

## **Holy Weakness: Becoming Human by Embracing our Weakness**

*By the V. Rev. William Nordenbrock, C.P.P.S.*

I have a cousin, who has a child with Down's syndrome. The child, Katie, is an adult now, living semi-independently in a group home. Julie speaks freely of the challenges that she and her family had to face, and continue to face, in caring for Katie. Julie doesn't in any way romanticize the hardships and the difficulties that the family has encountered. But clearly at the center, at the core of that mother's story of having a child with Down's syndrome, is the belief that her daughter is a great gift.

- Julie would tell you: Katie taught all of us how to love; not just because she needed so much care (and she did and continues to need special attention) but because Katie is so loving. She loves them in a way that teaches them what it means to be loving. She loves them in such an unconditional way, so completely, that she inspires them to respond in kind. By her demands to be loved, to be cared for, and in her own way of loving them, Katie helped them to be more loving as a family.
- Julie speaks of Katie as a teacher, who taught her other kids a lesson that she and her husband would have had a hard time giving the others, without Katie. She sees the effect of that today in the lives of all her children.
- Katie—the weak one, the disabled one—is the teacher, the blessing to the others.

Jean Vanier is the famous founder of the l'Arche communities that care for the intellectually disabled. He is also an author who has received many awards and much recognition. He is a very spiritual man, and is very committed to his own spiritual journey and to following Christ.

He doesn't know Julie or Katie, but he knows their story. He will tell you that much of what he has learned has come from those with whom he has lived: those whom others might reject, those whom others have scorned. Often his writing and teachings pass on their wisdom. (Much of what I say today, I've been trying to learn from him.)

Some of his observations about what it mean to be human and how we are to be human together are found in his little book, *Becoming Human*.

This is how this book begins-

*This book is about the liberation of the human heart from the tentacles of chaos and loneliness, and from those fears that provoke us to exclude and reject others. It is a liberation that opens us up and leads us to the discovery of our common humanity. . . . The discovery of our common humanity liberates us from self-centered compulsions and inner hurts; it is the discovery that*

*ultimately finds its fulfillment in forgiveness and loving our enemies. It is the process of truly becoming human.*

There is a truth there that I want us all to hold. I believe that the spiritual journey, that journey that we all wish to make towards holiness and a more profound relationship with God, is not about moving away from our humanness in search of the divine, but that we encounter the divine by truly embracing our humanity. It is our true humanity that we need to embrace; it is our true humanity that we have often lost under the hurts and pains of our lives, which have told us lies about our dignity and worth. It is sometimes hidden under so many layer of self protection that we can't find ourselves. Well, how do we do that? How do we find ourselves, and how do we embrace ourselves?

One of the central tenets of our faith is the Incarnation. Books and books are written about that, but put simply: God became human like us in Jesus. And in becoming human like us, God blesses and makes all of humanity sacred. The Incarnation makes our humanity—yours and mine—holy. Put simply, the Incarnation is God's way of showing us how to be human. To be fully human is to be like Jesus. So first of all, we look to Jesus to learn how to become more human.

We are followers of Jesus—and this coming week we remember what a dangerous thing that is. It is easy for us to image that being fully human is be like the Jesus who loved the poor, who heals the sick, and all those examples of Jesus that we think about when we ponder how to be a disciple. But being fully human is also about following Jesus and doing what he is going to do on Good Friday. Being fully human is to be mortal; it is to die one day. And that mortality is what can frighten us and keep us from being fully human along the way.

Now, I'm not just talking about our death—death; the final death of our bodies. For me (you may feel differently), in some ways, that isn't so hard to face. But I'm talking about a denial of our fragility, a denial of our weakness. It is our unwillingness to embrace that, which buries our true self; which takes us into isolation and loneliness.

So that is one way that we find our true humanity: we look to the Incarnation, we look to Jesus. And another way can be to go back to the beginning and see who we are before our true self gets lost.

In Matthew 18, we read,

*The disciples came up to Jesus with the question, "Who is of the greatest importance in the kingdom of God?" He called a little child over and stood him in their midst and said, "I assure you, unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of God. Whoever makes themselves lowly, becoming like this little child is of greatest importance in that heavenly reign (Mt 18: 1-4).*

What does it mean to be like a child?

- conceived and born in littleness and weakness
- open to others because of need
- completely dependent and unashamed of that neediness

If Jesus identifies and loves the weak, why are we so afraid of being weak, being like a child?

When a child is born, it is born into total dependency. A baby is too weak to even hold up his or her own head. Their very life is dependent on receiving the love and care from another. But of course, quickly the baby's life becomes about striving to be independent.

- The two-year-old who doesn't want to be carried.
- The 16-year-olds who think they are adult enough to make all their own decisions.
- And yes, this is good. To mature is to grow into awareness of our capabilities and our giftedness.
- But our desire for freedom and independence can take us away from others, toward isolation and loneliness.

The reading from Matthew reminds us that there is something about being a little child that we need to hold onto, or maybe that we need to reclaim.

- We are always going to be that child who needs love and needs others for us to love, who will allow us to love them.
- That is at the core of our humanness: our need of one another.

Vanier writes in *Being Human* that if we are to tell the truth about our humanness, we would say:

- We are all fundamentally the same
- We are all weak
- We are all part of a common broken humanity; we all have wounded and vulnerable hearts; we all need to feel appreciated and loved; we all need help.
- To deny weakness is to deny death; to deny that death is a part of life

He says: "Our lives are a mystery of growth from weakness to weakness; from the weakness of a baby to the weakness of the aged."

