

The Reverend Craig T. Kocher
Associate Dean of the Chapel and Director of Religious Life
I Corinthians 1:10-25
January 27, 2008

A Kingdom of Fools

Jean Vanier was born in Switzerland in 1928. His father was a big brass in the British Royal Navy, and Jean trained to be a naval officer himself. The destruction of World War II drove Jean into a life of prayer, and eventually he left a promising career in the military because he believed that only community, communities of people who understood how much they needed one another, how much their own lives depended on grace and the goodness of each other, only community could bring about healing in this world. In the late 60's he began the L'Arche movement, which has grown into a network of Christian communities all across the globe where able-bodied people and disabled persons live together as families, and see in one another their own gifts and weaknesses, and the face of Christ.

I tell you this for two reasons. First, because Jean Vanier will be preaching for us this coming fall, and a little advertising never hurts. And second, because his story relates directly to the story of the Corinthian church that Amanda read for us this morning. First Corinthians is a letter written from a pastor, Paul, to a church he started only a few years before in Corinth. This letter may be especially helpful to we Christians here in 2008 sitting in the midst of a well-known university campus which is in the midst of an upwardly mobile city, a city of many haves and have-nots, a city of vast numbers of graduate degrees and others who didn't finish high school, a city of medicine, research, and industry.

Corinth was not so different. Corinth sat on the Mediterranean coast, at the confluence of great land and sea trade routes. Corinth was a city of ambition filled with ambitious people, a buzz of economic growth and upward mobility at the center of first-century Rome, one of the world's first great superpowers. And in the midst of this city was the young Corinthian church, filled with CEOs and slaves, scholars and students, tradesmen and fishermen. It was also a church full of personality and opinion. If the people of the Corinthian church were around today they would all have their own blogs. That's the kind of place it was, immensely talented, and also deeply broken, which is not so different than this community or any community made in the image of the crucified Christ.

Frustration and in-fighting had grown at First Church Corinth, particularly around church practice and doctrine. And so Paul writes this letter, this personal, pastoral, heartfelt letter that eventually becomes part of the New Testament, that Christians in churches all across the world are reading with us this morning, and Paul tries to address some of the challenges in the church, about when and who should eat meat, about the meaning of the Lord's supper, about the gifts of the Spirit, the work of the cross, the triumph of love, and the diversity of the body of Christ.

After a few opening lines Paul launches into this section of the letter with a call for unity. Remember that the Corinthians were a talented bunch with social privilege and big wallets. It seemed they were increasingly placing faith in their social location, their

job titles and the names entered into their cell phones, in their intellect, their eloquence, and the Dow Jones. They were trying to force their doctrinal opinions on one another, to manufacture unity in the church by being right.

And Paul says to them that unity in the gospel does not come by force of will or skilled debate, but through the grace of Christ, grace revealed not through individual identity, but through our need for one another, our dependence on one another, especially those in our midst who are the weakest in the body. Jesus was not crucified, writes Paul, for one person, or one issue. Rather in his crucifixion and resurrection Jesus draws together the whole body of Christ. The rest of Corinth's bourgeoisie might call it foolishness, a kingdom of fools, but Paul says, for us who are being saved, the cross, and him whose body was laid upon it, is the power of God.

Paul's call for unity has been echoed down the centuries, and even this past week, which has marked the 100th anniversary of prayer for Christian unity. Christians on this campus and in every corner of the globe have prayed for oneness in the body. The ecumenical movement in Christendom comes from a good place, a gospel place, it comes from the prayer of our Lord, and from the sense that we need one another.

One of the most hopeful things I've experience in the past couple of years is an increased voice among Christian students at Duke, who may be a part of different campus ministries, yet sense deep down this call for unity in the Gospel, and are seeking out ways through common worship and prayer, study and service, to bring about a deeper oneness in the Christian community on campus. This is never easy work. The church has been fractured by ego and arrogance ever since James and John argued with one another about who was the greatest and who would sit at the Lord's right hand.

