

## Community and l'Arche

Some years ago I volunteered for an organization in Clinton that provides homes for mentally handicapped adults. It's called The Arch and is part of a worldwide confederation called L'Arche – that's L apostrophe A-r-c-h-e, which means “Ark” in French. They all started with a former French naval officer named Jean Vanier who in 1965 invited two profoundly handicapped men to live with him. What was unique about Vanier's approach was that he created an environment where the handicapped could live with others in an intentional Christian community rather than an institutional environment. The core members, as they are called, live with assistants, who treat them as equals, as beloved children of God, which we all are.

The Clinton L'Arche community was founded in 1975, just ten years after Jean Vanier started his work. It is one of the oldest in the US. What attracted me was the love that resides within the community. As a teacher I lived in my head most of the time, and I loved being with people who live with their hearts. Core members lack most of the intellectual baggage we use to cover our emotional state. It's obvious when they're happy or mad or hungry or sad. My visits also helped the assistants because I was willing to do anything, whether trimming bushes or cleaning bathrooms or ironing shirts.

I tell you all this because The Arch and Jean Vanier taught me a lot about what it means to live in community, and I think today's readings are all about community. Living in a community is different from a family. You choose to be part of a community. You develop relationships with people who are not like you, and because of those relationships you stick with them even when you discover that they have different political or theological views. That's why I like to talk about church as a community rather than a family. We are all in this together. Joining a family can be difficult – just think of the first time you met a date's family. There's more anxiety in that encounter than I would like to see in anyone who comes to this church. I want us to be welcoming, as indeed I think we are.

Church as community comes through very clearly in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. They really struggled with community. There was not unified leadership because different groups had their own champions. Paul said they should all be looking at Christ instead. They should be working together as God's field, God's building. I love Paul's description of servant leadership: he planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. It reminded me of a quote from Jean Vanier's book *Community and Growth*, in which he picks up another of Paul's images:

A community is a body...The diagram for a community is not a pyramid but a circle. A community leader leads with others, and amongst others. The pyramid is the diagram for an army or for industry.

The diagram for a community is a circle. I think Paul would agree with me that at the center of the church community circle should be Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus shows us other ways in which a community can be fractured by human failings. Last week we heard him say that he came to fulfill the law, not abolish it, and today we have three examples of that. Each expands on one of the Ten Commandments in a characteristic way: “You have heard...but I say to you.” Each takes what is easy for us to avoid and puts it in terms that are much more difficult to live out.

It is easy to avoid murder. It is much harder to control anger and insults. That's why I spend little time on social media, which seem to abound in both. Jesus leaves no wiggle room. If there is a break between you and someone else, seek reconciliation. Do it now, even before you have put your offering envelope in the plate, because God wants you to come to the altar reconciled. Note that when Jesus says "brother or sister" he is not just talking about blood relatives but anyone with whom you are in relationship, especially fellow Christians.

The way Jesus extends the prohibition against adultery is even more difficult for us. Former President Jimmy Carter famously said in an interview that he had failed to honor this prohibition because yes, he had looked at a woman with lust and thus had committed adultery with her in his heart, according to Jesus. President Carter's honesty was refreshing – and these days, almost naïve. Jesus really uses hyperbole when he says to destroy hands or eyes that cause sin. Even the most literal interpreter of the Bible does not do this. The teaching on divorce is also difficult. Many churches view divorce less absolutely than what we heard in this passage. Yet in the Episcopal Church we continue to emphasize committed, Godly love rather than the convenient love found in our culture.

The third section, where Jesus says that your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No" has been taken by some Christian groups – the Quakers come to mind – that one should not swear at all. That's why they won't swear to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" in a courtroom. They know that this isn't about bad language. It's about taking oaths. Oaths are necessary in a culture of deceit. Jesus calls for a culture of integrity where oaths are no longer necessary.

So we see Jesus expanding the Law in three ways, all of which relate to the healthy functioning of a community: reconciliation instead of anger, committed Godly love, and plain speech.

What about the reading from Deuteronomy? It comes from one of the last discourses Moses is said to give to the people of Israel. He presents a stark choice. Choose life or choose death. With life comes obedience, love, and blessing. With death comes disobedience, adversity, and curses. Heaven and earth are called to witness this covenant, showing how important it is. What strikes me the most about this passage is the earnest desire of Moses, and of God as well, that the people of Israel choose life. Moses has had enough experience with them to know how likely they are to go astray, but he deeply wants them to remain in community with God and one another.

That's what God wants for all of us – to live in unity with God and one another. Today we heard three essential components of such a life: trust, reconciliation, and Godly love. They are all essential elements of a thriving community. As Jean Vanier writes:

A community is only really a community when all its members realise how deeply they need the gifts of others, and try to make themselves more transparent and more faithful in the exercise of their own gift. So a community is built by every one of its members, all in their own way.

A community is built by every one of its members. That means you, each one of you. You are an essential part of this community we call Trinity Cathedral. We need one another in order to see God, to worship God, to love God. That's what it means to be a Christian – to seek Christ in one another in trust, in reconciliation, and in Godly love. May God bless you and bless this community of which we are a part.

[Epiphany 6: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37.]