- Probably most of us are getting more and more familiar with the weakness that comes with aging.
- Most of us don't like it much, do we? We fight against it.
- Yet I have to wonder about the reality of that growing weakness being forced upon those of us who are aging: isn't that the catalyst that teaches the wisdom that we hope for as we look to our elders, and look towards being elders?

Weakness and fragility, mortality: That is the truth of who we all are—yet that isn't the truth that we like to speak. Often, that isn't the self that we let others come to know. Instead, not so much with words, of course, nothing that crass, but sometimes in how we live and relate to others, we say: I am powerful, I am important, I am superior to others. We live out of our false selves.

We create and defend an identity that needs to succeed and achieve. We work hard and long to create an identity of being important and special. We strive to prove that we are lovable. Sometimes, we need to see ourselves and to be recognized as better than others.

And in the first part of life we live with these compulsions, and that is not all bad. As we strive for success, much good can come from that effort. But there is an inherent trap for us as we apply these worldly compulsions to our spiritual life. Because we are never good enough; we are never holy enough; we are never sinless; we are never worthy of God's love. And we are all subject, to a greater or lesser degree, to these compulsions.

I remember a conversation that I had with Richard Rohr during a sabbatical in Albuquerque. We were talking about gifts and weaknesses; about true self and false self. And Richard confessed that he used to sit in judgment of himself, because he doesn't really **do** anything; all he does is talk and/or preach. I remember thinking that here is probably one of the best-known Catholic preachers in the country, if not the world; he has a worldwide ministry of preaching retreat and teaching; he has touched countless lives through his work; through the various audio series/workshops that have been produced and he's critical of what he has been able to do! I remember thinking, what am I supposed to be thinking about my ministry? But Richard went on to say that what he had needed to come to accept, is that his gift, the gift from God of which he is the "means," is to talk. He's a mouth—he's not the hands. He opens his mouth and God uses it. Someone else will need to accept and recognize their gift to be the hands.

We are on the road to freedom when our compulsions no longer govern us. Freedom is the freedom of truth; the truth of who we are; "Truth will set you free." And freedom comes with the death of the false self.

According to Vanier, all religions speak of the death of the self so that the real self can emerge. The death of the false self (ego), he continues, is more painful for the rich, the powerful and the strong: those with a strong, imposing and dominating presence or sense of themselves. This type of death is easier for the poor, the weak, and those who have never sought power and control. For me, this gives a whole new layer of meaning to Jesus' teaching on the dangers of riches as an obstacle to entering the reign of God.

Vanier writes, "To be free is to know who we are, with all that is beautiful, all that is broken; to love our own values, to embrace them, to develop them, to be anchored

in a vision and a truth' but also to be open to others, and to the need to change. Freedom lies in discovering that truth is not a fixed set of certitudes, but a mystery that we enter, one step at a time. Freedom is to accept that we belong to a group, community, family, religion and that none of these is perfect.”

How do we know when we are denying our humanity, denying our fragility and weakness?

- If I beat myself up because I make mistakes; when I do something stupid. Then I'm trying to hang on to the false self who wants to think of myself as perfect.
- When my emotions go over the top at the mistakes that others make.
- When flights are cancelled and connections are missed and we have to fight the urge of going postal.
- When we get mad because the traffic light always seems to be red (as if my presence should change the reality of a light that is on a timer).
- When I start to think that the laws of physics should be somehow altered so that the world can revolve around me.
- When in community/family I get bothered about the inconvenience and difficulties of living with imperfect people, and I allow their quirks to get under my skin and effect the way that I relate to them; then I'm forgetting the fragility that is our common humanity.
- When I start to think that my idea of what is normal is the standard by which others should be judged. Then I'm still a long way from the freedom of truth.
- When I find myself wishing that I had the gifts of another, and am not recognizing and celebrating the gifts that God has given me.

All these are ways that we hold onto or give life to our false selves. And we keep our true selves isolated from one another and from growing in our relationship with God.

*The truth of my humanity is:*

1. *Life is hard.*
2. *I am not important.*
3. *My life is not about me.*
4. *I am not in control.*
5. *I am going to die.*

I am a weak and fragile human being. I am not the all-powerful God. And it is okay because I am loved by God beyond all understanding. I say that and sometimes, I actually believe it.

*Let nothing disturb thee.*

*Let nothing dismay thee.*

*All things pass.*

*God never changes.*

*Patience obtains all.  
She who has God lacks nothing.  
God alone is enough.*

To be human is to be a creature, not the Creator.

- Being weak is part of being human. Accepting our weakness is to accept our humanity.
- We could define original sin as wanting to be strong/to deny or seek to avoid our weakness; to seek to be divine instead of human; to be the creator instead of being a creature.
- Christ came to show us how to be weak; to show us how to be fully human: weak and available to God.

To accept our humanness, our fragility is not:

- To deny that we are also gifted; it isn't to deny the talents and abilities that we have.
- It is not to go through life passively, without goals, aspiration, and dreams; it's not about not working hard to achieve those dreams.

But it is simply to accept the truth of who we are: human and loved by God in all of our limitations and weaknesses.

### **For Reflection**

*I invite you today to spend some time thinking about, praying about being human.*

- *How does your struggle to deny your weakness keep your true self from emerging? How does that affect your relationships?*