While sometimes the interest in gospel unity tends to be code for unity as long as it is "unity my way," there is a movement among college age Christians who yearn for the church to really be the church, who are sick and tired, and downright bored, by the culture wars, issue wars, and political posturing that have plagued Christianity over the last couple of decades. Each year entering Duke students are given the opportunity to list a religious preference after being accepted, and each year the number of students who list a particular denomination decreases while the number of students who simply put "Christian" increases.

In his cry for unity in the Corinthian church, Paul says we are baptized into one another because we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ and the loving ties of the Spirit, and the message of the cross is not proclaimed in human eloquence, not won in a debate, not fully reasoned by the philosophers. The message of the cross, it's power for transformation and reconciliation, is and has always been most beautiful and most loving when revealed through the weakness of real lives, in that moment when we recognize our deep need for one another.

One or two of you will be aware that it's basketball season. Some of you know this because each basketball season you by-pass heated, paid for dorm rooms, and choose to sleep in tents for weeks on end in the dead of winter. I haven't done a quantitative study on this, but I have a theory that everyone on campus gets sick in late February because hundreds of students have been sleeping on the wet cold ground, and they get sick and pass it on. Nothing says unity on campus like shared germs. In basketball, as with all team sports, the most talented teams rarely win championships. Successful teams highlight the gifts of each player. They count on one another in particular ways at

particular times; that's the beauty of being a part of a team and it's what makes sport so intoxicating. And on the very best teams, players aren't afraid for their weaknesses to be exposed, because their weakness reveals a need for another's gift.

In the church the power of weakness is taken even further. Weakness and foolishness are two key words in the gospel lexicon. They should not be confused with being trampled on, or false humility, or unnecessary piety. Rather, Paul says, the cross, that brutal tool used by the Romans to inflict death and humiliation, is the source of God's redemption. All across the church, in all the different strands of the church, are gifts, and we are impoverished without the gifts of those in the body of Christ who are different than us, and as we recognize where we are weak in the faith, we see the strength of the gospel in the gifts of another: Some traditions have a higher view of the sacrament and show us how to encounter God through the material world. Other traditions emphasize social justice and teach us that God has a deep care and concern for the well-being of all people, and indeed the whole of creation. Other traditions have a long history of uniting with the Spirit through contemplative prayer, while others in the body pray in tongues. Some facets of Christianity gravitate toward the head while others appeal to the heart. Some in the church emphasize evangelism, while others emphasize discipleship. Some have a fabulous tradition of music and hymn-singing and a couple of massive organs and a 150 voice choir that processes each Sunday down a long aisle, dressed in blue and white. The church needs all of these gifts to be the church. None of us can do it alone.

In L'Arche communities, that network of Christian communities started by Jean Vanier, disabled persons and able-bodied persons share their homes and meals, they pray together and hope together, and care for one another as family, and the words "able" and "disabled" are not nearly as significant as brother, sister, friend, child. They discover in their life together that they all have gifts and they all have weaknesses, and they need each one around the table. On a visit to a L'Arche community in Canada with a group of students, I lived for a week in house with a Romanian named Marella, an American named Brian, and a handful of Canadians, Mary, Rose, Michael, Daulton, and Doug. Two were Protestant, the others were Catholic. They ranged in age from 18 to 63. Rose and Brian couldn't speak at all. Mary and Michael could not eat by themselves. Daulton could neither speak or eat without aid.

One morning, Doug, a big burly 28 year old with a goatee, earrings, and a tattoo on his neck, looked up at me across our morning coffee and said, as he glanced over at Brian and Rose, "Saying they are disabled isn't quite right. You know the difference between us and them is that they aren't afraid to give their love and to ask for it in return. The rest of us are also broken in different ways, we just hide our brokenness and neediness more easily; Brian and Rose simply share it."

The message of L'Arche, and the spirit of the ecumenical movement, is that we cannot do it alone. It is okay to need one another, and in our need for one another we discover the power of God that is stronger than human strength and wiser than human wisdom. When Jesus came to the last night of his life before he would be crucified on a Roman Cross, he took bread and broke it. He took wine and poured it, and said to his disciples this is a gift, it is a gift of my very life, and only when you recognize your need for this gift in one another, will my body be whole again. Amen.