

Sunday, September 23, 2007 (Feast of St. Matthew)

Matthew 9:9-13 and Psalm 119: 33-40

The Rev. Nancy Casey Fulton, Deacon

“May my words be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Amen.”

“Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
and I shall keep it to the end.

Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law;
I shall keep it with all my heart.”

Our psalm today was also the psalm at my ordination, ten years ago this week. At that time, I was trying to develop an Episcopal campus group, and I was volunteering extensively for Hospice of Central Michigan and for the chaplain program at Central Michigan Community Hospital. My plate was quite full, but when the Rev. Ron Vredeveld, AIM's (Association for Interfaith Ministry) coordinator for ministry, asked me to serve on the board, I couldn't say no. Ron had been a mentor the previous year when I did clinicals in chaplaincy at the hospital, and I owed him big time.

Saying yes was the start of a journey that I never imagined I would take. I admired the work of AIM and had been aware of it almost from its inception. I had read the Dutch priest and theologian Henri Nouwen's writing on the subject of disabilities. But, I admit, I was not comfortable with persons who lived with cognitive impairments. And so I left it to others who felt called to this work.

But God had other thoughts for me. After I'd been on the board for perhaps a year, Ron began to ask me to help out with pastoral care, or leadership at the weekly Friendship Class, when he was away. Before too long I realized that I needed to teach regularly at the Friendship Class if I was to understand my work as a member of the board. And when I was hired by Hospice of Central Michigan in 1998, one of my first clients was Tom, a man with severe mental and physical impairments. It seemed that in spite of my own misgivings, I was heading in a new direction, one that surprised me and delighted me. Now, ten years down the road, I am still on this journey, and I'm inviting you to join me.

Lately I ran across a comment from Mohandas Gandhi that I think we can all carry with us into this quiet ministry with men and women whose lives

happen to be more “limited” than ours. He said: “Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.” In 1964, when Jean Vanier, frustrated with French institutions that “warehoused” adults with disabilities, invited two disabled men to live with him in his home, he must have believed that what he was doing was “insignificant.” He was motivated, of course, by the Gospel imperative to take care of the “least of these.” But he could not have imagined that his small gesture would lead to an international community, known as l’Arche (the ark), which now numbers more than 120 homes.

A l’Arche home centers around the love of Christ. Unlike group homes we see in this area, the staff live in the home as well, not only caring for the residents—known as “core members”—but sharing meals and chores with them. Henry and I visited a l’Arche home earlier this month in Edinburgh. Its name, Creel Ha (Creel House) reflects the Gospel imperative to be fishers of people. The home has only three “core members” just now, though a fourth, who had recently moved to a nursing home because he required greater care than Creel Ha could give him, joined us that evening for dinner. It is an ordinary residence, part of a modern, very plain block of flats across the road from an industrial estate in the waterfront area known as Leith. The caregivers come from many places: Poland, the Philippines, Montana, Germany, Scotland. They sign on for a year or two, then often move on to other work, usually in the caring professions. What they do might seem insignificant: living with and caring for three or four adults who are certainly at the margins of society as we know it. But they are part of a movement that has changed the way we look at adults with cognitive impairments.

Henri Nouwen was certainly the best-known spokesperson for l’Arche. He came to believe that living in a l’Arche community as pastor and caregiver was more important than being a university professor. Of course, he never gave up teaching, for his greatest gift was to articulate his own struggle as he moved from academe to the l’Arche community of Daybreak in Toronto. Some of his academic friends—themselves persons of faith—never did understand his message that this quiet, hidden ministry was at the heart of Jesus’ teaching. But others who came to Toronto to visit Nouwen were transformed by the experience.

And transformation is what we should be about as Christians. Jesus speaks about such transformation in today's reading from Matthew: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" In the history of the human race, persons with disabilities have been shunned, considered sick, in need of healing. And in some ways, that is true: their bodies and minds don't always work in ways that we call "normal." To survive, they often require care from others who are more able. But in ministering to them, we are also healed from our disabilities: our hardness of heart, our blindness to God's presence in every one of God's children, our adherence to the world's measures of success. We are transformed.

Sue Monk Kidd, author of *The Secret Life of Bees* and many works on the life of the spirit, tells this story:

"As I sat in my den with the television droning in the background, I read about an autistic child who could not speak. She communicated within her silent world by writing on her computer screen. When a network news correspondent came to interview her and asked her what it was like to live with such silence, she wrote, 'I hear God's finest whispers.' Surprised, the correspondent responded, 'And what does God say?' The girl typed on her keyboard, 'He says he loves me too.'"

I teach Friendship Class because I love the congregation and the students. I lead worship at the Lynnwood Home because I love the residents and caregivers. And I believe with all my heart that Jesus loves them too, and that Jesus wants me to remind them of that truth every time we meet. And so I speak of God's love, and those I minister to remind me in their own way—sometimes verbal, sometimes not—that Jesus loves me too. That is what Jean Vanier did when he began l'Arche 43 years ago, and what his disciples continue to do in so many parts of the world. That is what Ron Vredeveld and everyone involved with AIM does every week at class, every Sunday at the Mt. Pleasant Center, all week long in visits to group homes and residents at the Center. That is what we as a congregation can do, in our quiet way, as we move into greater involvement with AIM's ministry.

We live in such a complicated world: we can fly to London in seven hours; we can communicate instantly via the internet with friends thousands of miles away; the list is endless, and overwhelming. But the message of Jesus

is simple, direct, refreshing, challenging: God loves us; God loves all of God's creation. And it is our calling as children of God to carry that message wherever we go. We do just that whenever we distribute communion in AIM worship: we give the bread and the juice with these words: "Remember, Jesus loves you." We will speak those words during communion today. I will also dismiss you with those words. And, with God's help, we will learn how God wants us to take those words to our brothers and sisters who happen to be more disabled—or differently disabled—than we are. With God's help, we will be able to remember each day that Jesus loves every one of us.

we will be able to live each day strengthened because we know that Jesus loves us