



August 2014

Reflections ...

Vol. 1, No. 1

Heaven Is Like ...

Judy and Jerry Horton

We often read and discuss the readings for Sunday Mass, sometimes trying to anticipate what angle our Pastor might take in his homily. I don't think we'd gotten it right even once, to which we credit a terrific pastor and great preaching.

The gospel for Sunday July 27 didn't stir us up much when we looked it up that morning. It was from Matthew 13—a string of parables on the refrain “the kingdom of heaven is like...”

O.K. Heard that one before.

However, on that Sunday Fr. James began by talking about Fr. Henri Nouwen, renowned author, intellectual, professor, and lecturer who had enjoyed great popularity through his books and writings. Fr. Nouwen was well known to us. We had read his books and even corresponded a little with him—first when he had a niece born with Down syndrome, and again when we moved out to the land that would become Down Home Ranch.

By that time, 1991, Fr. Nouwen had been living at the Daybreak L'Arche Community outside of Toronto for several years. No one would have predicted this brilliant scholar would spend the last years of his life as care-giver to one of their most helpless residents and being a pastor in a community for people with intellectual handicaps. Nouwen himself was notoriously inept at the little chores of everyday life, forgetting to close the shower curtain and flooding the bathroom, or missing swaths of whiskers during his morning shave. He had lived, after all, a life of the mind.

He disclosed after joining Daybreak that he had never cooked a meal, helped dress another person, or spoon-fed a soul; but now he was expected to do these things, and he did them. After a lifetime of exile in the rarified atmosphere of the church hierarchy and academe, or so it felt, he had finally found his home.

Fr. Henri Nouwen was accustomed to walking onto a stage to the rapt applause of a worshipful audience—and this is where Fr. James connected Nouwen to the parables—Nouwen the author, Nouwen the scholar and theologian, Nouwen the renowned lecturer.

The residents of Daybreak cared nothing at all about those things. They didn't even know anything about them. What they cared about was Henri. They missed him when he was gone.

They rejoiced when he was with them. It was as simple, and as profound, as that.

“The kingdom of heaven is like”...the tiny mustard seed, the yeast that leavens the whole batch, the treasure hidden in the field, the one pearl of great price. What Fr. Nouwen discovered at Daybreak was his own true relevance, which were not the degrees, the books, the adulation of an entranced public. The members of his new community didn’t care about that.

They just cared that he be home in time to have spaghetti with them, to spend time in simple conversation, to honor the evening ritual that gave them comfort. They loved him because he was their friend, and he was theirs.

He must have experienced something like we did after Kelly was born with Down syndrome. Of all situations in the world, this was one we would never have chosen for ourselves. We were readers and writers. We had college degrees. Academe was at the center of our universe. We didn’t think we had room in our world for a child with a big cognitive disability.

We were wrong.

Soon, we were in love with our little one, and we learned that love itself is quite sufficient a reason to carry on with our lives. She didn’t need for us have college degrees, or to be academics, or any of that stuff that seemed, like Fr. Nouwen, to be essential to who we are. It turned out that being mom and dad was quite enough.

It brought us to start Down Home Ranch twenty five years ago, now a community of about 50, some staff and some Ranchers, Kelly included.

So here we are, still asking that most important question, “Will you be home for dinner?”

And always glad when the answer is “Yes.”

Down Home Ranch is a working farm and ranch for people with special needs and those who choose to live and work beside them.

For more information, go to www.downhomeranch.org, e-mail us at info@downhomeranch.org, or call us at 888-926-2253.