

Sermon for the 14th Sunday of Pentecost
Rev David Howells

Grace Church in Scarborough
Date 25th August 2013 Proper 21 YrC

On our way back from Nova Scotia, as you travel west along the south shore of the wide estuary of the St Lawrence, there is a wonderful highway, flat and broad, on which you can whisk along at 120km/hr. It gets you there so much quicker!

But someone had told us of a Bakery at Kamouraska, and we stumbled onto the old coast road that runs through villages and towns of surprising beauty, oldness and quiet charm. Narrow streets and big steeped churches, market squares and people out on foot. Ordinary, unremarkable, but lived in over the ages. In one coffee shop we watched people come in and leave with greetings to each other without regard to age or dress code!

Lord, you have taught us that all our doings without love are nothing worth: send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the true bond of peace and of all virtues, without which

whoever lives is counted dead before you. Grant this for your only Son Jesus Christ's sake, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

This collect speaks to me every year when it comes around, and into my prayer life, from time to time, God sends it

“All our doings without love are nothing worth...”

I have, at the core of my friendship with God, the knowledge that I am loved.

Not saved or redeemed or created or anything else much, although I know these words are of great and real value to those whose path to God is understandably different from mine. No, for me it is knowing that I am loved by God.

I came to know it in my late teenage years and it has held fast ever since.

I learned a great deal of theology and churchmanship and it was all good, but as I get older it seems to me that these things, these learned things, beliefs, practices, doctrines and hymns, are, like the leaves of Summer coming towards Autumn, slowly revealing the stem and body of the tree. What endures, for my inner spiritual life, is God's love of me.

I must admit that in committees and meetings about church building and renovations, in fundraising and liturgy planning, it is sometimes hard to locate just where love remains, or informs, or gives life to what we do. And that is perhaps the great discipline of faith, to keep looking for *where the love lies hidden* in the day-to-day work.

From time to time though, I do see the work of love arising out of “the doings which are nothing worth”.

Some of you may know of Jean Vanier. The name rings Canadian bells since he is the son of a Governor General. Today I want to talk about him, because his work is so utterly worthless by any secular standard, yet it is of infinite worth and a saintliness seems to hover around him. It is the work of love.

It begins with a simple and foolish act.... Vanier writes...

I went to visit Father Thomas, who was the chaplain of a residence, the 'Val Fleuri', which welcomed about 30 men with an intellectual disability. I was deeply touched by my first contact with these men, by

their remarkable tenderness, coupled with their deep suffering.....a strange mix of enormous tenderness and enormous anger.

I began to visit asylums and psychiatric hospitals, and I met some families with members living with intellectual disabilities. I discovered a vast world of suffering of which I had previously been ignorant. I had lived in a world of efficiency in the navy, and of intellectualism during my studies. Now, I was confronted by the world of suffering, and I was deeply moved.

I was able to buy the house, L'Arche, in Trosly-Breuil. It had no electricity, no toilet, and only one tap with running water. There was electricity but I didn't know where the meter was, so we lived for a while with candles!

During a visit to one asylum, I had met three men. The parents of both Raphael and Philippe had died, and these two men had been placed in the asylum, events which were devastating for them. There was a third man, Dany. I invited these three men to come and live with me. Dany was not able to stay more than one night because he was too unstable. I had no long-term plan. The only thing I was sure of as I began, was that this beginning was an irreversible act.

Raphael, Philippe and I started very simply to live together. We cooked together, ate together, did the shopping together, and worked together in the garden. We lived very poorly materially, as the house was completely dilapidated.

Jean Vanier, Interview Charles Eric Hauguel, 1989

Why would you do such a thing? What would motivate you to tie yourself to mentally handicapped people? People who had been thrown away by society and warehoused in mental institutions?

Jean Vanier was bright and able with almost no limitations on what he could do with his life. If my children ever suggested doing this I would be utterly anxious about them.

After all, how do we measure success, achievement, value and the worth of a person?

A distinguished guest who went to see what was happening wrote this...

“At the end of August 1964, I was invited to lunch at L'Arche. It was August 25th, the feast day of Saint Louis. I remember the meal very well. Jean Vanier himself had done the cooking. We ate carrots, which Jean had not peeled. "It seems", he said, "that if carrots are peeled, they lose their vitamins". There was also herring, a fish I do not like at all. As the guest, I was given the biggest portion, and it was not cooked all the way through. I ate everything, the carrots and the barely cooked herring. For desert, there was applesauce, served on the same plates as the main course, so the applesauce tasted of herring! However, in spite of everything, that meal amazed me.”

“What moved me was not so much the menu as the atmosphere in that house. Each one participated according to his abilities: Philippe ground the coffee, Raphael swept the floor, and everyone including the guest did the dishes together. The atmosphere of attentive listening, of joy, and of I'm not quite sure what else, meant that I returned there often. I was moved by the friendly welcome, and the warm and brotherly atmosphere. I was very struck by the focus on the needs of the people living with disabilities.”

Antoinette Maurice, Cette richesse qui vient du pauvre, 2009

I sometimes think that I am hurtling along the highway of life in a great urgency of busyness and purpose. I get a lot done in a day and I feel exhausted at the end of it. But perhaps the Highway is just whisking me past the pretty villages and lovely towns on the quiet side roads. Maybe I am not noticing the neighbours chatting across the fence, the young man helping the old lady take out the garbage, the child holding the grandmothers hand as the motorcycle stops for them to cross to the grocery store.

All that whisking along without seeing the real beauty of a hand touching a shoulder is like much doing without love and nothing worth.

Our world, and our Anglican Church, has a fondness for bigness, for glitter and for success. Yet I would invite you to make your way to L'Arche Daybreak , 11339 Yonge St, Richmond Hill, or go to the Eucharist at L'Arche Toronto on 186 Floyd Ave East York on a Monday at 7pm. There is a holiness, a worthiness, in the midst of the sheer unimportance of lives lived with the intention of loving.

Vanier said

"We are born in extreme fragility,
and we die in extreme fragility.
Throughout our lives we remain vulnerable,
and at risk of being wounded.
Each child is so vulnerable, so fragile
and without any defenses!"

and

" We are not called by God to do extraordinary things, but to do ordinary things with extraordinary love."

And so we pray to God

"Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love"