

**Sermon for Zion, May 19, 2019** – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

**Hymns:** 313 – O Worship The King; 303 – My heart adores you;

635 – Brother, Sister, let me serve you; 399 – Spirit of Gentleness

**Scripture:** Matthew 11:28-30; Colossians 3:12-14; Galatians 5:22-23;

**Sermon Title:** Fruit of the Spirit – The Power of Gentleness

***Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)***

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

***Colossians 3:12-14 (NIV)***

*Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

***Galatians 5:22-23 (NRSV)***

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.*

Here are some headlines a week ago from newspapers around the world:

- Washington Post: “With the passing of Jean Vanier on May 7, the sum of the world’s welcoming kindness diminished appreciably.”
- New York Times: “Jean Vanier showed us the great strength of tenderness and vulnerability and weakness, which is Christ’s message.”
- Globe and Mail: Jean Vanier’s global life of service was always grounded in the mind and the heart.
- Toronto Star: Jean Vanier challenged what it means to be human; He did not merely preach compassion, but lived it every day.
- National Post: “Jean Vanier was a giant of a man, towering over all he encountered. He was able to see farther than most. But he spent his life bent over, better to hear the little ones, better to serve those weighed down by neglect or indifference, better to kneel before the God who created them all.”

Who was Jean Vanier? And why this rare outpouring of appreciation throughout the world for a Christian figure? Here's a summary from the CBC:

*In the early 1960s, after a career in the navy and in academia, Vanier (son of Canadian Governor-General George Vanier) began visiting French asylums. The horror of what he saw helped shape his mission for the rest of his life. In 1964, he invited two men with developmental disabilities to live with him in a small house he had bought in a village north of Paris. He called the house L'Arche — after Noah's Ark. “Essentially, they wanted a friend,” Vanier said. “They were not very interested in my knowledge or my ability to do things, but rather they needed my heart and my being.”*

*Their community grew and more people arrived, with or without disabilities, to live together. Today, that house is part of a network of more than 150 communities across the world, in 38 countries.*

*Together, they make up L'Arche International — an alternative model of living, where those with disabilities are treated as participants in a community, rather than as patients.*

*But for Vanier, the disabled were more than just patients in need of help: they were teachers to those who lived and worked with them — “Amazingly beautiful people with gifts about love and tenderness and life and caring and friendship.”*

Vanier wrote 30 books, won countless honours, was a perennial nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, was named a Companion of the Order of Canada and awarded France's Legion of Honour and the Templeton Prize, among many others, and was a friend and inspiration to thousands of parents, colleagues all over the world. Yet as Ian Brown wrote in the *Globe and Mail* (May 7, 2019):

*“His most significant accomplishment, however, was to establish the unique value of an intellectually disabled life. In L'Arche houses, residents live on equal footing and status with the assistants who help them, and where everyone sits down to at least one meal a day around a common table — a simple rite that defines the entire project — Mr. Vanier demonstrated that the able-bodied need the fragility of the intellectually disabled as much as, and probably more than, they need us.*

*“It is not just a question of performing good deeds for those who are excluded,” Mr. Vanier wrote, “but of being open and vulnerable to them in order to receive the life that they can offer; it is to become their friends. If we start to*

*include the disadvantaged in our lives and enter into heartfelt relationships with them, they will change things in us. ... They will then start to affect our human organizations, revealing new ways of being and walking together.”*

*In the long, bleak history of human disability, mankind’s most disenfranchised human beings suddenly had demonstrable value, Mr. Vanier declared. They taught him “to recognize and accept my own weaknesses and vulnerability. I no longer have to pretend I am strong and clever or better than others. I am like everybody else, with my fragility and my gifts.” It made for a less aggressive posture toward the world – a posture that seems even more relevant today.*

*The longer he lived with the intellectually disabled, the more Mr. Vanier understood their deep, though often hidden value. He began from a concern about what society could do for people with disabilities, but quickly discovered what people with disabilities could bring to society. “L’Arche has provoked a Copernican revolution,” a bishop in Rome later said to Mr. Vanier. “Up until now, we have spoken about doing good to the poor. But at L’Arche, you say that it is the poor who do us good. It will take a long time before this idea is integrated into the church.” Somehow, Mr. Vanier’s risky idea had worked.*

Ian Brown writes of Jean Vanier with more than a journalist’s eye. He writes from personal experience. Brown’s own son, Walker, has severe developmental challenges. Brown writes (CBC May 7):

*Every two weeks, I go up to my son Walker's house and I get him and I bring him back home for a couple of days and we go back up there.*

*He lives with seven people — none of whom can speak, and many of whom have quite severe intellectual and physical disabilities. And every time I go up there, I am petrified. I am ashamed to admit this, but it is true. I think, "I don't know what to do. I can't fix anybody." Their isolation terrifies me and makes me sad.*

*And every time I walk in there I remember what Vanier said, which is, "They don't want you to save them. They have two questions: 'Could you love me?' and 'Could you be my friend?'"*

