

“Faith in Ordinary Time: What’s in it for me?”
Mark 1:29-39 & 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Sermon by Jan Edmiston
February 5, 2006 – 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today we find ourselves in “Ordinary Time.”

On the Julian calendar, today is February 5th, 2006. But in the Christian liturgical calendar today is the 5th Sunday in “Ordinary Time.” It’s ordinary in that the weeks are not connected somehow to Christmas or Easter – the weeks immediately before or after those holy days. The Christmas season is behind us, and we have just three more Sundays until we come to Lent – the season that prepares us for Easter.

We often hear of conversion moments that come with mountaintop experiences and deep inside foxholes. But thank God for ordinary time. We could not take it if every day was a religious high point, a peak spiritual experience.

Christian faith matures when we move with God through the ordinary, when we realize that as we are moving through our day, making decisions from our desks or our kitchen tables, we realize that God is not only with us; God is influencing the way we move.

In preparing for this sermon about faith in ordinary time, I came across a book called *Everyday Christianity*¹ that, frankly, reminded me of last year’s debate about “what Jesus would drive.” This book, published before hybrid cars became options, offers guidance on how Christians should deal with such ordinary experiences as drinking coffee and going to the movies. There’s even a chapter on how Christians should respond to sporting events – particularly timely as the masses have turned toward Detroit today and will turn toward Turin on Friday.²

According to the wisdom of *Everyday Christianity*, it’s okay for Christians to enjoy watching and participating in sports, even though there are no overt references to sports in the Bible. Good to know.

(This would be the time when I should share Biblical sporting jokes because if I don’t you will want to share them with me after worship. But believe me, I’ve heard them. The one about Holy Scripture starting out with a sports reference: “In the Big Inning.” The one about Moses serving in Pharaoh’s court.) All references to athletic pursuits in Scripture, of course, whether we’re talking about Jacob wrestling with an angel or Paul’s words about “the race set before us” involve spiritual struggles rather than athletic struggles.

¹ *Everyday Christianity*, published by IVP, 1998.

² Today Super Bowl XL will be played in Detroit and the Winter Olympics begin Friday in Turin, Italy.

My problem with this book – *Everyday Christianity* – or with the on-going debates about what Jesus would drive, or whether Jesus would eat free-range chicken or KFC is a distraction. **Once we are all clear and obedient about issues that Jesus died for, then we can move on to the lesser issues of our faith.**

For today, let's look at what "everyday Christianity" looked like in the lives of Jesus and then Paul, one of Jesus' most faithful apostles. It was about something bigger than the characters in these stories.

For those who believe that Simon Peter was the first pope, notice that the first pope was married. At least he had a mother-in-law.

Notice that quite a few people lived in Simon's house in Capernaum: Simon, his brother Andrew, presumably their wives, maybe some children, and Simon's mother-in-law who was sick in bed with a fever. This house was clearly a center of activity³ both during Jesus' ministry and after Jesus was gone, and it's possible that all this activity started when Jesus approached the feverish mother-in-law and "lifted her up."

Word of the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law brought "the whole city" to the door of that house. In those days . . . and in *these* days . . . when the word gets out that there is someone who can cure what ails us, someone who can rid us of our demons we tend to flock to that person where his name is Deepak Chopra or Dr. Phil or Rick Warren or . . . Jesus. In any given era, there are unlimited numbers of people who long to be healed.

But there are limits to time. When Jesus got up early to pray in solitude, he found that people wanted him to spend his time doing other things – more "practical things." They didn't want him to pray as much as they wanted him to cure *them*.

"Everyone is searching for you!" the disciples told him. Actually they had been searching for him too.

Notice Jesus doesn't say, "Great, let's go and heal them all!"

Instead, he tells them they are moving on. His calling is -- apparently -- not to rid the masses of what ails them physically or mentally. His business was to tell as many as possible "the message." A spiritual message. And so off he went. His life's purpose was to tell the message. In ordinary time.

