

First Congregational Church of Montague Trinitarian

November 23, 2014

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Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

Soul Food

In this season of year, as daylight wanes and temperatures drop and skies grey, our minds turn to the practice of giving of thanks and to the comfort of food. We can get obsessed about our Thanksgiving dinner, the guests who will be coming, will there be enough food, will it look good enough, taste good enough, ... will the family members behave, get along and not break out into fights ... will someone drink too much?

This holiday, in particular, can be fraught with tension. All you have to do is tune into one of the multiple sitcoms on television around this time of year... each one seems to tell the same story... one of turkeys being over cooked, under cooked, or still frozen when taken out of the oven, and family relationships breaking down when compared to such idyllic families as seen on Leave it to Beaver or The Ozzie and Harriet Show from the 1950's!

But, here and now, in this sanctuary, we can bypass all that silly stuff and turn our attention to something of more substance... something that

might feed us at a deeper level... something that really warrants our giving thanks. And so today I offer you this reflection in the hope that somewhere in it you will find some food to feed your soul.

I'd like to begin with a short poem written by Jean Vanier. Vanier is a humanist, philosopher and theologian... a man with heart, a man of compassion. He is a passionate advocate for humanity and truth, inspired by the Holy One and by the Poor of the world. One of his life's works is to describe the process of what it means to become human. You can find on our website a full article about his work attached at the end of this sermon.

A poem titled **Mary with Jesus** and inspired by our gospel message today... *Whatever you did to the least of these, you did it to me.*"
(Matthew 25:45)

As you listen, listen not just with your ears but with your heart...listen and feel how it might have been for Mary to sit at the feet of Jesus. Feel how Jesus was soul food for her.

Mary with Jesus

**All the daily tasks of her life
were a prayer,**

her every gesture

a time of communion with Jesus,

because all was centered on Jesus.

It is important to take time

and to look quietly at Mary with Jesus.

We need to understand how all *our* gestures,

and even *our* physical bodies,

can become a source of life,

a presence of God,

a "sacrament".

A sacrament is a "sign", a place

that renders God present.

For Mary, the body of Jesus was a "sacrament",

The place where she met God.

We often say, therefore, that the weak and the broken

are a "sacrament"

which means that they render Jesus present:

***"Whatever you did to the least of these, you did it to me."* (Matthew 25:45)**

And again, that was written by Jean Vanier and can be found in a book titled *Befriending the Stranger*.

One of the questions Vanier seeks to answer in his life work is *How can unity be fostered among diverse people?* This is certainly a question we can engage in as we consider how we make our church, and ourselves, more accessible. In 1964 Vanier began a community called L'Arche. It is a community where differently abled people live together and learn from and support one another. He believes that by bringing diverse peoples together, people whose fragility is not so obvious with those whose physical and mental limitations (measured by the world's standards) are clearly visible, we are better able to develop our human nature.

When we are able to listen closely to the needs of another human being and are able to share our own brokenness, our own limitations, that's when our humanity shines forth... that is the result of encountering Christ. This happens whenever we are vulnerable with one another, but it is ever more acute when we can be present and vulnerable with those who have been given the label of intellectually or developmentally disabled, or poor or underprivileged. These are the ones that, to Vanier, are a sacrament, a sign rendering Jesus present.

I wonder if we can take this insight into the issue of immigration which is so present in the United States today. Could we see the immigrants,

legal or illegal, as worthy of our time and attention, our personal time and attention? Could we make an intention to go out and befriend someone so labeled? Could we be courageous enough to open up a conversation with such and individual or individuals? Could we risk finding out that we care about them. Could we risk finding Jesus in their eyes, in their speech, in their actions, in their presence? And what then if we did? What then would we do?

Would we find our own strangeness revealed? And then, finally in solidarity with these “others,” might we find the gratitude that is needed, the Thanksgiving that is needed, to open our hearts in such a way that allows the Holy Spirit to transform us from by-stander to activist ... to transform us from ones who stand and watch in fear, ignorance or apathy to ones who find solutions in the name of “Love one another and your neighbor as yourself” ... ones who are the way-makers, path-clearers, rather than close our doors and shutter our windows against that which we do not know.

