

Easter VI Year C

This past Thursday All Saints hosted a memorial service for Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, who died May 7th. As most of you know, L'Arche is a community of mentally and physically disabled adults who live in community in our neighborhood. They live in community with trained caretakers so that they don't have to be institutionalized. As they are able, they cook meals, do household chores, participate in creative projects... The goal is to live as much of a "normal" life as possible; a life of dignity, in short. All community events with L'Arche are chaotic, and this memorial service was no different. To transport some forty or so disabled core members from their houses to church is no small task. I found myself worried that we wouldn't start on time. We didn't. The nave of All Saints was filled with folks in wheelchairs: the lame and the blind; the diseased and the needy; the poor in Spirit. I realized that I just had to let go of the schedule. We weren't on my time.... We were on God's time. I thought that the scene was a picture of what the early church must have looked like: a community of no-accounts, the throw-aways of our world gathered to praise God and to remember their own dignity, made manifest by the fact that their sole purpose in their community is to simply care for each other. The Gospel reading for the service was the account in John's Gospel of Jesus washing

the disciples' feet. As the narrative was dramatically and deliberately read, we washed the feet of four of the older core members. The room was silent as if we were in the presence of a profound mystery; and of course we were. Some would call the gathering sordid; but it felt like a festival. We were witnessing the power of Love to raise up the cast down and broken. I am convinced more than ever that our proximity to the L'Arche community informs us beyond our knowing.

Today's reading is one of those passages in John that tips us off that this Gospel has more than one author...Here the action is concise, staccato...very much unlike the prologue just a few chapters before wherein the language is lyrical and high minded...full of theological and philosophical premise...language that has the echo of a mystical experience..."In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God" pure poetry...but here in the first few lines of the fifth chapter...the language is strictly business...narrative action...much like the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke...here the author painting a quite extraordinary picture in just a few terse lines...a picture of a day in the life of Jesus.... With narrative action sparsely found in John....and as the other segments in John that expound as to the nature of the Christ...I am vine...I am door...I am the good Shepard...I am

word...God in me and I in God...this passage, though action, bears great theological and philosophical import as well...just coming at it from another angle, another literary device.

So let's look at the scene, a scene of stark, yet marvelously colorful contrast. We look in on Jesus and his disciples going to a Jewish festival in Jerusalem...Now the Jews have all kinds of festivals...but the principal ones happened in Jerusalem...and they were lavish according to the historian Josephus...One would smell in the streets lamb cooking...I'm thinking with garlic, olive oil and rosemary...there would be bells ringing, drums and tambourines keeping rhythm...loud singing and raucous dancing...the place would be packed...no room in the streets or on rooftops...wine and beer flowing (yes they had something similar to beer)...the smell of spices and herbs in the air...the almost electric thrill of human community....like going to a big city for the first time....

But in stark contrast to the ecstasy of festival in just a brief turn of view in these few lines...we come upon a sordid scene...we come to the Bethzatha pool, which was one of several hot bubbling mineral pools around Jerusalem...a pool thought to have healing qualities...The legend of the pool was that an angel would come on certain occasions and cause the waters to stir...and the first one to enter the pool would be instantly healed...there are

invalids, blind, lame, paralyzed, sick...the least, the outcast... packed in here all around we are told...as crowded as the festival...filling all five niches surrounding the pool....they are outcasts because illness and disability renders one unclean in ancient Semitic culture....the hurt of the world there gathered, in contrast to the able bodied revelers participating in the festival...and then we are told that there is one at this biblical healthcare facility who has been coming to the pool, waiting, for thirty eight years to be healed...now we've all had to wait at a doctor's office, but this has got to be the Guinness record....this man for thirty eight years, healing just out of reach....And, to make matters worse, this facility is also understaffed...there is no one to help him into the pool...the system ain't working....and then Jesus who doesn't ask the man about his faith...the man probably had no idea who this Jesus was...Jesus does not ask for his papers, or an insurance card...Jesus now the proverbial angel roiling the waters...and Jesus tells him to stand, and he is healed....and the man stands up.... The Greek is unmistakable; the word for stand up is the same word for resurrection.... So a resurrection appearance here...the man enabled after thirty eight years to stand with new found dignity...this narrative will go on to tell us...but not in today's reading, that Jesus will bump into this man in the Temple, whole and well...the Temple a place he could not have gone

had he been ill...lo, for some thirty eight years...now whole and healed and at home, at festival...raised into new life, abundant new life that is new found community...This is a: the last shall come first story...that God loves us all, but the ones who cause God to get up in the morning...are the last and the least...the ones who suffer indignity...and indignity, God will not tolerate....Dignity is to stand welcomed and loved and whole.

Dear sisters and brothers, there is a question we must keep forever upon our lips: Who are *our* last...who are *our* lost...who are the ones who languish amid the indignities of our world, in contrast to the world's abundance...that is a question we Christian folk must ask...For far too long the church has offered answers only...I say we must ask the question....Do you want to be well?... Do you want to be whole?...Do you want to be welcome?...Do you wish to stand as equal? Who are these among us? Who are the unclean of our world? Who are the ones that forever have had to let others go before them?... The poor black, the poor white...the landless native American...the homeless mother....the addict on the streets....the sick with no access to healthcare....the undocumented immigrant...It's a long list.... and Alas, these days, getting longer....but these are the ones to whom we are given....to whom Jesus is given.

Good people of God it is we now who are the raised Christ, we the ones who bear this festival life...It is for us to stir the waters of healing for our world that languishes for lack of simple human care, for lack of being claimed worthy....no one to put them in the pool, as it were....We heirs of the sacred tradition....that God claims all for the joy of community; the place where we recognize our own dignity....and it is our joy as well to find the lost, to find them walking freely in God's house...home again...and it has been such a long wait...but now in the raised Christ, in the light of the raised one...the wait is over....God has made all days Sabbath...all days holy...all days of healing....all festival....no more thirty eight years....no more waiting....only festival....only the joy of knowing one belongs....and the time is God's time.... And that time is always now.