

Finding God in the Ordinary Sunday, 3/3/19

1 Did you know that if you do a Google image search on “washing dishes,” almost every image returned is of a woman or a girl with their hands in the sink? That’s not the way it is at my house. Washing dishes is one of the most ordinary things I do during the week. It’s not as exciting as writing a sermon. It’s not the kind of thing I’m going to post on Facebook or Instagram. It’s not something that requires a great deal of thought or training. Maybe that’s why it’s so easy for me to get into the zone while I’m doing the dishes- to give my attention to a conversation I’m having with Jana, or to listen to the music playing, without really even thinking about the dishes I’m washing.

Life is full of moments like that. If it’s not doing the dishes for you, maybe it’s ironing clothes, or shoveling snow, or commuting to work or school. We all have high points and low points that punctuate our lives- mountain top experiences when we’re in awe of God’s goodness, and valleys of despair when we desperately cry out for God’s mercy and strength. But thankfully, most of life isn’t like that. Can you imagine how stressful it would be, hopping from one mountain top to another without ever taking a rest? Can you imagine how chaotic life would be if we were continually bouncing from one extreme to another, from despair to ecstasy and back again, over and over again?

Thankfully, our lives are full of ordinary moments: washing the dishes; grocery shopping; filling the gas tank; doing the homework; making your bed. You might be surprised by just how many ordinary things you do each week, and how dependent on those ordinary things you’ve become to establish your daily, weekly, monthly, and even annual rhythms of life. Ordinary has gotten a bad rap in our culture that enshrines the sensational: American Idol; The Voice; America’s Got Talent; Dancing with the Stars; X Factor; and even The Great British Bake Off. It might make for interesting television, but most of us will never be like those stars, and that’s ok, because God not only created us to live in ordinary times, God also chooses to meet us in them.

2 Countless times in the Old Testament, it was in ordinary circumstances that God chose to meet God’s people. Jacob met God in an ordinary rock that he had used as a pillow. Abraham saw God’s hand in providing a ram caught in a thicket. Moses heard from God in burning bush while out tending his sheep. Sure, there were those mountain top experiences-

literally, for example, when Moses spoke with God on the top of Mount Sinai. And yes, there were those valleys of despair, like when Pharaoh's chariots were bearing down on the Hebrew people, and they desperately cried to God for deliverance. But much more often, God spoke through ordinary circumstances, like the weary travelers who visited Abram and Sarai and announced that they were to become parents, or the way God sent food to the prophet Elijah by a raven. God created the ordinary, so why shouldn't we expect to find God in the ordinary?

There's something extraordinary that can happen when we open our eyes and hearts to see God in the ordinary. Jesus knew that, which is why most of his ministry took place not in the Temple or synagogues, but in people's homes gathered for a meal, or where people worked, dropping their fishing nets or collecting taxes. His parables concerned common objects like seeds, salt, lamps, and stones. Jesus even showed up in an ordinary way, born of a woman in humble circumstances.

3 It's no wonder that Jesus also chose ordinary objects to remind us of the most important things at the center of our Christian faith. Sometimes we let the mystery and awe of the communion table overshadow the intentional ordinariness of the bread and the juice. Before the low-carb craze hit, bread used to be a regular part of our meals, just as the wine represented by our unfermented grape juice used to be a regular meal-time drink before we developed other ways to preserve food, like refrigeration. We have to reclaim the ordinary in the bread and the juice before we can begin to fully appreciate the extraordinary thing that Jesus made them into for us. Let's join the disciples with Jesus now in the upper room in Jerusalem as Jesus reveals the mystery of the Lord's Table to us. I'm reading in the Gospel of Luke in the New Living Translation.

{Read Luke, 22:14-16, 19-20, NLT}

4 I have great respect for Pope Francis, and I can also appreciate the way symbols and dress can help us to be open to God in new ways. I still wear my clerical robe and stole when I conduct funerals because I think they are often a comforting sign of God's presence for those gathered in grief. But sometimes I think all the gold tassels and embroidered finery distract and confuse us, when Jesus came to show us that we don't have to dress up and go

out in order to have a love relationship with God. We can find God even in something as ordinary as the breaking of bread.