Now, these may seem like lofty ideals and you may feel frozen, paralyzed, by the idea of going out and establishing a connection with a stranger. I dare say we feel this paralysis even among one another right here in our sanctuary....even I feel it and I am not supposed to but it is there... when I go to meet a stranger I have to put myself in a certain frame of mind, and I have to call on Jesus to lead me. He never lets me

down either! We each have incredible reserves within us to accomplish much that we hold to be beyond our abilities. Especially when we realize it is not us, but Christ who works in us, that accomplishes these things.

So, as we go forth to do these great works, to break down these barriers to peace in the world, to strike down the barrier of silence and open up the curtain of dialogue, let us be inspired by these wise words from the Talmud.

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.” –the Talmud

We just need to do something toward acting justly and being merciful while staying humble in our knowledge that the work we do is God's work in the world. This is the kind of work that feeds our souls. As Dorothy Day says, “Loving thy neighbor is not just good for the neighbor, it is essential to our souls.”

May your Thanksgiving Day be full of love. May your turkey be moist, and your mashed potatoes smooth. May you risk being vulnerable with the ones that you speak or sit with and may that vulnerability open the

way to a deeper understanding of your own needs and those of the other... Most of all may you find God in your home and in your heart.

May it be so!

Amen and Amen.

Scroll down to find quotes related to the gospel reading and message reflection for the day and an article about Jean Vanier....

From edgeofenclosure.org by Suzanne Guthrie

All through those weary first days in jail when I was in solitary confinement, the only thoughts that brought comfort to my soul were those lines in the Psalms that expressed the terror and misery of man suddenly stricken and abandoned. Solitude and hunger and weariness of spirit — these sharpened my perceptions so that I suffered not only my own sorrow but the sorrows of those about me. I was no longer myself. I was man. I was no longer a young

girl, part of a radical movement seeking justice for those oppressed, I was the oppressed. I was that drug addict, screaming and tossing in her cell, beating her head against the wall. I was that shoplifter who for rebellion was sentenced to solitary. I was that woman who had killed her children, who had murdered her lover.

The blackness of hell was all about me. The sorrows of the world encompassed me. I was like one gone down into the pit. Hope had forsaken me. I was that mother whose child had been raped and slain. I was the mother who had borne the monster who had done it. I was even that monster, feeling in my own heart every abomination.

-Dorothy Day 1897-1980

from an autobiography, written as a letter to her brother
(with echos of Psalm 130)

what glorious hope

"What glorious hope!" [François] Mauriac writes. "There are all those who will discover that their neighbor is Jesus himself, although they belong to the mass of those who do not know Christ

or who have forgotten Him. And nevertheless they will find themselves well loved. It is impossible for any one of those who has real charity in his heart not to serve Christ. Even some of those who think they hate Him, have consecrated their lives to Him; for Jesus is disguised and masked in the midst of men, hidden among the poor, among the sick, among prisoners, among strangers. Many who serve Him officially have never known who He was, and many who do not even know His name, will hear on the last day the words that open to them the gates of joy. 'O, Those children were I, and I those working men. I wept on the hospital bed. I was that murderer in his cell whom you consoled.'"

-Francois Mauriac 1885-1970

quoted from the above letter by Dorothy Day

About Jean Vanier found at jean-vanier.org/en/his_message/jean_vanier_on_becoming_human

By Pamela Cushing

For over 4 decades, he has been their friend and radical advocate, inviting us to recognize the profound gifts and lessons that they can offer others when they are supported and included with dignity: ‘We must stay near them and take time to listen to them because out of fear they speak quietly and infrequently.’

Vanier’s work expands our understanding of human purpose and the good life through three core questions: *What does it mean to be fully human? What does it mean to serve others well? How can unity be fostered among diverse people?*

His response to these questions has been practical and intellectual, lived and written. The simple, yet transformational practice at the heart of his vision is to create supportive spaces for two people to come together across differences. In this, he shows that it is indeed possible to live out humanistic ideals.

Dignity, Freedom and Opportunity for all humans

What does it mean to be fully human?

