

Downward Mobility
Fifth in a Summer Sermon Series – Sabbath Living
August 19, 2007

Matthew 19: 16 - 26

16 Then someone came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good?" There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter life, keep the commandments."

"Which ones?" the man inquired. And Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to Jesus, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?"

21 Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

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Living in the moment. That's where we left off last Sunday. Mindfulness. Being mindful of the present – the here and now. Becoming finders rather than seekers. The time is now. We are already home in God. I asked you to practice "mindfulness" this past week. Would anyone share an experience that you had being "mindful?"

This morning, as part of our series on Sabbath living, I want us to ponder the concept of simplifying our lives. Sometimes, we simply have too many things to take care of and not enough time to do it. We continue to add more and more "stuff" to our lives. Like an overgrown garden, our lives become too crowded, too overgrown, too crammed. There is no space for life itself, no space for Sabbath moments.

When I plant a vegetable garden, I am guilty of over planting and have a real hard time thinning. At first, I want to plant enough seeds so that if some don't germinate, there will still be plenty of plants. But of course, most of the seeds do germinate and then there are too many seedlings. It is agony to pluck up some of those seedlings in order to make room for the other seedlings to grow. But if those carrots or radishes or beans aren't thinned, they will never grow, or if they do, they will merely produce lots of greens and no vegetable.

So it is with our lives. We plant so many seeds, and they seem so small. They take up hardly any space at all. But everything, Wayne Muller points out, needs space to grow. Children, a home, a career, a project, a hobby, a spiritual practice - everything needs space and everything needs time. And as each grows, each one takes from the other, until nothing grows beneath the surface. Life becomes all foliage and greenery above ground and nothing to show for it beneath. Sooner or later, it all withers from lack of nourishment. (p. 184, Muller, *Sabbath*)

Jesus tried to teach us, by the way he lived, what really matters in life. Take this morning's gospel lesson for example. Jesus urges the rich young man to sell all of his possessions, to **really** thin out his life! And then, to give all of the money to the poor. How unreasonable is this? Even the young man, who lives by all the commandments, goes away sad because it is just too much to ask of him.

Now I would argue with Jesus and say that not everyone can sell all of their possessions and give everything to the poor. I think that such a life of poverty is a calling from God that only a few people have. Mother Teresa knew that calling. She took a vow of poverty. Cheryl Avery is another. Cheryl knew that God called her to provide housing and education and humane work for families that lived in the Managua Dump. It was as if she took a vow of poverty as she sold her home and her possessions so that she could buy acres of land in Nicaragua for this community that she named Chacocente. But people like Mother Teresa and Cheryl Avery are rare.

Perhaps it is more realistic to think that Jesus wants all of us to get our priorities straight, to thin out the things that keep us from embracing Sabbath living, perhaps even to live below our means so that there is money to give away. Remember how John Wesley advised his followers? He said, "Earn all you can so that you can save all you can so that you can give all you can."

Henri Nouwen, a writer, teacher, spiritual guide and Roman Catholic priest, is another example of someone who thinned out many of his earthly possessions so that he could live a life that was one with God's love. It was Nouwen who coined the term "downward mobility." He taught that in contrast to the *upward mobility* of worldly living, the spiritual life is one of *downward mobility* and Nouwen lived what he taught.

Born in Holland, on January 24, 1932, Nouwen felt called to the priesthood at a very young age. He was ordained in 1957 as a diocesan priest and studied psychology at the Catholic University in Holland. In 1964 he moved to the United States to study at the Menninger Clinic.

During the 60's, he was inspired by the American civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Soon his career took him to a variety of teaching positions at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard, and ongoing involvement in American peace and social justice movements. In all of these, Henri looked for ways to help people deepen their spiritual foundations and cultivate community. He is one of the most popular and prolific spiritual writers of the later twentieth century. In 1985, Nouwen spent a year at L'Arche in France. L'Arche is a place where mentally challenged people and their assistants attempt to live together according to the gospel. This let him to commit his life to the mentally challenged people at Daybreak, a sister community in Toronto. I was so taken by Nouwen's own explanation of his "downward mobility" journey, that I want to read to you what he wrote.

"Journey to L'Arche" October 1, 1989 (found on the internet)

I want to share a little bit of my own journey to L'Arche - a journey from an academic world to a world with mentally handicapped people. I thought you might like to know how it all came about.

One of the things that I am becoming aware of more and more is that from the very beginning of my life there have been two voices. One voice saying, "Henri, be sure you make it on your own, be sure you can do it yourself, be sure you become an independent person. Be sure that I can be proud of you." And, another voice saying "Henri, whatever you are going to do, even if you don't do anything very interesting in the eyes of the world, be sure you stay close to the heart of Jesus, be sure you stay close to the love of God." You can sort of guess which voice was whose. But, I guess we all hear these voices to some degree—the voice that calls you upward and says, "Make something of your life, be sure you have a good career." Then, a voice that says, "Be sure you never lose touch with your vocation." There is a little bit of a struggle there, a tension.

