

Acts 32-35
Dying to yourself
Delivered on April 19, 2009

Maybe some of you are familiar with Donald Miller. He caused a small sensation during the election campaigns because he was invited to and indeed did offer the opening prayer at the Democratic National Convention. The reason he caused a stir is that he is an evangelical, and the Democrats are not known for embracing that particular brand of Christianity. I guess the Democrats got over it. No one I am aware of has said much about Donald Miller lately in either democrat or republican circles.

Donald Miller is a religious writer, a **hip** religious writer, which almost sounds like a contradiction in terms. In his writings, his lingo is “au courant.” The title of one of his essays, for instance is “Community: Living with Freaks.” Actually, that is the essay I want to tell you about because it resonated with me. In college, and after college when I lived in an apartment, I too, lived with freaks. In fact, I would suggest that not until you engage in group living arrangements, do you realize just how many, many freaks there are out there.

For Donald, his life in community began when he was thirty years old. He lived in a house with five other guys. They named their house Graceland, not because they felt that they had found grace, and not because they expected their house to exude grace, but because, in Donald’s own words, “because that was the name of the house Elvis lived in, and, like Elvis, we were all pretty good with the ladies.” Or at least, and this is my addition, “They **considered** themselves to be pretty good with the ladies.”

The Graceland womanizers start out liking each other. They sit around watching football games on TV together, for instance, but soon enough, there are hassles over who’s supposed to wash the dishes and who’s responsible for breaking the garage door opener. When they have house meetings to try to iron out problems, some of them get defensive, others don’t listen. Donald and another guy get into a feud because the other guy revs up his motorcycle early every workday morning and that wakes up Donald. You get the idea.

That’s pretty much been my experience. When I was in college, I lived in a sorority house for a year, a house very similar to Graceland, I suppose. Only along with the house meetings that Donald mentioned, we also had love fests. There were times when we got together and hugged each other and cried. I don’t remember why we did that now. I think it might have had something to do with hormones. When I lived in the sorority house, the miniseries Rich Man Poor Man was on the air. Donald’s roomies watched football, we sat around eating popcorn and watching episodes of Rich man Poor Man. But living in the sorority house wasn’t all hugging and crying and watching TV together. We had whopping arguments, too. I remember telling one girl in our house, her name was Michelle, how I absolutely HATED her. I don’t know why I hated her. She had said something rude and crude, I think—or had I?

As you get older, as you have more dealings with the world, you think you have more tolerance for other people, but I'm not so sure. Now that I am 55 years old, and living alone, I think I would have trouble living with small children for instance. While I was **raising** children, I learned to live with noise—TV's blaring, kids shouting, that kind of thing. I learned to live with that because after all, they were my children, I loved them. Up with them, I had to put, as they say. Because they were my own flesh and blood, I tolerated scratches on the furniture, too. And, when ink spots appeared on the wall-to-wall carpeting, I just covered them over with area rugs. I got used to never knowing where things were—the remote control to the TV, the toilet plunger, my hand lotion.

Now that my children are grown, I really enjoy living alone. Things are quieter. I actually wake up to the sound of birds chirping, not children arguing for bathroom privileges. I have refinished the scratched table tops. Best of all, I have discovered the serenity that comes in knowing that when I lose something, all I have to do is retrace my steps. I actually didn't realize how much my life had changed, and how much I had changed, until a few months ago. A woman came to visit. She brought with her her two small children—a three year old and an infant. The three year old was carrying (pause) a McDonald's Happy Meal. His little legs propelled him straight for my living room couch—my practically new, light colored, damask covered living room couch. It took me all of one millisecond to direct the family out to my deck, where little, greasy hands and chicken nuggets can't do so much damage. The family's visit made me realize that if and when I have grandchildren, I will have to live with grime again and everything else that goes with communal living. This go around, if there is a next go around helping raise grandchildren, I may purchase plastic runners for the carpets, a full size throw for the couch and glass for my tabletops.

