly and honestly, I appreciated them allowing me to walk with them in processing their thoughts and feelings. In the months since that conversation, I have continued to learn from the students in unimagined ways both inside and outside the classroom. I am inspired by their desire to not just to talk about the injustice but to also live out their beliefs through their lives.

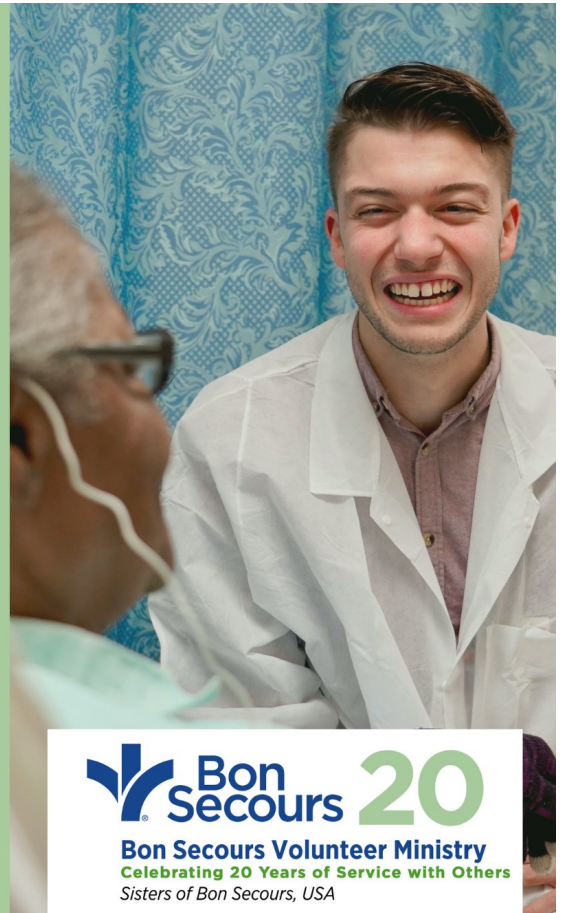
Ultimately, at a time in the world where connection seems fraught and relationships are tested, it has been both a blessing and a privilege to see individuals sow God's justice through a screen and continue to watch it blossom in person. Ultimately, my experiences truly highlight that beyond what we may look like or where we may come from, there are common experiences, interests, and emotions that we all, as individuals, can share and explore together.

DO YOU KNOW A YOUNG ADULT WHO IS:

- motivated by an open and giving spirit
- interested in practicing justice by building relationships based in service
- open to reflecting upon the connection between service and spirituality
- willing to live in community with other volunteers and to live simply during the year of service?

REFER THEM TO BSVM FOR OUR
2022-2023 MINISTRY YEAR!

Send contact info to volunteer@bshsi.org or fill out contact form at bit.ly/BSVMapply




Bon Secours 20
Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry
Celebrating 20 Years of Service with Others
Sisters of Bon Secours, USA

Alumni Profile

By Faith Yusko, BSVM 2016-2017



Faith with her ACE community.

Faith Yusko was an enthusiastic and joyful BSVM volunteer in the 2016-2017 service year and she continues to live out this passion for life and service. Below, Faith shares about some of the learnings from her service year and how her service impacts her current life in many different ways.

How did your experience with BSVM shape you? My year in Baltimore kicked off adventures in full-time, faith-based service. I was lucky to have the chance to be the Catholic Volunteer Network Recruiter for my year immediately after BSVM. After that I was a St. Joseph Worker in New York serving at the United Nations, and currently I am an ACE teaching fellow living in community with other teachers in Tucson, AZ.

What advice do you have to offer former volunteers as they continue to process their BSVM experience? Connect with other volunteers and find meaningful communities to be a part of in your post-volunteer life. It is amazing to have people to share with and learn from in the years to come. It is helpful to have a prayer community to grow with when you may not have the formal facilitated prayer time that you did each week during BSVM!

