

**SLD08.14.11 Sacred Communities – L’Arche**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**I Corinthians 12:12-27**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“We Are People”**

We’re way into this summer series on sacred communities this morning – this will be the ninth sermon on the topic. And we all know that the point of this exploration is to explore during this long stretch of Ordinary Time, the varieties of ways people live out their Christian discipleship. For years during our summers together we’ve examined and exegeted the lives of extraordinary individuals of faith; this summer we’ve been looking together at *communities* of faith.

What I need you to know at this point is that when I launch on a sermon series of this nature, I actually have no idea what I’m doing, what I’m getting myself in to. God blesses me with a creative idea, and, for planning purposes, I develop it a bit so we all know the general trajectory of the sermons. But it’s not until I get through with one sermon and face the next, usually with a spare week between, that I actually begin to confront what I’ve set myself up to deliver.

Take the Beguines. I didn’t have a clue about the Beguines before I began studying them. Or even Iona. Who knew that Iona was a 6<sup>th</sup> century community and a 19<sup>th</sup> century community and a 21<sup>st</sup> century community, all different! And who in the heck knows how the virtual world of the Second Life Gospel works? But ask any of us in about a month.

In any case, today we come to the L’Arche community. Truth is, last week I didn’t know from L’Arche except that it has something to do with people with disabilities, or differing abilities, as we’re supposed to say now, and that one of the most popular

and influential spiritual writers of our day, Henri Nouwen, spent the last decade of his life in a L'Arche community.

What I'm trying to say is that for many of these communities, as for many of the individuals in our summer saints series, I'm pretty much starting from scratch, which is both the joy and the challenge of it.

So little did I know that this week's exploration into L'Arche communities would lead me to the doorstep of a Russian novel's worth of players, many of whom are right here in Atlanta and featured in one way or another in my own personal spiritual journey over the years.

But first, what is L'Arche?

Well, the word "L'Arche" is French for "the Ark," and, sure enough, L'Arche was founded in France in 1964 by a man named Jean Vanier.

Yes, but who is Jean Vanier?

Well, Jean Vanier is a Swiss-born Canadian who first served in the British and Canadian Royal Navies, and then went on to earn a PhD in Philosophy on the topic of happiness, which he ends up defining as "loving and being loved." To Jean Vanier, this is happiness: loving and being loved.

Much influenced by his friend, Father Thomas Philippe (born in France in 1905 and a whole 'nother story...), back in 1964 Vanier invited two men with disabilities, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, to leave the institutions where they lived and come share their lives with him in a house in Trosly, France.<sup>1</sup> Vanier's initial urge to "do something for" Raphael and Philippe grew to become a commitment to "being with" and "friend to" these two men. With that shift in heart and consciousness, a core belief of

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.larcheusa.org/>

L'Arche emerged: that strength is revealed through weakness and human vulnerability, which given room to grow in trust, creates community. The desire to love and be loved, as Vanier well knew, is something every person longs to experience. So began the first L'Arche community, where people with and without developmental disabilities shared life in mutual relationship and trust in God.

From Vanier's first home in Trosly-Breuil, France, L'Arche grew, through the support of many people, grew to 140 communities in 40 countries, all of which are dedicated to building inclusive communities of faith and friendship where people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together. The first L'Arche community in the United States was founded in Erie, Pennsylvania in 1972. To date there are 16 in the U.S., and counting. In 1997, L'Arche USA was established to support these stateside communities.

Although L'Arche was founded in a village in France in the Roman Catholic tradition, today L'Arche communities around the world reflect the predominant faith traditions of the local populations. In the United States, communities are typically inter-denominationally Christian and some are inter-religious. All L'Arche communities welcome people of any or no faith, and respect and support its members in deepening their spiritual lives within or outside of a religious affiliation.

Wrote Vanier in his book *Becoming Human*, "at the heart of L'Arche *and* of being human, is the belief in the inner beauty of each and every human being. We do not discover who we are, we do not reach true humanness," he writes, "in a solitary state; we discover it through mutual dependency, in weakness, in learning through belonging."

