

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201906021533)

Jean Vanier

In nomine...

I. Intro

Jean Vanier died a few weeks ago. The Economist did a lovely obituary about him. I really enjoy The Economist's obituaries, and I particularly appreciate the sympathy and respect they frequently show for figures who lived out their faith in authentic ways. People like Jean Vanier.

Jean Vanier was not a doctor or a therapist or a researcher. He wasn't a clergyman. Vanier was a philosopher and a man of deep faith. In the 1960's when Vanier became aware of the plight of people with developmental disabilities, often institutionalized, he felt called by his faith to do something about that. He invited two such men to live with him and thus began a movement called "L'Arche." Like Noah's ark, at L'Arche there there was space for everyone: everyone belonged.

Vanier talked a lot about the challenges of living in community. Brené Brown recently put out a Netflix special in which she said something like, "I love humankind, but actual people... not so much." It's when we meet the actual persons that life gets hard, right? It's the annoying person in church. It's the husband who was so attractive when you first met, but who turned out to be thoughtless and self-concerned and not quite as capable of providing as he made himself out to be. It's the friend who is just a little too needy. These people annoy us chiefly because they make obvious our own weaknesses; they give the lie to our carefully nurtured self-perception that we are good people. When life rubs up against life, the veneer sometimes gets rubbed away and the reality shines out.

II. Thesis

These are the truths that we see at work in our reading from Acts today. Paul and company are still in Philippi, still staying at Lydia's house and planting the seeds of the Gospel in the community they have encountered there. A girl with a foreign spirit, a spirit of divination, follows them around, declaring that Paul is a servant of the most high God. After several days of this, Paul's patience wears thin, the veneer rubs off, and Paul heals this girl of her affliction, this spirit that today we might consider a developmental disability or a mental disturbance, not as much because he cares for her as because he is annoyed. That's what the Bible says!

And we never hear from the girl again. She disappears from the story, her part done. Our author just forgets about her. That is disturbing to me. Luke the writer and Paul the apostle, by all appearances, share exactly the same tendency that continues today to ignore and engage with as little as possible those who are different, who aren't neurotypical, who have mental or emotional stuck places or hang-ups or challenges. So we have in the Bible a negative lesson.

But there's some irony, a good plot twist in the story here. Paul rejects one messenger of God, one who testified to the people of Philippi, "These men are servants of the most high God." So instead he gets to deal with the slave girl's owners, who offer a different testimony: "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." Wow. Paul is denounced as evil, and loaded up with racial slurs to boot!

Paul is not able to silence these persons nearly as effectively as an underage slave girl. Instead, as a racial minority, he gets shunted into the criminal justice system, stripped, beaten, and thrown into jail. The slave girl had rubbed away the veneer and brought out Paul's temper. But the slave girl's owners got Paul and Silas beaten, breaking their very skin and covering them with blood and bruises.

There are times in our lives, issues in our lives, that are sometimes so deep and so painful that we prefer physical torment to dealing with what's really at issue.

III. Good News

And yet, here, finally, what the slave girl couldn't do, a beating with rods and being put in stocks seems to have accomplished. As Paul and Silas endure the heat of the jail and the flies drinking from their open wounds while they themselves are bound and unable to flick them away, Paul and Silas, we're told, begin praying and singing hymns to God. What were they praying for? Release, like God had done for other apostles in recent memory? Relief from their pain? Vindication before the court?

I wonder if they were praying for that slave girl. If Paul and Silas, free men with some civil standing, were physically abused by the wrath of the slave owners, what would become of the little girl, whose value as a source of income had been fatally compromised when Paul healed her of her illness?

We don't know what they were praying for, but isn't it fascinating that when the earthquake came and all the jail's doors were opened and chains loosed, not only did Paul and Silas not escape into the night. None of the other prisoners left either! So the jailer, whose life literally depended on the performance of his job, was discouraged from killing himself. Even more, because Paul & Silas had given him back his life, he was emboldened to surrender that redeemed life to Jesus, asking "What must I do to be saved" and being baptized into Christ that very night.

IV. Invitation

Paul and Silas might not have gotten everything right. They had their own issues and it's easy to see some of those when reading Acts and Paul's epistles. But they kept pursuing God, and God was able to use them to do amazing things.

Jean Vanier did things that would be unimaginable to many of us: he saw the image of God in people who had been discarded by the rest of society, and he embraced exactly those broken ones as his teachers. From them he learned how to encounter God and how to live the full life that God created him to live.

What do you think is hardest about serving others at Family Promise this past week or at Kitchen of Hope next weekend? It's not the physical labor. It's the challenge of encountering people different from ourselves, people in need, and wrestling with what that means about me. Am I really the good person I like to think I am? Does that play out in my encounter with this fellow human being?

St. Thomas' is not a museum. We are a workshop, where souls are being formed. Young souls and old souls. Your soul and my soul. And showing up on Sunday is a good place to start that soul formation. The Holy Eucharist is a clear, important, and outward symbol of what we're about. But don't get stuck there. There are many, many ways to get involved in the work of St. Thomas' and to give your soul space to grow and be shaped and transformed. Don't shortchange yourself. Get involved. Invest your time, your energy, your heart and, yes, your money. Don't be satisfied with "good enough." Don't be satisfied with "respectable." We're here to take it to another level, to the level of "disciple." Get in the game. Be a disciple of Jesus Christ. And remember it is people like Paul and Silas, people like that slave girl and her bold proclamation, people like Jean Vanier, and people like that annoying person you really wish went to a different church: these are the ones who will show us the way.

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