*If you can stop trying make them into something you want them to be and accept them as they are, then you can be accepted as you are and you can find this great equality that, I think, was the centre of Vanier's theory, the centre of the way he lived. It was a pleasure and an honour to know him.*

Vanier explained how ordinary people could live the spirit of L'Arche:

- *“Try and find somebody who is lonely. Go and visit a little old lady who has no friends or family. Bring her flowers. People say, ‘but that’s nothing.’ It is nothing — but it’s also everything. It always begins with small little things. It all began in Bethlehem. That was pretty small.”*
- *“We have a fear of accompanying people who are weak .... They are seen as a financial and social liability. We see the leprosy but not the person ... We want to cure, but are we prepared to care?”*
- *He argued that the greatest threat to peace is a widening gap between rich and poor, strong and weak. But rather than urging people to open their wallets to the less fortunate, Vanier asked them to open their hearts. “It’s not a question of doing something, but of recognizing that each person has a gift to give.”*
- *“I found God’s presence in prayer. I also found God in the weak and the poor, because they cry out for love and friendship. They call forth love in us. And God is love.”*

For Vanier, his commitment to value the lives of the intellectually disabled was a direct outgrowth of his profound Christian faith, and his attentiveness to the words and example of Jesus. His life of prayer and service bore incredible fruit in lives and communities throughout the world, and his life is a prime example of the Fruit of the Spirit: is there a better example in our world today of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, than the life and work of Jean Vanier? And reading through dozens of obituaries published in his memory, of all of these attributes, it is “gentleness” which seems to most typify the man. Not to the exclusion of the others; but perhaps that which shone most brightly.

Gentleness is not something we often consider as a primary Christian attribute. But the Apostle Paul did; not only did he include it in his list of the Fruit of the Spirit, he also highlighted it in his letter to the Christians in Colossae, in his summary of proper Christian conduct (Colossians 3:12-14):

*Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone.*

*Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

How should we live as the children of God? That's how. And that's how Jean Vanier lived, and in so doing, changed many lives, and inspired many more.

Jesus, in speaking of gentleness, said this (Matthew 11:28-30): *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

*“Take my yoke upon you.”* When I hear these words, I think of being tied to the plough; I think of hard work, of straining under the load. But in looking at this passage afresh, I've come to a different understanding, and maybe, too, an insight into what enabled a man like Jean Vanier to do the work to which he committed his life.

I've always believed that a yoke is the shoulder brace and harness by which a horse or ox is tied to a plough. But in the Biblical context, it is most often understood as my Oxford Dictionary defines it: *“a wooden crosspiece that is fastened over the necks of two animals and attached to the plough or cart that they are to pull.”* That definition is shared by most dictionaries, as well as by most Biblical passages. A yoke is used to join two together. It is used to share the burden. It is used to share the work.

With that understanding, I came to a new interpretation of the words of Jesus. *“Take my yoke upon you,”* I now understand as, *“Let's share this work together.”* When we follow Jesus; when we learn from the example of his life; when we do the work he has called us to do; we do not do it alone. He shares the work, he shares the burden, with us. Not only that, we share the yoke not with one who is dragging and pulling us hither and yon, making unreasonable demands, stretching us beyond the breaking point, but one who is *“gentle and humble in heart.”*

At one of our Foodgrains celebrations, I had the opportunity to walk behind a horse-drawn plough. Technically, I was the operator, but fortunately, the horse knew what he was doing, and I more or less followed along. I said to the farmer

afterwards, “That wasn’t as hard as I thought.” He said, “That’s because the horse did all the work. Two horses are a different challenge, though,” he said. “They have to learn how to work together. The more experienced horse has to teach the other what’s what, or they’ll end up working against each other, rather than together. A good team can plough much more than twice the field as one working alone. ”

Think of those words now, as I re-read this passage of Jesus. *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

Here’s Jean Vanier’s secret: the incredible work he did, he did not do alone. He was yoked together with Jesus. He learned from Jesus. He learned gentleness, and reached out to the neglected, the undervalued, the friendless, the alone. He laid aside the pride of his ancestry, the status of his birth, the wealth of his family, the accomplishments of his career, the power of his intellect, and traded it for gentleness, for simplicity, for humility of heart, a humility which does not mean thinking less of yourself, but instead thinking more of others. And he, as he said time and again, found purpose. Found joy. And found rest for his soul.

Are you weary and heavy burdened? Share your life – your burdens – your worries – with Jesus. Take his yoke upon you, and allow him to share the load. See where he might lead you. Follow him. Learn from him. Be guided by him. Live in gentleness and humility. You will discover that *“his yoke is easy and his burden is light.”* And you will find purpose; you will find direction; *“you will find rest for your souls.”*

For Jesus; for his friend Jean Vanier; for the gentleness with which he lived his life; and for all that Jesus can do in and through us, as we share our lives with him: thanks be to God. Amen.