In exploring what it means to be fully human, Vanier invites us to observe the tension in our world between the pressure to achieve mastery or control, and our longing to find ways to live at peace with our own, and others’ imperfections. Where modernity privileges progress and perfection, Vanier has drawn attention to imperfection and fallibility

as important and overlooked aspects of being human. Vanier believes that highlighting the universality and centrality of our shared fragility has the potential to unite us in commonality: “The weak teach the strong to accept and integrate the weakness and brokenness of their own lives.” Vanier’s narratives reveal how people really blossom when they are welcomed as they are, with their gifts and their weaknesses together. Importantly, while acknowledging the humanness of our imperfection, Vanier also insists that we continually take responsibility to strive to grow towards freedom and serving others in spite of this.

The gem of inspiration at the heart of L’Arche is that mutual relationships with those who are vulnerable open us up to the discovery of our common humanity. In this way, he names human imperfection as a gift, and an opportunity. Imperfection and weakness can draw people closer together, for instance in solidarity around someone who has been hurt and needs help. Vulnerability can move others to give more of themselves, or to open up and reveal their own shortcomings. Strength and mastery can be impressive, yet they tend to divide people in competition and the regular disappointment of not measuring up. "I am struck by how sharing our weakness and difficulties is more nourishing to others than sharing our qualities and successes."

A meaningful life is one of compassion, in service of humane ideals

What does it mean to serve others well?

Sharing life with marginalized people galvanized Vanier's understanding that to serve others well requires us to move beyond charity and tolerance. He recognized the hubris that grows when a helper imagines himself as somehow superior or separate from those he serves. He learned how much better help feels to the person in need when animated by a sense of solidarity and common humanity than help driven merely by a sense of duty. The felt distinction is between merely caring for others, and actually caring about them as people. And since you cannot legislate people to care about others, part of Vanier's distinct contribution to our understanding of serving others well, is to demonstrate with his communities, that it is possible to create the conditions for this mutuality to develop. "Every child, every person needs to know that they are a source of joy ... needs to be celebrated." He suggests that it is only through this kind of profound acceptance that "our negative, broken self-images can be transformed." One example is his insistence that simply being with the marginalized in solidarity and celebration, is as vital as doing practical things for them. He entreats people to cultivate "fidelity to the wonder of each day... visible in small and daily gestures of love and forgiveness."

Vanier insists that while difficult and fraught, care relationships that are not at least on a path towards mutuality will be shallow and inadequate.

Amidst the routine physics of care, he reminds us of the fundamental goal of service: “to support and love people to greater freedom.” By this of course he does not mean that one’s need or impairment disappears; but that a person should not be made to feel trapped by their need or interminably beholden to others. He points to the unbearable weight we heap onto people already living with an impairment, when we add the social burden of feeling that they are defined by their need, and have nothing to give to others.

Meaningful fulfillment emerges as we craft relationships across difference

How can unity be fostered among diverse people?

As both a realist and a student of the heart, Vanier has long recognized that you cannot force people to love, appreciate or include others that they deem unworthy of it because of their differences. While this instinct to judge, fear and exclude those who are different in devalued ways is natural, Vanier points us to the opposing possibility: that the scope of our imagination can be enriched if we learn to live with the hidden lessons of the dissonance that diversity occasions. Vanier rejects resignation to our base fears and instead offers stories of the exciting possibilities of difference, designed to encourage the desire for openness by choice, not law. Vanier holds the unsentimental conviction that love

is what can make power generative instead of degenerative.

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

Vanier has shown that when marginalized people are welcomed in love and friendship, their gifts have transformative effects on personal and interpersonal healing and unity. This transformation flows both ways: When one's gifts are properly acknowledged, a person with disabilities' resilience and sense of worth is strengthened. The human yearning to be loved and to belong is universal and L'Arche and Faith & Light communities are living laboratories that explore, every day, how to best respond to this yearning. In their sustained encounter with marginalized people, the community members gradually name, explore and embrace their own human fragility and thereby readjust their moral compass. They are challenged and taught how to bring their strong and the weak sides together. They learn that tenderness and compassion are as important as power and knowledge. In acknowledging their own imperfections, they also learn to live with greater humility in the face of others' vulnerability. The result is a cohort of peacemakers within & without these communities, trained in Vanier's distinct humanistic ideas of care, imperfection and unity. These actors bring those ideas to bear in everyday life as citizens, leaders and family members. "It is only when we stand up, with all our failings and sufferings, and try to support

others rather than withdraw into ourselves, that we can fully live the life of community."