³Pilgrims can visit this house – or at least the ruins of the limestone house that scholars believe was Peter's home in Capernaum, so believed because of the Christian graffiti on the walls and the baptismal in the living room. Clearly something happened in that ancient house because Early Christians gathered there years after Jesus left Galilee.

*“Let us go on to the neighboring towns,
so that I may proclaim the message there also;
for that is what I came out to do.”*

What message was that, do you think?

Interestingly enough, Paul also spent his days proclaiming a message and to proclaim it “free of charge,” he says. And again, we might ask: what message is he talking about here? What’s so important that he would go from town to town sharing this message in different ways, depending on who he was talking with?

Just like today, people in Paul’s time were distracted by daily practices of their faith. Was it faithful to eat foods sacrificed to idols? Was it okay to eat food that Moses had been told was unclean? Could you be a disciple of Jesus and eat bacon or wear leather?⁴

Those were the “what would Jesus drive?” questions of that time. But they were distractions. Paul’s point was that he had to be “all things to all people” so that his words would be credible for any kind of listener. In other words, the most important issue was the gospel, the message. It was more important than Paul’s personal preferences and tastes. Maybe Paul loved shellfish, but he didn’t dare eat it with certain people because it might confuse them in terms of their faith.

When Paul was with Jews, he respected a kosher kitchen so that his eating habits would not distract those Jews from hearing what he was really trying to say.

When he was with Gentiles (those “outside the law”⁵) Paul could share the gospel over pork chops if that’s what the Gentiles were having for dinner that night.

If Paul was with “the weak” (in other words with the spiritually immature), Paul took pains not to confuse new believers. He became “all things to all people” so that he might make the message clear, spoken in a language that every kind of listener could understand. **Paul never wanted religion to get in the way of God.** Do you know what I mean?

Maybe some of us can relate to this. Have we ever known religion to get in the way of God and God’s message?

And again, what *is* this message? What is this gospel that Jesus and Paul and so many other ordinary people have spent their lives trying to proclaim? We also call “the

⁴ The Old Testament book of Leviticus includes The Holiness Code which explained what was lawful and what was not lawful for the Jews traveling with Moses to the Holy Land.

⁵ The Earliest Christians (the first 12 disciples for example) were Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah. One controversy for early Christianity was whether Gentiles who accepted Jesus as Messiah had to become Jews before they could become “genuine” Christians. It was decided that they did not, and just as current day Christians need not subscribe to Jewish laws concerning clean and unclean foods, etc. the early Christians who were Gentiles did not have to comply with Jewish law to follow Jesus.

gospel” the Good News. What was so important, what’s so GOOD about this message that Jesus would focus more on proclaiming this Good News than he would focus even on healing the sick? What was so important that Paul would take great pains to tailor the message so that all kinds of people could understand it?

The message is this:
That God loves us. And now it’s our turn.

The message is that the world is not about us. Notice that the first thing Peter’s mother-in-law did after she was healed was to serve the others in her house. It wasn’t about her. Jesus did not heal her so that she would take a seat as the beloved matriarch of her family (the future pope’s mother-in-law, no less.)

She was healed so that she, too, could proclaim the message that God is love. Even if she had remained sick, if she was a woman of faith and there was even an ounce of energy within her, it still would have been her life purpose to proclaim that God is love. Yes, God can even use illness. Sometimes God especially uses illness and adversity to spread the word.

The best sermon preached on this subject this week is not being preached from this or any pulpit today, on this 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time. It was not preached by any man (or woman) of the cloth, “unless that cloth is leather.”⁶

The best sermon proclaiming the Gospel this week might well have been on Friday at the National Prayer Breakfast when Bono – yes, Bono, the lead singer for U2 – preached to a gathering that included Christians, Jews, Muslims, Democrats, Republicans, and the President of the United States

The truth is that more people will watch the Super Bowl tonight than listened to the State of the Union address last Tuesday. Maybe that’s because the State of the Union seems to have little to do with ordinary life compared to what people will be expected to talk about tomorrow “at the water cooler” with other Americans. Or maybe we find that we are only interested in those issues that support what we already believe.