What reading have you found to be informative, helpful and/or inspirational for volunteers in the BSVM formation or for those wishing to continue to explore the pillars of BSVM? My favorite book during my BSVM year was by Father James Martin, and it is called, *This Our Exile: A Spiritual Journey with the Refugees of East Africa*. Before my BSVM year, I tended to shy away from theological books that were not assigned to me from college or programming. I picked up this one on my own, and I really connected with how he was a young professional who felt a kind of loss. Though most of the story relates to his time abroad, I could see similarities between my own experience in the loving embrace of the Baltimore community.

What were some of the gifts you received during your time of service? Have any of these gifts helped you specifically during this time of pandemic? Apart from the wonderful community members, whom I still love and cherish no matter how far apart we live from one another, I learned a lot of different recipes during my time in the Sowebos house! I still have my handwritten cookbook from that year, and I have been adding to it during quarantine. My heart and belly are full every time I cook Celina's rice and beans, or Joe Ann's pie crust recipe, or make pancakes using Amanda's nonna's recipe. I love being able to share these meals and break bread with the new communities that I have been blessed to be a part of as well. Even as we have not been able to be home with our families, serving together during a pandemic and still being able to eat meals together has been one of the things that has brought me great joy.



Faith and her 2016-2017 BSVM Community crocheted hats to donate.

2020-2021 Closing Reflection

By Shannon Curran
BSVM Director



Volunteers,

Way back in September 2020 – which feels like decades ago – you were commissioned with words from Dorothy Day: “The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us.” When reflecting on today’s readings, I was struck by how well Fr. Greg Boyle’s words on tenderness serve as a bookend to Dorothy Day’s revolution of the heart.

In *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, Fr. Boyle writes: “If love is the answer, community is the context, and tenderness the methodology. Otherwise, love stays in the head or, worse, hovers about it. Or it stays in the heart, which is never enough. For unless love becomes

tenderness – the connective tissue of love – it never becomes transformational.” He goes on to write, “We need only meet the world, today, with a loving heart, to determine what we will find. A loving heart doesn’t color your world like rose-colored glasses; it alters it.”

When Fr. Boyle uses words and phrases like “methodology,” “transformational,” or altered world, he’s speaking *our* language – he’s talking Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry. Tenderness and transformation are the language of Bon Secours. Volunteers, you enter BSVM well aware that our mission is transformation through service with others. When you leave, I know, that you *know* transformation.

You leave knowing transformation because you’ve been touched by God’s tenderness. We are grateful for how each of you have allowed the Spirit, in so many different ways, to clear and smooth the path for you to receive God’s tenderness. In so doing, you have also cleared and smoothed the path for us and others to receive God’s tenderness in new ways.

This afternoon, we celebrate you. We celebrate how you have each met the world with a tender and loving heart. We celebrate how you have risen and continue to rise to the greatest challenge of the day --- you have risen to the challenge of bringing about a revolution of the heart. The reflections you share this afternoon let us glimpse your revolution of the heart.

We thank you for giving witness to the transformative power of God’s tenderness. Right before our eyes, volunteers, you ring out Fr. Boyle’s words: “The holy is happening.”

“The holy is happening”

-Fr. Gregory Boyle, S.J.

Closing Ceremony 2021



Our 2020-2021 BSVM Ministry Volunteers and Staff at the Closing Ceremony via Zoom on Thursday, July 8, 2021.



Brion, Kelly and Sara outside the Baltimore volunteer house following the Closing Ceremony.



Destiny and Mikayla hold their olive wood Cross received at Closing Ceremony.



Kelly, Sara, and Brion hold their Closing Ceremony gifts.

Farewell to our 2020-2021 BSVM Volunteers
Thank you for your commitment to BSVM



Brion and Kelly enjoy working in the Bon Secours' Urban Garden greenhouse.



Mikayla washes Destiny's feet during the Holy Thursday morning reflection.



