

Easter V Year C 2019

Marty O'Malley is the director of L'Arche Mobile, whose offices are next door in Stirling Hall. Many of you know Marty, and many of you know that L'Arche serves a community of mentally disabled adults whose parents for whatever reason were unable to care for their disabled grown child. L'Arche was founded by a man named Jean Vanier, a French Catholic who fifty five years ago made the decision to invite two mentally disabled men into his home to live... the alternative would have been that they would be remanded to the state for their care, that they would be institutionalized into anonymous indignity. Now L'Arche has one hundred forty five communities in thirty five countries, on five continents. Jean Vanier died last week. He was ninety years old.... But still his death is deeply grieved by the L'Arche community. Vanier was the quintessential humanitarian. Some call him a saint. He coined the phrase, which is L'Arche's motto.... "Changing the world one heart at a time." This Thursday we will host at All Saints a memorial service for the Mobile L'Arche community.

Marty has a son named Donovan who was born with Down's syndrome. Despite his disability Donovan graduated last year from McGill-Toolen high school and was admitted to Springhill College as a regular student. Provision of course has been made to accommodate his disability, but he is the first student with

Down's syndrome ever to be admitted there. I asked him the other day how it was going... and he said well, "I passed!"

Last week was a hard one for the O'Malleys: There was Jean Vanier's death, and then Marty's younger brother died of lung cancer after a long illness; and then his uncle with whom he was very close died the day after. While he was at his brother's funeral in Chicago his wife called and told him that Donovan's best friend from high school dropped dead of a brain aneurism. Marty broke the news to Donovan after they had returned home from Chicago. According to Marty Donovan was devastated, and after tears he finally mustered a question for his dad.... "Does God not like us?" he asked.

That's a really good question... One that has been asked over the millennia. The scribes of Hebrew scripture sometimes thought as much. There was the time while the people of Israel wandered in the Sinai desert after their exodus from Egypt that they decided they would worship other gods; and God informed Moses that he was going to wipe them out. Moses pleaded for their lives and God changed God's mind. Of course there is the matter of the great flood when God, angered by the violence in the world, sent a deluge and wiped from the face of the earth all but one family of humans.... But then there are other stories of God's

unfailing Love and redemption; of God's nurture of God's people in spite of their duplicity and errant choices.... So the great perennial and persistent question is that if God is Good, and if God loves us, then why is there suffering and evil in the world. That question of theodicy (God's justice), so-called by theologians, has kept many theologians and laypersons alike burning the midnight oil... and it is a question that has never been satisfactorily answered... One may argue that the whole of scripture, both Old and New Testaments, are compendia of artful speculation not only as to the nature of God... If God is Love then why is the world a mess? But scripture is also the means of looking deeply for meaning and purpose. In other words, it's not just about God, and our believing in God.... But it is also about us, our reasons for living; why we are here in the first place; what is our ultimate concern; where does our most important responsibility lie? Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth century philosopher said that humankind's greatest longing boils down to two questions: What can we know; and what shall we do?

What can we know, and what shall we do? We are so distracted in our self-absorbed culture that many of us never get around to asking those questions. We hide from them in our willful ignorance only to become subject to anxiety and fear, afflictions of post-modernity.... If you think about it... It's those two

questions that scripture attempts to get at. Hear O Israel: Know that I am the Lord your God. You shall have none other gods besides me. And this same God gave the people of Israel, during their formative sojourn in the desert of Sinai, the Law to hold them together justly. For the people of Israel to follow the Law was in fact the means of loving God, which also was the means of loving one's neighbor. So the knowledge of God in Hebrew scripture is found in the practice of God's Laws.... That is, doing begets knowing.

The same premise is true in New Testament literature. The Gospels are a re-articulation of how to practice the faith... Knowing God through our doing. The synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke come at it from the tradition of Judaism. Jesus, his life and ministry, are the model for the practice of Torah in the context of a people being occupied by an oppressive foreign power. To live as Jesus lived is to, in short, hold the community together in the face of suffering and evil.... John's Gospel comes at these questions from the Greek Academy, a more cosmopolitan and universal understanding of knowledge and practice.... And John is the one who names this practice as Love.... In the Greek the word for Love is befriending. In the Greek philosophical tradition friendship was the highest virtue. Friendship was the practice of living one's life for the good of the other; to seek the well-being of the other before one's own well-being. John is making the

connection between the life and ministry of Jesus with the Greek virtue of friendship; that to know God is to Love one's neighbor.

So the question is not, If God is Love and if God is good, then why is there suffering and evil in the world? The questions are: What can we know and what shall we do? John is telling us, brothers and sisters, that God is Love, and that to know God is to be about the practice of Love. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that God's dream for the world is Love and the means of Love is Justice.... So that makes our faith not a private enterprise, not personal, but a public responsibility. The writer of John's Gospel calls the Holy Spirit, the Advocate.... Could it be that our practice of Love is at its heart impassioned advocacy for the voiceless? I think so. Could it be that to know God we are to be advocates for the dignity and well-being for God's people who are marginalized? I think so. Just as I have loved you; you also should love one another... and the world will know me through your practice of Love. Love holds us together.

Perhaps the suffering and evil in the world is there for the redeeming; perhaps it is there so that Love can do Love's work.... And God knows there is work to do.... Our politicians, those who have the power to order our common life, have, to say the least, taken leave of their senses... corruption and greed have

become the new normal. Maybe it has always been that way, but now it is more brazen and blatant. The Citizens United ruling, a tragedy in our history, has allowed corporate greed to shape our fading democracy. Decisions are no longer being made for the good of the whole; instead decisions are made for the elite few. Political expediency is now the moral high ground. The draconian abortion ban just passed by the Alabama legislature, which compromises the safety and well-being and privacy of girls and women, is but one example. Our war on the immigrant including innocent children is another... I could of course go on... but my point is that Love requires us to Love in the manner of giving ourselves to the well-being of the other, particularly the lost and the least.... Love is not a pleasurable emotion only. Love is a responsibility. We are advocates. Our faith is a public faith; and there is no other reason that we are here on this earth than to Love each other.... And the means of Love, the practice of Love, is compassion to a fault... the means of Love is to welcome unconditionally; the means of Love is to include and embrace, even the ones with whom we don't care to associate.... The means of Love is to heal the brokenness of our world... The means of Love is to see that saving justice, mutuality and equity, and respect, wins the day..... Dear friends, our lives are short; and there is no time to waste on distractions... What can we know? What shall we do? Those questions are precious gifts. We need to

be about the Love of God, the knowledge and the doing.... We need to be about the Love of God and change the world... change the world one heart at a time.