

Second Sunday

This is my second Sunday. A year ago I was asked to deliver a message or something like that. My wife began referring to the message as a sermon. I will leave sermons to the duly qualified.

According to the lectionary we are in “ordinary time.” The liturgical year begins with Advent and “ordinary time” is “time after Pentecost”. I have taken the liberty of writing free of the liturgical calendar. But, certainly not free of the bible.

In the context of the Last Supper and after Judas had departed, Jesus said to his disciples: “Where I am going, you cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another as I have loved you.” His coda revealed what was new: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Jesus, in the Gospel according to John, elaborated on the command to love: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends.”

Jesus’ commands are bracing, uncomfortable, humbling. They also seem impossibly challenging, yet for me, they are a crucial proof of divinity. They go well beyond philosophy or human

imagination. You will not find the insistence of high-risk love in Plato's writing or the imaginary works of J. R. R. Tolkien.

It is no surprise then, when the risen Lord commissions his disciples to "go and make disciples of all the nations." Or when Jesus insists that those who acknowledge Him as the Christ should care for the poor and the powerless.

Jesus set the ground rules. His mission was to be universal, not sectarian or tribal, open to all. His commandments were not transitory. In short, He was not man. He was emphasizing his demands on our humanity—His design.

As the noted theologian C. S. Lewis observed about Jesus:
"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God."

Lewis continues, "That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a

madman or something worse.

The Acts of the first century AD were first the work of those who were chosen. They had walked and talked with him. They saw the reactions to His extraordinary works and stories. They saw the crucifixion—the facts on the ground as we say today--the empty grave and were with Jesus on the Pentecost. They were prepared to act sacrificially.

And they had an important ally—the Holy Spirit. I wonder how many persons today would like to have lived the life of one of His disciples?

“Now, before I continue to talk about the foundation of belief and faith, let me quote from a sermon by the great Scottish Minister, George MacDonald, who C. S. Lewis called his “Master”.

MacDonald said “Now, whenever you begin to speak of anything true, divine, heavenly or supernatural, you cannot speak of it at all without speaking about it wrongly in some measure. We have no words, we have no phrases, and we have no possible combination of sentences that do more than represent fragmentarily the greatness of the things that belong to the very vital being of our nature”.

Let me continue with McDonald's warning, a recurring echo in my mind.

I must admit a fascination with authentic acts of sacrifice. I need reinforcement. It is hard for me to rely exclusively on text that is at least over 2000 years old. I believe most of us are attentive to how the Holy Spirit works in our own lives and are curious about how it works in the lives of others.

In David Brooks recent book, *The Second Mountain*, he refers to annunciation moments—circumstances when people gain a searing and perhaps life changing insight into who they are and their calling.

Biblically the Holy Spirit reveals and then remains an insistent voice. Belief in the Holy Spirit must be, I think, partly circumstantial. How do we account for its presence? How do we know it is at work? Can a person believe in God—really believe—if there is never a mystical moment in their lives? What about the person who regards the words of the Bible as inerrant, but experiences a mystical dryness?

I suspect as Brooks defines an annunciation moment, we can all look back and discover one or more in our own lives.

I am frequently reminded of discovering that the great psychologist Karl Menninger advised persons with mental anguish to leave the house and help someone. Menninger's wisdom, Jesus's insistence.

And I can recall more mystical senses. I still say fly fishing is sport in paradise. There are certainly moments in the stream which convince me of a profound, indeed divine design at work.

And how should I characterize those moments of deep emotion when I sense truly transcendent expressions of humanity by others?

Yet we know God's ways are often puzzling and indeed as noted biblically, "holy mysteries." The New International Version Concordance lists 31 instances of the word mystery or mysteries in the Bible.

So how do we go beyond mystery? Well at the most absolute level faith is required. But, of course, faith has its imperatives. You won't find the word "faith" in an attorney's closing argument before a jury—she will speak of evidence.

Are annunciation moments evidence? I believe they are and that the “best evidence” is gathered when we practice the commandment to love. Or, when we turn to God to help us through a difficult moment in our lives. Few invite suffering, but I suspect few deny its window on our vulnerability. And, understanding that we are not god-like is essential.