Destiny leads a student book club at Cristo Rey Richmond High School.



Sara leads a lesson at Sisters Academy of Baltimore.

The Work of the Holy Spirit!

By Joy Aker
BSVM Retreat Leader



Joy Aker

For over 10 years, BSVM has been blessed with the presence of Joy Aker. Joy accompanies the volunteers in their spiritual formation. She leads volunteer retreats, helps with formation in Baltimore, and offers spiritual direction to our volunteers. Joy has a master's degree in Theology and Spirituality from St. Mary's Ecumenical Institute and currently works part-time as a Nurse Anesthetist. She also leads retreats at the Bon Secours Retreat and Conference Center and Loyola Retreat House. Thank you for your faithful service, Joy!

How were you first introduced to BSVM?

In 2008, I received a call from Shannon Curran. She asked if I was interested in leading a one-day contemplative retreat. No one can remember how she got my number, but I think our connection was the work of the Holy Spirit! The one-day retreat quickly grew and now I do 3 multi-day retreats. I love working with the volunteers! My work with BSVM will be the work that I continue to do the longest.

What drew you to working with the ministry volunteers?

I love seeing how they live out the pillars of the program. I watch their lives change as they experience a year with BSVM; they are lighter. They learn how to live with others and how to be kinder. They come to understand that they can really be men and woman for others, as the Jesuits say. At the end of the year, the volunteers are very different. After a year of reflecting on how Jesus is calling them to serve and what it means to really love someone, you can see that they are changed. This ministry gives them a foundation for the rest of their lives.

Why do you think our ministry is valuable? How do you see it shaping young adults? The volunteers often leave BSVM to enter a helping profession. The program supports them as they develop professional skills, but it also helps them to see that no matter what career path they take, God and spirituality can always be a part of their professional lives.

The contemplative retreat is another way the volunteers are shaped by their experience. It is meant to give them a space to reflect upon their relationship with God and the great mystery that is God. It helps them to find new ways to pray and how they can integrate prayer into their lives.

What have you learned from your time with BSVM? I work with both young adults (in BSVM) and older adults. The young adults are so different. They invite me to see things from their perspective and offer new insights. They are so enthusiastic; they want to change the world! Working with young adults keeps me young and invites me to grow as well.



From L-R: Emily Thrush, Site Leader, Joy Aker, Retreat Leader, along with 2020-2021 BSVM Volunteers



Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry
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Cover Photo

Brion mentors a student at Sisters Academy of Baltimore. Taken by Liz O'Neill, Director of Communications for the Sisters of Bon Secours.

BSVM Staff

Shannon Curran, Director
Olivia Steback, Program Manager
Emily Thrush, Site Leader
Liesel Rupprecht, Program Coordinator

Our Mission

Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry, sponsored by the Sisters of Bon Secours, provides the opportunity for women and men to participate in the Sisters' commitment to justice in radical solidarity with the poor, the suffering, and those most in need. By sharing the Bon Secours charism of compassion, healing, and liberation, the ministry nurtures and sustains individuals in their personal and communal journeys towards transformation through service with others.

To nurture this transformative journey, Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry supports individuals through a year of spiritual formation. The ministry is structured with five pillars that support this growth. Volunteers commit to: grow spiritually, develop an intentional community, live simply, practice God's justice, and learn through service with others. Throughout this year, volunteers discover that by sharing the charism of compassion, healing, and liberation with others they, in turn, receive the charism from those they serve.

Support BSVM

Share your time and enthusiasm. Your personal presence is one of the best ways to support the program. Send a letter of support, or schedule a time to visit our community outside or over Zoom. Contact BSVMoffice@bshsi.org.

Support the program financially. It costs about \$16,000 to support one volunteer for the year, including rent, health insurance, stipend and funds for community support. Monetary donations or gently used furnishings for the volunteer houses are greatly appreciated.

Donations are tax-deductible

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