In our scripture passage for today, we learn that the first Christians lived in community and this community was so close, that they shared everything in common. In light of what I just told you, I am pretty sure I wouldn't be able to live like that. I like my uncomplicated, quiet life too much and I like my **stuff** too much. First time some **unrelated** person scratched my tabletop or dribbled permanent ink on my carpet, I would be very tempted to ask him or her to leave.

I am comforted by the fact that not all Christians believe that community living is front and center to living a life of faith. You will recall that some Christians thought just the opposite. Beginning in the 4th century there was a trend for super religious types to go out into the desert and live there alone for extended periods. The desert father Antony is a case in point. His aspiration in life was to find unity with God and he was pretty sure he couldn't do that living with PEOPLE. So, Antony moved out to the desert. He discovered a deserted fortress, "Empty so long that reptiles filled it. He went there and took up residence in it," says his biographer, Athenasius. Antony lived off loaves of bread dropped off periodically by friends, who left their gifts at the fortress gate. For **twenty** years Antony lived in that reptile-infested fortress. At last, though, he was compelled by curiosity seekers to come out and give an accounting of himself. It is said that when he emerged from his solitary life, he was able to heal people of their various diseases, just like Jesus did, and that just like Jesus he spoke with grace. So, perhaps he

actually had found unity with God. Eventually, though, Antony gave in to all the spiritually starved souls who would not let him alone. He established a monastic community for himself and his many followers. But here's the thing. If they lived in monasteries, they actually were not living a solitary life, were they? I like to think that even Antony, discovered the importance of community to living a life of faith.

One of the reasons that religious folks need community is so that we are not tempted to believe in our own self-sufficiency. Even Antony, proud as he might have been of his ability to live alone, was dependent on his friends for, literally, his daily bread. Those of us who live in rural areas, may also fool ourselves into believing that we are ruggedly independent. We may chop our own wood, grow our own food, own our own wells, for example. But ultimately, our independence is a self-delusion, isn't it? The minute we pull our cars and trucks out onto Route 29 on our way to church we are taking advantage of the work of others—the ones who built and maintain our road systems. And indeed, who built the cars and trucks we drive?

We depend on others for our mental health, too—we need other people with whom we can share our joys and sorrows. Indeed, it is not until we are in community with others that we discover who we truly are. For instance, I know that I am a type A personality only because I have been in community with those who are NOT type A personalities. Once we get over that blow to our ego, that we are dependent on others for practically everything in life, it's not such a stretch to understand how we also depend on God for absolutely everything we have and everything we are.

Living in community is not easy. We have it in the writings of some of the Desert Fathers. They actually knew that the hardest spiritual work in the world is tolerating others. Living in community means forgiving the other not just seven times, but seven times seven times. Living in community means knowing the other so well, that you almost become the other person—feeling the other's joy and pain. Another way to say that is, living in community we have to die to ourselves—which, come to think of it, is what Jesus did on the cross—die to himself, for our sake. It's the message of Easter. Antony knew that, as well as any of the desert fathers. He instructed his fellow ascetics at the monastery he established: "Live as though dying daily...strive to be bound to each other as allies."

For most of us an attitude of selflessness is hard to sustain. For me, anyway, I'll have a spark of selflessness here, and another brief flicker of selflessness there, interrupted by long periods of selfishness. Yet, it's a beginning. At least I have something to build on.

That's what Donald Miller finally discovered—that we have to die to ourselves daily, if we are to live in Christian community. Miller says that the notion came to him when he was on a mission trip. He was staying at a bed and breakfast with fifteen or so other people—people who all had their own agendas—who all made demands on the owner of the place. And even though this bed and breakfast was supposed to be a communal living establishment, Donald discovered that just as at Graceland, not all the

guests cleaned up after themselves. One early morning, Miller and the owner were alone, drinking coffee together, before the other house guests got up. Miller surveyed the sink of dirty dishes and he asked his host, "How do you keep such a good attitude all the time with so many people abusing your kindness?" The man set down his coffee cup and looked Donald in the eye, "If we are not willing to wake up in the morning and die to ourselves, perhaps we should ask ourselves whether or not we are really following Jesus." Amen