

18 Pentecost, Proper 20
September 18, 2016
Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Tim 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

Many of you are probably familiar with Henri Nouwen's prolific spiritual writings. He was a Catholic priest and theologian, originally from the Netherlands. He taught theology at both Harvard and Yale Universities. And he spent the last 11 years of his life at a L'Arche community called near Toronto, Canada.

L'Arche is French for "the ark." L'Arche communities are places where people with intellectual disabilities (for example, people with Down syndrome and certain manifestations of cerebral palsy) live together in faith-based communities with others who do not have intellectual disabilities, referred to as "assistants."

L'Arche was founded by a French Canadian named Jean Vanier. In the early 1960s Jean visited an institution for men with intellectual disabilities in the small village of Trosly-Breuil, France. The residents were locked inside the institution, separated from the rest of the local community. Jean invited two men, Raphael and Philippe, to leave the institution and live together with him in a small home, which he named "L'Arche". For Raphael and Philippe, this meant an enormous widening of their independence, daily activities, friendships, and belonging in the wider community. And Jean noticed that something was changing for him as well. Earlier in his life, he had been a naval commander and a professor of philosophy. He was skilled at giving orders and had spent years in school training his intellect. Now, living with Raphael and Philippe, he noticed that his heart was learning and growing, and he has since referred to L'Arche as a "School of the Heart."

L'Arche began in this one village in France in 1964. In the last 50+ years, L'Arche has expanded to 37 countries. There are now 17 L'Arche communities here in the United States. A L'Arche community typically has 3 or 4 homes in a single neighborhood. I spent 8 years as an assistant at L'Arche in Seattle. I lived in a home with 4 housemates with intellectual disabilities, and 2 fellow assistants. My daily activities involved assisting fellow housemates as needed with daily tasks, such as help getting dressed, making meals, and driving them to work.

Beyond daily tasks, L'Arche communities are places where birthdays are joyfully celebrated, there are candles, prayer and song at evening meals, and they are places of simple, yet extraordinary hospitality (Reimer).

One of the first community members in Erie, Pennsylvania was named Carol. When an assistant was helping her move in the first day, she was adamant that she didn't want a mirror in her room. She explained, "I will never look at myself. I hate myself." The assistant convinced her that she might need the mirror at some point, and Carol let him put it up. About two years later, Carol decided to look at herself in the mirror. She said to herself, "You know, you aren't so bad after all!" (Mosteller).

Interestingly, the experience of assistants in L'Arche can be vastly different. After one year in community, they can find themselves disoriented. They may have survived rigorous and high-paced life at major universities or in the business world. But L'Arche is a realm of authenticity and relationships, and our titles, degrees, and developed powers of the intellect are suddenly of little use. Our identities are no longer based on what we can *do* and achieve, but who we *are*, including all of our gifts and weaknesses.

In his book entitled *Adam: God's Beloved*, Henri Nouwen describes his growing friendship with a man named Adam, who had a severe intellectual disability, was non-verbal and suffered from frequent seizures. Nouwen wrote: "The great paradoxes of the Gospel—that the last will be the first, that those who lose their lives will gain them, that the poor are blessed, and that the gentle will inherit the Kingdom—all became incarnate for me in Adam." Nouwen said: "It took me a long time to see this complete reversal of values, but once I experienced it, it was as if I was walking into completely new spiritual territory..."

And this brings us to today's scripture readings. The Psalms outline a pattern of reversals and remind us of God's promise and grace. God takes a childless home and fills it with children and joy. God takes up the weak out of the dust. God lifts up the poor, and sets them with princes.

The writings from Amos tell of an era when there was relative prosperity for Israel, but also a time of social and religious corruption. In the verses for today, Amos calls attention to the hypocrisy of the day. The wealthy piously followed divine laws, for example, not selling grain on the days of the new moon. But at the same time they treated the poor unfairly. As the debts of the poor grew, some were forced to sell their lands or even sell themselves into slavery to pay the debt, which is referenced in today's reading as: "buying the poor for silver." Amos was saying that our relationship with God cannot be disconnected from our relationship with the poor, our neighbors and our community (Barré).

The gospel for today, the story of the dishonest manager, is a complicated passage, and there are a wide range of interpretations. At the end, the master commends the manager for his actions. Many interpreters explain – the master was clearly pleased with the manager's quick thinking and decisive action in saving himself and his position. But anthropologist and scripture scholar, Richard Rohrbaugh points out, these sound suspiciously like our culture and values of today.

Rohrbaugh is a scholar who has devoted himself to studying ancient Mediterranean culture. He then works to understand scripture through the lens of this society, culture, and time.

So take a moment to imagine yourself being one of the people listening to Jesus, or hearing Luke's gospel being read aloud in the days of the early church. How might you have understood these words and this story?

First of all, chances are that you were not part of the elite class. Capernaum, for example, was the largest town in Galilee at the time, and about 95% of the people were peasants (Rohrbaugh).

Secondly, the core value of this society was honor. Honor is what established your standing in the pecking order of the village. Everyone in the village knew the order, and it determined how you interacted with each other (Rohrbaugh).

Jesus begins: "There was a rich man." Rohrbaugh explains that this sets the scene from the beginning. Calling the man "rich" would have been a description of someone who had gained wealth by taking it from someone weaker. (The very next story in Luke shows the very different paths of Lazarus and the rich man.)

