

Sunday November 22, 2009
BELONGING – Making it a Reality
Guest Speaker: Karen Pascal
L'Arche Dance Troupe: Spirit Movers

PART 1

If you recall, last week, Ken ended by challenging us that God might be calling us to say, “yes” to something that is really hard. Standing up here this Sunday morning is the really hard thing I had to say, “yes” to. He created a wonderful image as he asked a circle to first turn inward and see what they could see and then he had them turn around, link their hands and look outward. I think today is a day that we as a community are going to look outward to see something on our horizon that will speak into us as a community.

I love to be able to introduce two friends of mine who don't know each other and yet I, as the connecting link, know they will enjoy each other's company. That is what I feel like I am doing today: I am introducing The Olive Branch Community to my good friends from the L'Arche Daybreak Community and to their dance troop – The Spirit Movers. L'Arche Daybreak is right on our doorstep in Richmond Hill but perhaps some of you have never heard of it.

L'Arche means “the Ark” – as in Noah's Ark and a Canadian named Jean Vanier founded it in France in 1964. Jean was a PhD. Philosopher, the son of our 12th Governor General – George Vanier and at the time he was living in France and teaching at a university in Paris. God was deeply at work in Jean's life challenging him to live out his faith by reaching out to the weak and dispossessed in society. He felt led to invite two mentally handicapped adults who were living in a very dire local psychiatric hospital to come and live with him.

He brought a little cottage in the village of Trosley-Breuil an hour north of Paris in order to provide these two men with a real home. It was a very simple and humble beginning but from this has grown an international network of communities for people with mental disabilities. Today, there are 132 L'Arche communities on six continents as well as 1500 non-residential support groups for families with mentally disabled children called Faith & Light. In each home

L'Arche creates, mentally handicapped adults and volunteer caregivers live together in community.

Jean Vanier really didn't know where this first step would lead but he knew that his faith in Jesus Christ was calling him to share his life with the most vulnerable. Vanier's own journey took him from power and privilege to the discovery that the weakest members of society have something to bring us. In fact, vulnerability has the power to unite us. We all crave to know we belong but the real secret lies in making welcome the ones who are weak and powerless. When we make them welcome then we all know we can be welcome. We all belong!

In 2002, I produced a documentary called BELONGING, which features Jean Vanier. I want you to see a little bit of this because it will give you an insight into life in a typical L'Arche community. You will meet Patrick and in celebrating his birthday, I think you will find the very heart of L'Arche and I think if you look carefully, you will glimpse God's heart as well.

Video Clip # 1 from "Belonging"

PART 2:

Jean Vanier raises a very important question: What do we, as a community want to grow into? What will it look like to grow into greater compassion? What step might God ask you to take to accomplish this? 45 years ago Jean Vanier took a step into the unknown and said yes to God's prompting to do something compassionate in response to a very specific need. To welcome two mentally handicapped people into his life. To provide a place where they would belong.

Now I think you are ready to meet The Spirit Movers from L'Arche Daybreak. They have performed in many different settings including dancing for Pope Jean Paul II when he last visited Toronto. We are honored to have them with us today.

The Spirit Movers Dance

PART 3

Let's be real here, reaching out and having a real relationship with someone in need isn't always easy. It can get messy and sometimes we hold back because we anticipate it will be draining. It may cost us our time, our finances, our privacy...even our reputation. One thing Jean Vanier has shared so honestly about working with people with mental disabilities is that it exposes your own weaknesses, your own inability to love, your impatience. When God calls us into something that involves leaving our safe zone where we are in control, we will discover how very needy we are.

God often uses circumstances to rub and chafe us to expose the very nature of our heart. After all, our God has committed to make us like his son Jesus. It usually takes getting overwhelmed to allow God by his Holy Spirit to transform us and to make us a source of transformation and healing in the world where we live.

I think a really good example of this is found in the journey Henri Nouwen.

Henri Nouwen was a priest and a psychologist - a very successful spiritual writer with dozens of books to his credit. He taught at the best schools, Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. But when he was at Harvard – at the pinnacle of his success he was deeply unhappy because at a very deep place he knew that he had drifted from that central call on his life to be close to Jesus. He took a sabbatical to the L'Arche Community in France. From there, through a series of circumstances Henri was called to come to L'Arche Daybreak here in Richmond Hill.

For the last ten years of Henri's life he lived as the Pastor of this community. Here is a man who was named the top spiritual influential writer by leaders in the Catholic, Mainstream and Evangelical churches but his credibility to speak about ministry for the body of Christ grew when Henri left Harvard and came to be part of the community at Daybreak. I would like you to watch this little segment from the biography of Henri Nouwen called "Journey of the Heart"

Video Clip #2 from "Henri Nouewen"

PART 4:

I love how the various fellow members of the L'Arche Daybreak community describe Henri Nouwen's struggle. Henri Nouwen was your basic 'A' type, driven personality.

As Henri Nouwen himself said - we need to move the ideas that we hold in our head about how to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ down into our heart. I think the best way that happens is not by theorizing but by doing.

Henri had to live out this verse:

“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

Mark 9:35

What Henri Nouwen discovered was that those that the world considers weak, poor and useless have something to give us. Despite not being comfortable and adept at caring for Adam, Henri didn't give up.

He stayed at Daybreak for 10 years. Seemingly this talented man had so much to offer in that setting but what he found was that the love and acceptance they offered him, was much richer than anything he had to give. The L'Arche community transformed his life. They gave him a home and a sense of belonging.