5 Deacon Eddie Ensley, writing in *Finding Inner Peace*, shared this story of his father's amazing ability to find God in the ordinary.

*When I think of the peace of living in the present moment, I think of my Cherokee grandfather, Pop. His cabin, perched high on a bluff over the white running rivers of the Chatahoochee river, overlooked a stunning scene of beauty. Bright green woods climbed up the banks of the river to the top of the bluff. Pop could spend many scores of minutes walking this area. Across the horizon, the wooded bluff of the Alabama side of the river glimmered in the sunlight. Pop never shared with me the full secrets of his silences, his deep peace, and his keen awareness of everything around him, but one day he gave me a glimpse. He would often take long walks along the bluff and through the woods. He slowly looked at the river and all that he saw. Once when he was watching I asked him, "What are you doing, Pop?" He answered, "I'm looking at what is in front of me." "Why? Why are you looking at what is in front of you?" I probed. "Because," he said, "when you look long enough it shimmers and you can see the glory."*¹

6 When you look long enough it shimmers and you can see the glory. Have you ever had that experience? Have you slowed down long enough to really look at what's in front of you, whether it's another person or a majestic landscape, and seen the glory of God before you? You don't have to take a trip to a faraway place to find signs of God's majesty. The snow in the pine trees and the sculpted drifts of snow this past month have been spectacular. What could be more ordinary for us this past month than snow? My problem has been that I've usually been in such a hurry to clear the snow off the driveway (in a sometimes sour disposition I must admit), that I've seldom allowed myself to pause and look at what's in front of me. Despite all our struggles with it, snow is really an amazing part of God's creation. Did you know that around half the people on earth have never seen snow, or that snow isn't actually white; it's translucence scatters the light in such a way that we perceive it

¹ Deacon Eddie Ensley. *Finding Inner Peace: Easing Stress and Anxiety through Prayer*, pp 15-16. Twenty-Third Publications.

as white? Do you know all the different crystalline forms that snowflakes can form as?² You think you know snow, but you probably don't! Life is like that for us. We're always on the move, assuming we know everything, while all the while we're failing to look, really look, at what's right in front of us. Try to steal a few moments this month to look at the snow all around you more carefully and appreciate how beautiful it is. Even snow is a sign of God's creative and generous love.

7 Now let's get back to this matter of breaking bread. Do you suppose God is only present when we break bread in church on the first Sunday of the month? Of course not. Breaking bread can happen any time and, in any way, that we receive our daily bread. Has it ever occurred to you that when you sit down to enjoy a meal, at home or at a restaurant, it's an opportunity to spend time with God? I believe that whenever and wherever we enjoy God's provision, we can remember that Jesus wants us to meet him in the ordinary and remember that night Jesus shared his last Passover meal with the disciples, and that just as Jesus gave his life for us, we also are called to give our lives in selfless service to our neighbors. We're to remember that a right relationship with God is made possible not because of who we are or what we've done, but because we've received in the center of our being the one person who can do what we can't. We're to remember that Jesus came that all may have life, and have it abundantly. What would your next meal prayer look like if you treated it as that kind of communion with Jesus? There's no reason it can't be. There's no reason it shouldn't be.

8 Brother Lawrence was a seventeenth-century monk who found his primary connection with God through the practice of the ordinary work he did in the monastery kitchen. In the classic compilation of his teaching, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, he wrote, "We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed."³ That sounds an awful lot like the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, as Eugene Peterson so masterfully paraphrased: "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it

² http://www.softschools.com/facts/weather/snowflake_facts/3208/

³ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/66573.Brother_Lawrence

before God as an offering.”⁴ God will meet you on the mountain tops, and God will carry you in the valleys. But mostly, look for God in the ordinary moments of your life, and your attitude of reverent love will make those moments holy.



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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⁴ Romans 12:1, The Message.