First of all, I tried to solve it by becoming a sort of hyphenated priest. Do you know what that is? It is sort of a priest/ psychologist. I thought I could have them both. People would say, "Well we don't really like these priests around" and I could say, "Oh well, I'm a psychologist. I'm clearly in touch with things so don't laugh at me." I tried very hard to keep those two voices together—the voice that called me upwards and the voice that called me downwards.

In the beginning of my life I pleased my father and mother immensely by studying, then teaching and then becoming somewhat known, going to Notre Dame, Yale, Harvard. I pleased a lot of people doing so and also pleased myself. I felt good about it. It was a beautiful time.

But somewhere on the way up, I wondered if I was still really in touch with my own vocation. I started noticing it when I suddenly found myself speaking to thousands of people about humility and wondered what they were all thinking about me. I said, "My goodness, here I am talking about love and here I am talking about God's goodness and here I'm talking about humility to all these people from all over the place."

I came home and was alone. I didn't really feel well. I didn't really feel peaceful. I didn't really feel very centered. Actually, I felt lonely. I didn't know where I belonged. I was pretty good on the stage but not really always that good in my own heart. I started to wonder if my career hadn't really gotten into the way of my vocation. It was a very anguishing time in my life—a time of real pain. I felt guilt and confusion. Here I was talking about God and I was not feeling really well. So, I started to pray very simply. I remember saying this prayer over and over again, "Lord Jesus, let me know where You want me to go and I will follow you. But, please be clear about it. No ambiguous messages!" I prayed and prayed.

I was still living at Yale in New Haven, Connecticut. One morning at 9:00 o'clock, there was someone pushing the bell of my little apartment. I went to open the door and there was a young woman standing there.

She said, "Are you Henri Nouwen?" I said, "Yes, I am." She said, "I've come to bring you the greetings of Jean Vanier." Jean Vanier was quite unknown to me. I had heard that he was the founder of the L'Arche Communities and that he worked with mentally handicapped people but that was about all I knew.

I said, "Oh, that's nice. Thank you. What can I do for you?" "Oh," she said, "no, no, no, I've come to bring you the greetings of Jean Vanier."

I said, "Thank you, that's nice. Do you want me to talk somewhere or write something or give a lecture?" "No, no, no," she said, "I've come to bring you the greetings of Jean Vanier."

By that time I said, "Where are you from?"

"Oh, I'm from Mobile, Alabama."

I said, "You've come from Mobile, Alabama, to New Haven to give me the greetings of Jean Vanier? Isn't that a little much?"

She said, "Can I come in?"

I had sort of forgotten my manners and I said, "Please come in but I have to leave. I have to work, to teach, to meet all these people."

She said, "Oh, you go and I'll stay." So, she moved into my room and I left for the University.

When I came home that night—I had sort of forgotten about her—I saw something I had never seen before. I walked into my room. The table was beautifully decorated with a lovely white cloth over it, candles, a bottle of wine, flowers, two plates with nice silver. I just looked and said, "What's this?"

She was standing there laughing and said, "We're going to have dinner together."

I said, "But all these things, where did they all come from?"

"I found them in your own cupboards."

I said, "My stuff?"

"Yes, it's yours. You haven't even noticed that you have it. Let's have dinner."

She and I sat there having this delicious dinner in my own house with my own things, and I thought, "What's happening?" She stayed three days and helped me with all sorts of things. Finally she said, "I have to go. I just wanted you to know that Jean Vanier sends his greetings."

When she had left, I sat in my chair and thought, "Now, this is something special. Somewhere God is answering my prayer. This is like an angel coming to you bringing a message and calling you to something new." I wasn't asked to take a new job. I wasn't asked to do another project. I wasn't asked to be useful to anybody. I was simply invited to come to know another human being who had heard of me.

It took about three or four years before I really met Jean. We met silently at a retreat in which no words were spoken. At the very end Jean said, "Henri, maybe we, our community of handicapped people, can offer a home to you, can offer a place to you where you are really safe, where you can meet God in a whole new way." It was an incredible experience because he didn't ask me to be useful; he didn't ask me to work for handicapped people; he didn't say he needed another priest; he didn't say any of these things. He said, "Maybe we can offer a home to you."

Gradually I realized that I had to take that call very seriously. After a few years, I finally realized that the time of being at the university was over. I had struggled to go to different places—maybe I should go to Latin America, maybe I should work with the poor—I tried all sorts of things. Suddenly I realized Jean Vanier's call was a real call. It came from God. God had sent someone to me and I should take it seriously.

I left the university and went to France. After a year in France, I was called to become a priest at the Daybreak Community in Toronto which is a L'Arche Community (the word L'Arche means the Arc of Noah) a community of about a hundred people, fifty handicapped people and fifty assistants. L'Arche is a community of mentally handicapped people and their assistants who try to live in the spirit of the beatitudes. So I went to Toronto.