Many wealthy landowners at the time were often absent from the land, so they hired other people to oversee it, such as the manager in this story. The wealthy landowners demanded the highest profits they could from the work of the tenants and trade with merchant. Charging interest was forbidden in the Torah. So the landowners (or the managers working for them) would not charge interest as a separate line item, but would charge a higher overall price that included the interest, oftentimes interest as high as 25-50% (Herzog).

The managers were stuck in the middle, facing the demands of the master on one side, and the resentment of the tenants on the other (Herzog).

As tenants fell further into debt, one of the few ways that they could exercise some form of control over those above them was to try to influence the perceived honor of the elites through what was said about them (Herzog).

The rumor being spread in this story, presumably by the tenants or merchants, is that the manager is squandering the property of the master (Herzog). This tarnishes the honor of the manager. The master also loses his honor and status, being perceived as weak and unable to control his manager (Rohrbaugh). The master's solution to regain his own honor is to dismiss the manager. This is not necessarily his first choice, as he already knows and has invested in this manager, but it seems at the moment to be his only choice to regain his honor.

However, the manager comes up with his own solution. The debtors do not know that the manager is acting independently as he renegotiates contracts with them (Bailey in Herzog). So the master regains his honor, being praised and seen as generous (Rohrbaugh). And the master is not losing money, simply not collecting the extra interest that was built into the price (Herzog).

In the end, through the manager's actions:

- The honor of the master is restored, and he is no longer benefitting at the expense of others;

- The steward has saved his position and restored his relationships with the master and the tenants; and
- The tenants have had debts forgiven which gives the whole village reason to be joyful (Rohrbaugh).

Through this lens of interpretation, the manager's actions bring a new order to the land. It brings justice for all, and builds the Kingdom of God.

As I read the scriptures this week, I reflected on places and situations where I have seen and experienced such building of the Kingdom of God—where honor is restored, the welfare of all is preserved, where debt is forgiven, God takes up the poor, and God fills an empty home with joy. Again and again, stories and examples from L'Arche came to mind.

In the United States, people with disabilities are more likely to be poor than any other demographic, including single-parent homes, or any race or ethnicity. There are over 317,000 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities on waiting lists for home and community-based services in this country. In L'Arche in India and the Philippines, some of its members with intellectual disabilities have come to the community as children rescued from the streets or the local garbage dump where they have been left, without a family and without a home. Even within the church in the U.S., a recent study discovered that people with intellectual disabilities and their families often stop coming to church because they do not feel fully welcome, included and accepted.

L'Arche is a place that celebrates the unique and sacred value of each person. Its community members are challenged and learn to build relationships across differences in abilities, race, culture, religion, and social status.

In recent months, we have witnessed sharp divisions in this country, between Democrats and Republicans, people of different racial and ethnic groups, and the rich and the poor. We see violence in the U.S. and around the world between peoples of different colors, religions and nationalities, and the spiraling effects of further fear, anxiety, and division.

As the Anglican primates met in January of this year, a time when the church was seeking to build unity, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, invited the founder of L'Arche, Jean Vanier, to speak to the group. Justin Welby has said, "Every time one meets Jean, one has a sense of new horizons opening up, of a new vision opening before one's eyes of what it is to be human and of what it is to be in a community."

Considering the divisions of today in light of the gospel – let's ask ourselves – what is the path that will lead us beyond our usual dichotomies? Like the actions of the manager in today's story, what is the "third way", a way that will restore justice and be life-giving for all?

As the Psalms and Old Testament reading attest, part of this journey is lifting up the poor. Another part that Jean Vanier describes throughout his writing is recognizing our own poverty. Jean writes that assistants often come to L'Arche with the mission to "serve the poor," but their understanding of why they are called to L'Arche then changes. Jean writes: "Jesus does not just serve the poor, he becomes one of them."

Kathy was a member of L'Arche in Seattle who had an intellectual disability. One day she was on a walk with her friend. She turned to him and asked, "Do you think God can love me in my condition?"

My heart breaks, imagining the many circumstances where Kathy was not fully accepted because of her disability, bringing her to the question: "Do you think God can love me in my condition?"

But I also think that this is a question deep inside many of our hearts. There is still a gap in us fully believing that God loves us exactly as we are. And this profoundly effects how we treat ourselves and others.

In our society, community structures are changing. Americans report that they have fewer and fewer people in their lives who they say they can trust and with whom they can share openly about their lives. We often miss opportunities for joy, because we are holding onto the myth that our fulfillment is around the corner if we could just lose five pounds, buy that new house, or get more tasks completed each day. Many of us pack our lives full of work, appointments, sports and music practices for kids, activities on our computers and smart phones. There's little space left for silence, relationship, and simply being ourselves. Perhaps we fear that these places could uncover the hunger and vulnerabilities existing inside us.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, addressed the International Assembly of L'Arche in 2005. He said: "The mission of L'Arche is conversion ... [L'Arche] asks us to inhabit another world, which is more not less real, ... a world in which real human beings can flourish..."

Whether volunteers who come once a week to L'Arche, or assistants who come for a summer, a year, or a decade, many notice that their hearts have been forever changed. After time in L'Arche, assistants report that they have grown in their ability to build relationships, communicate with others, and resolve conflict. Whatever else they may be called to, they are then more loving and more peaceful family members, friends, teachers, social workers, doctors, neighbors, and community members.

Some days the work of building the Kingdom of God amidst the divisions of our world feels more overwhelming and challenging than on others. As we all work together in the building, I am helped by Jean Vanier's reminder: "We are not called by God to do extraordinary things, but to do ordinary things with extraordinary love."

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