Opinion
Spirituality



Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities, is pictured in a March 11, 2015, photo. (CNS photo/courtesy Jean Vanier Association)



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Jean Vanier, Rachel Held Evans and Melinda Gates: unlikely people to be included in the same sentence. Their lives have recently invited me into a thoughtfulness that moves into action: philosopher/theologian, theologian/doubter, tech engineer/philanthropist. Their living invites us all to position ourselves closer to those in need of God's mercy.

Let us consider this Sunday's Gospel to love another in the light of these lives:

Jean Vanier, companion to people with disabilities.

"It is only when we stand up, with all our failings and sufferings, and try to support others rather than withdraw into ourselves, that we can fully live the life of community."

Vanier teaches us to connect ever so tenderly with one another. His kind voice, gentle glance, compassionate being snuggles up to the ones whose ability is marked by different bodies, different brains than those found in the norm. Vanier reminds us that human beings are not loved for their status in society or ability to achieve; human beings desire love because we simply are made in the image and likeness of God.

I once volunteered at the Tacoma L'Arche community. Growing in love, like, and concern for the core members was as simple as loving my family. I just needed the busy-ness and routine of my life to pause in order to make time and space for new relationships. I continue to pray the L'Arche Prayer:

> Father, through Jesus our Lord and our brother, we ask you to bless us.
>
> Grant that L'Arche be a true home, where everyone may find life, where those of us who suffer may find hope.
>
> Keep in your loving care all those who come.
>
> Spirit of God, give us greatness of heart that we may welcome all those you send.

Make us compassionate that we may heal and bring peace.

Help us to see, to serve and to love.

O Lord, through the hands of each other, bless us; through the eyes of each other, smile on us.

O Lord, grant freedom, fellowship and unity to all your people and welcome everyone into your kingdom.

— Amen



Rachel Held Evans (RNS/Courtesy of Macki Evans)

Rachel Held Evans, companion to people of faith who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning. In her book *A Year of Biblical Womanhood,* she wrote:

> "If you are looking for Bible verses with which to support slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to abolish slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to oppress women, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to liberate and honor women, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to wage

> war, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to promote peace, you will find them. If you are looking for an outdated, irrelevant ancient text, you will find it. If you are looking for truth, believe me, you will find it.
>
> This is why there are times when the most instructive question to bring to the text is not 'what does it say?' but 'what am I looking for?' I suspect Jesus knew this when he said, 'ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.'
>
> If you want to do violence in this world, you will always find the weapons. If you want to heal, you will always find the balm."

Evans recently died at the age of 37 leaving behind two children and a spouse. As a heterosexual white woman, she began asking questions in her church about how we might all be called to love more, love differently, love all the time. This belief led her to become an advocate for those on the margins of society's understanding of respectable sexuality. In Evangelical churches in particular, she brought dignity to her interactions with people who are gay, wrote about it and invited others to do the same.

I read her book *Searching for Sunday* during a time of great questioning in my own faith journey. I had come to the point where I was re-assessing my relationship with the Catholic Church, again. Her recognition that life is more messy than hip, as a millennial, drew my attention to her, the way she told stories, and the way she gently formed language to hug my experience of deep conviction and loyalty.

I pray for this hope she articulated, "I explained that when our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender friends aren't welcome at the table, then we don't feel welcome either, and that not every young adult gets married or has children, so we need to stop building our churches around categories and start building them around people."



Melinda Gates (Wikimedia Commons)

Melinda Gates, companion to two-thirds of the world's women. In an interview with Good Housekeeping, she said:

> "Get involved in your community or the broader world. Ask questions: Are we truly equal in my community? How are women faring? Because poverty is sexist. Women suffer disproportionately in poverty across the world. So ask questions … learn where your passion is and where your passion and talent meet the world's needs. If you keep asking questions, you'll figure out where those two pieces intersect and give back in a way that's right for you."

Gates identifies as a Catholic. In a podcast with Oprah Winfrey, Gates mentions listening to so many women's stories from around the world. Caring for their children has become a burden, and the more they have children the less resources they have to distribute between them all. This led Gates to a two-year discernment on the Catholic Church's official stance on contraception. When she realized that even many women who identified as Catholic took contraceptive measures to space out their children, she wondered whether the women she was meeting needed to suffer more because of her belief. When she realized the dilemma between belief and practice in her own community, she could no longer get in the way of offering real care for these women.

With these three witnesses in mind, I pray with courage to examine my own tension between belief and practice, and to examine putting people into groups as opposed to encountering each person with a deep sense of dignity and respect. I ask God to guide me to people whom I can companion and be the bearer of mercy for this Easter season and beyond.

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