Let me repeat this because I find it so fundamental to the vision of L'Arche:

“We do not discover who we are, we do not reach true humanness, in a solitary state; we discover it through mutual dependency, in weakness, in learning through belonging.”

What better definition, I ask you, for *any* body of Christ?

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ...The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, says Paul, those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with great respect.”

Is this what folks in a L’Arche community seek to do? Clothe society’s less honored mentally or physically handicapped individuals with more honor? More respect? Perhaps.

Certainly L’Arche professes that persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities, through their own vulnerability, often have a special gift for touching our hearts. Certainly Nouwen hoped before joining the Daybreak L’Arche community that, after living for so many years among the “best and brightest,” he might not better find what he was seeking among those regarded as “poor in spirit.”

But L’Arche’s aim is no more to glorify those with differing abilities than Paul’s was to argue that the ear is somehow more worthy than the eye. Rather, the point both make is that for wholeness, *all* members of the body, *every single* member of the body, is both *mutually* dependant and *equally* important. No member of the body, however weak or dishonored or marginalized, is any less indispensable to the whole.

But just how mutual can a community be if some are always caretakers and some always caregivers? Or, put differently, what, really, do those with disabilities have to offer to those who care for them?

When Nouwen became the pastor of the Daybreak L'Arche community in 1986, he was assigned to care for the most severely handicapped adult in the community, a young man named Adam, who could not talk or move by himself. Nouwen spent hours each morning simply bathing, dressing, and feeding Adam. In the course of caring for Adam, Nouwen experienced a deep inner conversion. Adam was not impressed by Nouwen's books or his fame or his genius as a public speaker. But through this mute and helpless man, Nouwen began to experience *a sense of what it means to be "Beloved" of God.*<sup>2</sup> Through Adam's weakness and inescapable vulnerability, Nouwen finally experienced for himself the power of God's love.

"Core Members" - that's what the differently-abled members of a L'Arche Community are called - Core Members. And no question but that the vulnerability of Core Members is all "out there" for anyone to see. If you have the mentation of a three-year old or an IQ below 70 or an inability to filter your social responses, why, your weaknesses are as plain as your face. As opposed, say, to the vulnerabilities of those of us who do not consider ourselves dis- or differently-abled: *our* vulnerabilities tend to be more tactfully hidden, do they not? (at least until they leak), more socially acceptable (until they blow), more "mainstream" (until they tank us.)

Living in a L'Arche community, whether for a few months or a few years, might regarded be as a holy invitation to leak, blow, and tank...in community. But in a

---

<sup>2</sup> All Saints, Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time, Robert Ellsberg, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, N.Y. 1997. pp. 410-412.

forgiving and accepting community. In a community that grounds itself in the belief that each person is unique and of sacred value. A community in which the gifts and weaknesses of each person are recognized and accepted. In which God's love is experienced through mutual friendships. A community of care for those with differing abilities, to be sure, but also a community in which people without intellectual disabilities, through daily acts of care, trust, and friendship, develop into ambassadors of compassion and leaders of social change and the common good.

Remarks Curt Armstrong, Executive Director of L'Arche Atlanta, (more about them in a minute), living in a L'Arche community "strips life down to its fundamentals: laughing, crying, dancing, getting mad, forgiving." There's this continual shift from the head...to the head, heart and body, to the *full* self, continually being pulled back into the "reality" of present moment. And it is only in the present moment, Curt quotes Vanier as saying, that God gives God's Self."<sup>3</sup> (Remember the Sacrament of the Present Moment in Green Bough's Rule of Life?)

So back around 2002, Jean Varnier came to the states and spoke at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church here in Atlanta. In 2005, some people who heard him there were moved to form L'Arche Atlanta to begin exploring the possibility of developing a L'Arche Community in this city.

It takes a long time to form a L'Arche community, a lot time and money and prayer and intentionality. Before L'Arche USA ever approves a local project, it's essential that the project have a wide network of financial and spiritual support, a well-functioning board and trained leadership, and is fully accredited with local governmental

---

<sup>3</sup> Brief interview with Curt Armstrong on the lawn of the new L'Arche home on Aug. 12, 2011.

agencies to provide services. From the initial conception of the group to finally welcoming the first person to live in a home typically takes five to ten years.

