



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE
THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 19, 2019
ACTS 11:1-18; PSALM 148:7-14; REVELATION 21:1-6; JOHN 13:31-35

THE VULNERABILITY OF LOVE

JOHN 13:31-35 *[At the last supper, when Judas had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."]*

My great-aunt Marge was born in 1914 in a tiny rural town in eastern Iowa, the daughter of German/Irish farmers. Her parents valued education, so they sent her to the big city of Dewitt (population 1500) for high school. After graduation, she moved to Chicago, went to work, married my uncle Ole and when she was 28, had a daughter of her own, Mary Christine.

Marge was a curious mixture of farm and city. She could bake a dozen different pies without a recipe but insisted that pie goes stale the next day. If you didn't eat it by

then, she'd throw it out. Butter should never be refrigerated because it loses its flavor, and milk must be served in a pitcher, even if it comes in a carton and not directly from a cow.

Marge was always smartly attired, with ironed dresses, matching gloves and tasteful accessories. In Chicago, she went to jazz clubs and Cubs games, played excellent poker, and started every day at her kitchen table, dealing out her prayer cards on a tea towel and quietly praying them one by one. Her extended family didn't know what to make of her.

When Mary Christine was six months old and not yet sitting up, Marge knew something was unusual and took her to a specialist who confirmed that Mary had Down Syndrome. In 1943, the standard approach was to institutionalize people with intellectual disabilities since it was thought they could not contribute to society. They were sent away so that their families could move on. And that was what most of Marge's family expected. As farmers who raised livestock, they had a rational fatalism about disabilities.

But that was not what Marge and Ole did. They decided Mary would be their only child, learned everything they could about Down Syndrome, and found a special school in Chicago that would welcome her.

Marge went back to work to pay for the tuition.

Over the years, Mary Christine learned how to care for herself and how to help with housework. I remember she could not carry a tune, but she sang all the time. She followed sports closely and had strong opinions on Major League Baseball. And she kept her mother's high standards; when she visited our family, if any of us slept past 8 a.m., she would wake us up, shoo us out of bed and then make the bed quickly so we

couldn't go back to sleep. She was the light in Marge and Ole's lives.

When I heard on May 7 that Jean Vanier died at the age of 90, all these memories came back. Vanier was the founder of L'Arche, an international movement that creates communities for people with intellectual disabilities – the core members -- and those without them – the partners – to live and work together in mutual love and learning.



Vanier began the first community in Trosly, France, in 1964 and there are now more than 10,000 people living in over 160 communities in 38 countries around the world. One is

here in Capitol Hill and another is in Tacoma. One is in Clinton, Iowa, near where my great-aunt grew up.

The spiritual foundation of the L'Arche communities is found in the 13th chapter of the gospel of John, including the passage we heard today. It is the story of Jesus' teachings at the last supper, and it begins, "Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus loved them 'til the end." At the last supper, Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, ties a towel around his waist, and kneeling on the floor, washes

the feet of the disciples. He tells them, “Just as I have done, you must do for each other.” And then a little later, he gives them a new commandment. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love each other.”

The love that Jesus mandates – in Greek, “*agape*” – goes far beyond the tender affection that our English word “love” usually connotes. Its hallmark is not sentiment, but an unconditional honor and esteem and a desire for the well-being of others. It wells up out of the recognition of the other as whole and beloved and is offered for its own sake. There is no expectation of reciprocity. And this love is saturated with the grace and power of God.

Jean Vanier writes that it wasn’t until he had lived in the L’Arche community for many years that he really understood what it means to be human and to love. He created a home for people with intellectual disabilities in order to care for them, but over time he realized that they had become a community of friends, each the carer and the cared-for.

He discovered that alongside the diagnosed weaknesses of the core members were tremendous strengths – selfless love, abundant joy, wonder at creation, true listening, and gratitude. I remember that Mary Christine always gravitated to the person who was sad or anxious, and would

sit quietly next to them, tapping her pencil on her knee. There was a sense of compassion and peace that could not be articulated.

Beyond what he discovered about others, in a deep way Vanier also discovered his own weakness and vulnerability. He was able-bodied, sure, but filled with self-doubt, frustration, impatience, and fear. These were the qualities that got in the way of experiencing the love offered to him and in fully loving in return.

He realized that every person is a mixture of strength and weakness, and to be fully human is to recognize, accept, and offer our weaknesses and vulnerabilities to each other. This is how we love ourselves and others just as they are, and it is the heart of belonging.

Think about your experience – have you found that sharing frailties and difficulties is more heartening than comparing strengths and successes?

At the last supper, Jesus gets up from the table, lays down his outer garment – revealing his inner, vulnerable self – and serves his disciples by washing their feet. He is keenly aware of what is coming and releases Judas to do what he plans. Then Jesus says to his friends, “Little children, the Son of Man has been glorified and God has

been glorified in him. Love one another as I have loved you.”

To glorify means to make visible the presence of God. So Jesus is saying, “See, my darlings? The presence of God is here, it is made known in me and will be made known in you. Be a sign, a witness to my love in the way you love each other.”

Jean Vanier said, “Loving someone does not mean simply doing things for them. To love someone is to show to them their beauty, their worth and their importance; it is to

understand them, understand their cries and their body language.”

This is how Marge and Ole loved Mary, and how she loved everyone she met. And the glory of God shone round about them. May we make God’s presence visible, too, in the way we love through our own vulnerability and by embracing that of others. Amen.



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