A new chapter of Acts, a 21st Century version, unfolds before us. A version that reflects on the expressions of our faith, and not just those who have gained titles by their ascendancy in one or more religious organizations. Because the church, and I am talking about it in general, is too frequently a place where ambition shadows sacrificial love and sometimes suppresses it entirely.

The Acts of spirit-led work are encyclopedic. And, they reach well beyond formal Christianity. They reflect the most profound Intention of the designer. So let me recall Jesus’s words as he elaborated on the mission of His Disciples and Church: “By this all men will know that you are my Disciples, if you love one another.”

“THE VILLAGE of Trosly-Breuil north of Paris, lay so close to the forest of Compiègne that it seemed about to be engulfed by it.”

The Village was brought to life in an obituary of Jean Vanier in the Economist magazine: "The village mental institution, which Jean Vanier visited in the early 1960s, gloomier still, a place of horror. With little work to do, the young men sat around for most of the day. They were not allowed to leave the building. Some were violent, and screaming; they were pacified with injections. He was struck by an overwhelming atmosphere of sadness. But amid that sadness shone the beauty of the human beings incarcerated there.

They cried out to be looked on with kindness, called by their name, not despised, but loved. He already knew they would return that love, for he felt it whenever he was among them. And to love was to be with God.

Feeling he must do something, in 1964 he bought a small stone house in Trosly-Breuil. It was falling to bits, with no electricity or plumbing, but it would serve the purpose. Then he invited two of the young men from the institution, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, to live with him there. They would share meals and chores and make a little foyer, like a family. They said yes at once. Philippe had a paralysed leg, a withered right hand and poor eyesight, and repeated himself constantly. Raphael, damaged by meningitis, knew only 20 words, fell often and had

fits of anger. Yet in both boys he saw radiance and, most important, tenderness. From his invitation and their acceptance sprang a network of 150 house-based communities in 38 countries, from India to Ivory Coast, from Honduras to Palestine. Here those with mental impairment and those without it live and work together as friends. Each person does what they can manage, whether baking bread or mending tractors or binding books, and everyone has value. Communal meals are at the core of it; as Aristotle said, men cannot know each other until they have eaten salt together.

He had no professional experience in this sort of care. He had been a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto (hence Aristotle) and before that a midshipman in the British and Canadian navies, drawn to serve as a teenager during the war. When he set up the house in Trosly-Breuil, in his late 30s, he put aside all ambition for success in the world's eyes. No more climbing up the ladder, hungry for applause; instead, the tiny joys of a bowl of soup carried without spilling to the table, or an apple core shaken wildly down on the overgrown garden, or a song sung loudly out of tune. Though his lanky figure towered over "the boys", as he always thought of his first recruits, he had left behind that life of controlling and commanding people. Now he listened, or spoke softly in a voice inflected by English public school as well as his Canadian

parents. He let Raphael and Philippe choose the food and paint the rooms, discovering the gifts they had, laughed at the mess they all made together and, because they were in the same boat, named the house L'Arche, the Ark. It soon drew not only more young people, needing 12 more houses by 1977, but assistants from Europe, North America and South Asia. Support from the French government spread his idea all the faster, though he was careful to insist that no two houses were alike; he feared the dead hand of administration. His life became one of incessant travelling, in his simple blue anorak, to nurture his flowers as they grew.

For him L'Arche was rooted in his following of Jesus. Whatever was done for the poor, the suffering and the imprisoned was done for him. For Jesus too was vulnerable, and a servant.

The obituary also noted that "his arms were wide open to Hindus, Muslims, Jews and those of no faith at all, as long as they acknowledged that at the heart of the universe, bringing everything together, was love; and as long as they could sit, as he did, beside a young man twisted and immobile from birth, repeating to him simply: "Sébastien, you are beautiful."

Let me end with this brief reflection. We live in an

individualistic society. Our culture makes agape love hard.

Selflessness is counter-cultural.

As we reflect on our annunciation moments — the moments of profound clarity — do we find ourselves closer to the design — the why of our being?

Few, indeed an infinitesimal number, will be the subject of an obituary in a prominent magazine. Yet today the Beaverkill Church lives because its community cared and reached beyond themselves.