



## **“Stinkiness”**

A homily by the Very Reverend Michael R. Ruk

Sun., May 12, 2019

Gospel this week: John 10:22-30

The Christian church lost two giants. Not popes, or bishops, or priests, or monks, or nuns, but two laypeople who really were amazing voices for what it truly means to be a shepherd.

A lot of times when we think about this Good Shepherd Sunday – and we hear something about the Good Shepherd every fourth Sunday of Easter – a lot of times people lift up priests or bishops or people discerning ordained ministry. But these two individuals were shepherds in their own right. And I wanted to reflect upon them and their role of being a shepherd, and also *our* responsibility of being shepherds.

The first person I want to reflect upon is someone I’ve talked about before, and that’s Jean Vanier. Jean Vanier died at age 90 this week. He was Canadian, and he had a career in the government.

He decided to give up that career in the government to live with people who were mentally and physically disabled. And I’m not saying just come in and help them as an aide, but actually live with them as a family. He formed a community called L’Arche, which means “ark,” like Noah’s Ark.

It’s a beautiful community. If you’ve ever come in contact with these houses, they’re not just social-service agencies or anything like that. They’re truly families, communities, people living together – some able-bodied, some less-than-able-bodied. They live together in this beautiful example of community and family.

For most people, these individuals would be people that would be so challenging, so difficult, people that people avoid. But what Vanier said was that it’s important to live with these

people, to be with them in their woundedness, in their fragility. By living with them, by sharing their sorrows, by sharing their joys, it's something beautiful.

That's what Vanier really wanted to stress, this idea that shepherding people requires being with people, living with people. We hear that expression a lot of times that Pope Francis speaks about: A shepherd needs to smell like their sheep – to be with them, to embrace them.

That was one thing I saw when I was in the Holy Land this past winter. Shepherds are actually one of the poorest occupations in the Middle East. These are people that really live on the edges. Because people don't want to hang out with you if you smell like sheep, period.

If you drive throughout Israel and Palestine, you see corrugated metal shacks, basically. And that's where the Bedouin shepherds live. They just scrape an existence by. But more importantly, for us, they live there every day with their sheep. They literally live with them. They sheep aren't there, and you're over here. They sheep and the shepherd are one – in a nice stinky, smelly mess.

I think the idea of Vanier and the shepherd are very much the same. Sometimes the only way you can really experience someone, and their life, and their journey, is just being with them.

A lot of times people ask me, "How do I help someone who's suffering, or who's dying, when I don't know what the answers are, or what the right words to say or not say are?" And I would say, just be like the shepherd. Just be there. You don't have to offer any words of wisdom or advice. Just be there.

And I think that's the important image that we need to take from this Sunday. It's that being the shepherd requires you to just be there. To be there when life gets stinky. And trust me, when I came close to some of these shepherds, deodorant wasn't the thing. Sheep and goats are not that attractive when you come close to them.

So be there with people in their pain. Be there with people in their joys. Be with people. Just be.

The other person I wanted to reflect upon this day is someone on the opposite end of the spectrum. And that's Rachel Held Evans. Rachel was not 90; she was 37 when she died this week.

Rachel's journey, I think, is very important for us. She was raised in a very conservative evangelical family. And she realized that that's not where the spirit was calling her to be.

She was a blogger. That's how she did her ministry, her shepherding. She blogged about her spiritual journey out of the evangelical church, and struggled with some of the spiritual practices and theologies of her early years. But she moved beyond them, and she landed where? In the Episcopal Church. And she just, for the last couple of years, really found her home in the Episcopal Church – its history, and its liturgy, and its traditions.

She in many ways shepherded people in a different way, but in some ways similar. She wanted to be with her people as people had their journey. She wanted to embrace people through their struggles, and their falls, and their failures, that the strict evangelicalism of her youth, where there was just black and white, many times morphed into many shades of gray. And we all know that gray is probably God's favorite color.

Sometimes we need people to help us through that process. Not with judgment, not with condemnation, but help people gently through the process.

In many ways, this 90-year-old and this 37-year-old were the same person. Sure, they looked a lot different, their lives were different. One was American, one was Canadian; one was older, one was younger; one was Catholic, one was Episcopalian. But both of their lives were about shepherding, about being with people through their struggles.

It's interesting, I was perusing some of their writings this week. And both of them were basically saying the same thing. This comes from Jean Vanier: "I was struck by how sharing our weaknesses and difficulties is more nourishing to others than sharing qualities and successes. Growth begins when we share our weaknesses."

Rachel writes this: "We are closer to God with our vulnerabilities than with our safe successes." We are closer to God with our vulnerabilities.

In both cases, Rachel and Jean realized that life is about sharing our weaknesses. Those weaknesses could be physical. Those weaknesses could be emotional. Those weaknesses could be spiritual.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, let's realize that being a shepherd doesn't require a collar, or a mitre, or a crosier. It just requires us to be who we are. To be with people in their successes, but also in their brokenness, in their failures – and sometimes even their stinkiness.