I think this is a perfect time to welcome back the Spirit Movers and to love them, delight in the gift they bring and receive from them.

Spirit Movers Second Dance**PART 5:**

A few weeks ago, I had a birthday and my good friend John Deacon gave me the gift of this verse:

“I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will

dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

John 21: 18

Frankly, John’s gift to me went over like a lead balloon. Though he suggested that this verse captures the essence of the aging process for all, I would still rather live in denial of that process.

I know I have begun the steep up hill climb of old age but the thought that in future, I might be at the mercy of others and dependent on others for care, did not exactly excite me. I shoved the message way back in some corner of my mind determined to drag it to the trash bin at the earliest possible opportunity.

Within a few days, I found myself with a circle of friends who had gathered for a weekend of meetings. As we began to share about our past year, each one told of how very hard and unexpected the year had been. The recurring theme was “I really did not expect to be living through a year like this at this point in my life.” The verse from John became alive to me as I realized how it speaks of what life can be like no matter what age you are.

How many of you have come through the kind of year that would cause you to say – I really wasn’t prepared for this! Sometimes health issues, or a family crisis, or relationship breakdown, or work ... or lack of work brings it on. A financial crisis can cause one to feel way way out of control. The bottom line is, sometimes we find ourselves in a place where our circumstances seem to be leading us to a place we don’t want to go.

My year has been like that. It certainly gets your attention.

There is something in those words that Jesus spoke to Peter that is rich and compelling for us today. Jesus has died and already the disciples have had two times when he appeared to them as the resurrected Lord. But on this morning, Peter and the other disciples have gone back to their old job of fishing. Just days before Peter had been the number one disciple answering Jesus question “**Who do you say I am!**” when he said: “**You are the Christ**”

Mark 8:29 He even vowed that he would never deny Jesus.... but that was before the garden, that was before Jesus was arrested, that was before he was dragged off to be crucified. Peter had not kept that promise.

When Peter and the disciples went fishing that morning they needed to find their purpose again and to find a way to meet their basic needs. It wasn't a very successful fishing expedition. They fished all night and caught nothing. Then this man on the shore suggests they throw their net out on the other side of the boat. In no time they have a net full of fish – 153 big ones to be exact. Peter says it has got to be the Lord and he jumps out of that boat rushing to get to the shore. Seems like our man Peter is always willing to get out of the boat. When he meets Jesus on the shore, Jesus challenges him three times with the question “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?” Each time Peter answers “yes” and each time Jesus calls him to his destiny. He says: “Feed my sheep”. Peter, the failure at following Jesus when the going got tough, is being called back into relationship and purpose. But the power to obey lies hidden in Jesus question “Do you love me?” You see we are called into a relationship with God himself. It is a love story. All the resource to actually go and do what Jesus is asking lies right there in that place of beginning. In the Bible it says we love him because He first loved us. But the power to give love to others is really out of the overflow of our love for Jesus.

The circumstances you find yourselves into today may be wonderful or they may be the kind that keep you up through the night wondering how you will survive. On the shore of our lives is one who knows us so well he will call you by your exact name...just like he did with Peter. He called him to love him – love the very one he had identified as the Christ. Here is the mystery – Jesus wants our love, needs our love, receives it and does not turn away with the humblest offering of love we can give. He has a call upon our lives, which may have us in a place now where we did not expect to be. In circumstances that are way beyond us. But this Jesus, standing on the shore of our lives calls to us, commissions us, equips us and empowers us. He has the food we need to do what He is calling us to do. – to love.

Let's go back to the two men we have encountered this morning. Both Jean Vanier and Henri Nouwen heard a call to join their life with those who are poor and powerless. Both understood that this call to live out your faith in community with others means that you don't just come on a white horse to rescue but you come in love ... to receive. As Henri said: “He came to help but discovered that the poor have something to give him”.

We tend to remember Nouwen and Vanier for the big things they have done. Last year Vanier was named Canada's Nation Builder. He has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Nouwen has written well over 35 books and at least a dozen have been written about him but for both these men, where they found the deepest point of connecting with God has been in the choice of downward mobility. The choice to embrace the weak and the powerless and the poor. There is a secret in this: when we make welcome the weakest members of society, then we know that we belong. Nobody need be left out.

This morning as we receive communion, I want you to see Jesus on the shore of your circumstances. He knows you. He knows what you need. And he has a call on your life. He alone is the strength to live that call. After Jesus spoke the words that told Peter just how he was glorify God in his death, he simply said, "Follow me!". Jesus didn't paint a pretty picture that day but in it he drew Peter to himself restoring him and wiping out the shame of his betrayal. Yes he called him to a task – to feed his sheep but first and before all – He called him to love God. To enter into a relationship of love for Jesus which would be his resource to face all that life would bring to him.... even the days that were coming when someone else would control his life for him **Let's Pray.**

Communion:

Jesus asked us to take the bread and remember in this that his body was broken for us. By his stripes we are healed. The he took the cup and said this is the new covenant sealed by my blood. We do this because we want to remember that we have been called into God's Kingdom to be a source of light and hope to the world where he has planted us. He is our resource, our strength to live this life sacrificially and as unto him.

Our resources will not run dry but we cannot do the loving and giving part in our own strength. We need to take the love Jesus offers us and allow it to flow through us – first back to the one who loved us first and then out to those beyond our little circle, beyond ourselves. Trust me, there is something more powerful than you can imagine when you take that love and spread it on the weak and the poor and the outcastes. Jesus said. In as much as you do it unto the least of these you have done it unto me.