The first thing they asked me was to work with Adam—of all names. I had to work with Adam! It sounded like working with humanity. Adam, a twenty-four-year-old man, was very, very, very handicapped. He couldn't speak. He couldn't walk. He couldn't dress or undress himself. You never really knew if he knew you or not. His body was very deformed. His back was distorted and he suffered from continuous epileptic seizures. And, they said, "Henri, we would like you to work with Adam." I was really afraid. "Don't worry."

Here I was a university professor. I had never touched anybody very closely and here was Adam. Hold him! At 7: 00 in the morning I went to his room and there he was. I took off his clothes, held him and walked with him very carefully. I was frightened because I thought he might have a seizure. I walked with him to the bath and tried to lift him into the bath tub - he was as heavy as I am. I started to throw water over him, wash him, shampoo his hair and take him out again to brush his teeth, comb his hair and bring him back to his bed. I dressed him in what clothes I could find and took him to the kitchen. I sat him at the table and started to give him his breakfast. The only thing he could really do was lift the spoon up to his mouth. I was sat there and watched him. It took about an hour. I had never been with anyone for a whole hour, just seeing if they could eat.

Something happened. I was frightened for about a week, a little less frightened after two weeks. After three or four weeks, I started to realize that I was thinking about Adam a lot and that I was looking forward to being with him. Suddenly I knew something was happening between us that was very intimate, very beautiful and that was of God. I don't know how to say it well.

Somehow I started to realize that this poor, broken man was the place where God was speaking to me in a whole new way. Gradually I discovered real affection in myself and I thought that Adam and I belonged together and that it was so important.

I want you to understand a little better what happened between Adam and me. Maybe I can say it very simply. Adam taught me a lot about God's love in a very concrete way. First of all, he taught me that being is more important than doing, that God wants me to be with God and not to do all sorts of things to prove that I'm valuable. My whole life had been doing, doing, doing, so people would finally recognize that I was okay. I'm such a driven person who wants to do thousands and thousands of things so that I can somehow finally show that I'm a worthwhile being. Here I was with Adam and Adam said, "I don't care what you do as long as you will be with me." It wasn't easy just to be with Adam. It isn't easy to simply be with a person without accomplishing much.

Then he taught me something else. He taught me that the heart is more important than the mind. Well, if you've come from a university, that's hard to learn. Minds thinking, having arguments, discussing writing, doing, that is what a human being is. Didn't Thomas Aquinas say that human beings are thinking animals? Well, Adam didn't think. Adam had a heart, a real human heart. I suddenly realized that what makes a human being human is the heart with which he can give and receive love. Adam was giving me an enormous amount of God's love and I was giving Adam of my love. There was an intimacy that went far beyond words or far beyond activity. I suddenly realized that Adam was not just a disabled person, less human than me or other people. He was a fully human being, so fully human that God even chose him to become the instrument of this Holy Love. He was so vulnerable, so weak, so empty, that he became just heart, the heart where God wanted to dwell, where God wanted to stay and where God wanted to speak to those who came close to God's vulnerable heart. Adam was a full human being, not half human or less human. I discovered that. Suddenly I understood what I had heard in Latin America about the preferential option for the poor. Indeed, God loves the poor and God loves Adam very specially. God wanted to dwell in his broken person in order to speak from that vulnerability into the world of strength, and call people to become vulnerable.

Finally, Adam was telling me something that is sort of obvious. Doing things together is more important than doing things alone. I came from a world that is very much concerned with doing things on your own, but here was Adam, so weak and vulnerable. I couldn't help Adam alone. We needed all sorts of people. We had a person from Brazil, people from the United States, Canada, Holland—young, old living together in one house around Adam and other handicapped people. Suddenly I realized that Adam, the weakest among us, created community. He brought us together and his needs, his vulnerability, made us into a true community. We could not have survived with all these different characters together if he hadn't been there. His weakness became our strength. His weakness made us into a loving community. His weakness invited us to forgive one another, to calm our arguments and to be with him. I think it is very important that God revealed God's self through Adam, telling me, "Henri, being is more important than doing; the heart is more important than the mind and living in community is a lot more important than trying to do it all on your own."

That is what I'm learning. I've been there only three years and it's not easy. I make a lot of mistakes. In many ways, Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard were easier. I went through a lot of inner-pain and discovered my own handicaps, my own struggles and my own anguish. I now know it is a vocation for me and I want to stay there. I hope I can stay there and be faithful.

And Nouwen did just that until his sudden and unexpected death in September of 1998.

To "thin" our lives is to make room for God's intentions for us. I'm not asking myself or anyone of you to take a vow of poverty this morning, unless it is your calling from God. But I will ask you all to do some "thinning" this week. I'm placing this gardening tool that's used for weeding on our altar visual as an invitation for you to do some "thinning" of your own life. Find something or several things that you no longer need and discard them. Give them away if they can be useful to someone else or throw them away if they are not usable. Reduce "things" and make some room for God. That is what God expects of us rich people. To get our priorities straight and to find time and space for Sabbath living. May it be so. Alleluia. Amen.