Have you noticed that we often go to the mat to fight for issues that make life better for *us*? The issues that satisfy our own lifestyles, the issues that confirm us, the issues that make us feel comfortable?

But the world is not about us. Before God and members of Congress and the President of the United States, before business leaders and religious leaders at the National Prayer Breakfast, the singer Bono had the audacity – on an ordinary Friday – to share God’s Word, to remind them all that the message of Jesus was not to create a “bless me club.” It wasn’t about creating “holy huddle” which keeps others out.

⁶ From Bono’s address to the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC on Friday, February 3rd.

It was about “getting our feet dirty” in someone else’s disaster. Jesus’ message is about being inconvenienced. It’s about changing our personal preferences for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of sharing God’s message of love with people who are not like us.

When the Spirit of God is working, things start happening. People start moving – sometimes from town to town to share the message, like Jesus and Paul. And sometimes there are other kinds of movement.

In the words of Bono, for example, when the world’s powers noticed that something had to be done about AIDS, it was clear that God’s message was being proclaimed because, at last, the church got busy:

“Love was on the move. Mercy was on the move. God was on the move. Moving people of all kinds to work with others they had never met, never would have cared to meet . . . conservative church groups hanging out with spokesmen for the gay community . . . Soccer moms and quarterbacks . . . hip-hop starts and country stars. This is what happens when God gets on the move: crazy stuff happens!”

*Popes were seen wearing sunglasses!
Jesse Helms was seen with a ghetto blaster!
Crazy stuff. Evidence of the spirit.”⁷*

All in ordinary time.

We need to keep moving if we have any thoughts of being faithful disciples of Jesus. If we are touched in any way by a desire to live lives that make a difference, the first thing we must realize is that *it’s not about us*.

A mature spiritual life does not ask, “What’s in it for me?” Sometimes even the spiritual life becomes something to fill our souls, to satisfy our longings, to make us feel good.

Those might be bonus features, but the truth is that what’s in it for us – ultimately – is merely the knowledge that we are doing what we were created to do. We are being what we were created to be.

It’s not about me. It’s not about you. It’s about God’s message of love.

And love is about justice. And love is about healing.

Jesus spent some of his day-to-day schedule healing the sick and banishing demons from their lives. But he spent most of his ordinary time sharing the message that this is our job. He showed us how to do it. Now it’s our turn.

⁷ From Bono’s address to the National Prayer Breakfast.

And Paul was quick to mention that he was willing to share this message for free without cost to the hearers. But it cost him something. It cost him his daily comforts. It cost him money going from place to place.

Friends, it's important to remember that sharing this message indeed costs something. We want to offer it to the masses for free so that any person could come through these doors and hear the message through worship and music. We want any child to come through and have the opportunity to witness tender love in the church's nursery, and through classes, and through programs for their parents. We want any stranger to come through these doors and find help for addiction and underemployment and loneliness. We want the doors to be open and the lights to be on.

But these things are not free to the ones to provide them any more than Paul's ministry did not cost him dearly. It's tempting to focus on how much we should be giving to share God's message. But for now, I want to focus on how much we get to keep.

Scripture suggests that we *keep* 90% of what we earn, but share the rest in order to spread this message of love. Jesus and Paul showed us how to do us. Now it's our turn. (And we are not being asked to give anything near what Jesus and Paul gave, if you know what I mean.)

On this day of our LORD, on this ordinary day – and for most of us it is truly ordinary – if we have been lifted up in any way, if we have received a message of love in any language – now it is our turn. It's our turn to serve. It's our turn to give. It's our turn to spread the word that God is love.

Now it's our turn.

Let us pray: LORD of all good, break open our souls that we might be moved. Amen.