But what do you know but that the founding members of the Community of Hospitality happened to be in the midst of a process of discernment for next steps for the Community, doing their best to approach the future with open hands and hearts, allowing the Spirit to move where She will.

And what do you know but that Curt Armstrong, who had been serving a L'Arche community in Compaign, France for the last twelve years, happened to wish to bring his family back to the States, and was hired to be Executive Director of L'Arche Atlanta.

And what do you know but that one of board members of the Community of Hospitality was dear friends with Curt and decided to serve on the boards of both organizations.

And what do you know but that just last November, the Friends of L'Arche Atlanta announced a new partnership with the long-standing Decatur nonprofit Community of Hospitality (COH) to lease their Oakhurst home for ten years at a dollar a year, which 10-year agreement opens the way for L'Arche to establish their first home in Georgia. Fundraising is underway to support needed renovations – in fact you'll notice an announcement in your bulletin about an upcoming contra dance event – and the home is expected to open in mid 2012 with three adults with developmental disabilities and three assistants living there as family.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.friendsoflarheatlanta.org/>, and a lengthy phone conversation with L'Arche and Community of Hospitality board member Lisa White Persons on Aug. 12, 2011.

Those of you familiar with the Community of Hospitality will appreciate the extraordinary synchronicity of this creative collaboration. The Community of Hospitality is a non-residential group of people who, for the past 30 years, have lived a deep commitment to the vulnerable in the City of Atlanta and in Decatur. From the beginning this group has determined to deliver care and concern through mutual relationships, trust in God, and life together.

Some of the public ministries generated by the leadership of the Community of Hospitality with which you may be familiar include Café 458, an award-winning restaurant at 458 Edgewood Ave that serves sit-down meals to the homeless and also offer gourmet selections to the public on Sundays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. All proceeds from Café 458, including tips, go directly to support the Atlanta Center for Self Sufficiency (formerly known as Samaritan House of Atlanta), a nonprofit agency whose mission is to help homeless men and women achieve self-sufficiency.

I myself served tables at Café 458 back before seminary, and collaborated with a photographer and an art director back in the mid-80's to produce a marketing booklet of interviews of guests and helpers.

Community of Hospitality leaders and Café co-founders A.B. Short and Bob Freeman expanded across the street from the Café to establish a Phase II Recovery Program for men on the streets that provides on-site substance abuse and support groups, financial management workshops, a clothing closet, laundry, secure storage space, counseling, Community Voice Mail, telephone access, and a mailing address.

Another reknown ministry to grow out of the leadership of the Community of Hospitality is Bill Bolling's Atlanta Community Food Bank which currently distributes

nearly two million pounds of food and other donated grocery items each month to more than 700 nonprofit partner agencies in 38 counties in Metro Atlanta and North Georgia.

Many of the ministries and people related to the Community of Hospitality figured centrally in my own life twenty five years or so ago as I was making my own way toward seminary.

But despite the 30 years of creative, faithful and inclusive “worship circle” on Sunday evenings, or perhaps because of it, the age, composition, and dynamics of the Community of Hospitality have, as with all living organisms, changed over the years. This new use of their Oakhurst property promises fresh stirrings of the Spirit in their midst, the fruits of which will be discovered fully only over time. The Community intends to continue to worship in what is becoming known as the L’Arche home, and who knows to what rhythm these two heart- and spirit-filled communions will “contra dance” in the coming years.

Here of late, we of Emory Church have been enjoying our own dance of fresh spirit-stirrings. We have a lot in common with L’Arche in other ways as well. For the heart of L’Arche, as of Emory Church, is relationship: “meeting people, not through the filters of certitudes, ideologies, idealism or judgments, but heart to heart; listening to people with their pain, their joy, their hope, their history, listening to their heart beats.”<sup>5</sup>

So who knows if perhaps at some point it might please the Spirit for L’Arche and EPC to share a few balance and swings as well. Perhaps joining in their dance might help us perceive what it means to be beloved of God. And who knows? It might even make us happy!

To the glory of God. Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.larcheusa.org/who-we-are/larche-international-2/>