

The Ordinary in God's Hands

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

The apostle Paul writes to a church where he was the founding pastor. He speaks to a jumble of their moral and spiritual problems. To this diverse group of Christians in this cosmopolitan city, he first reminds them of the state in which Christ's good news came to them: "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world...." Paul goes on, but you get the sense.

Paul isn't depressed that the congregation is a bag stuffed with such worldly losers. He's excited. He's celebrating. He knows what God can do in the ordinary. These Christians in Corinth especially need to be reminded of God's work in common life, because they've been revering the flashier gifts of the Spirit, gifts like those that enable people to speak spectacularly in public worship. Paul helps them realize that God's grace also works in ordinary ways.

Paul could have chosen a different approach in his letter. He could have quoted the Old Testament about how God used common people for uncommon service. If this had been his method, he could start way back, noting how God worked through Moses, although Moses was a murderer. Paul could range further back and mention Abraham who was a liar or Jacob a cheat. or, he could point to David who was an adulterer, but who, as 1 Samuel 27 informs us, was also a genocidal mass murderer.

If Paul were going to continue the list of how God works in ordinary life, he could leap ahead to Jesus as the greatest example of God's grace in our ordinary existence. After Jesus started preaching, he mostly traveled in Galilee's smaller villages, and, along with healing the masses as well as the privileged, he told parables of how God works in ordinary life. He presented parables about laborers who stood in the bazaar waiting to be hired and of a shepherd who set out to find a sheep lost from the flock's 100, and when he found it he called everybody around to rejoice; and a woman who lost one of her ten coins who then swept her house and called all to rejoice when she found it; he mentioned a son, lost in confusion about what's really important in life, who when finally trudging home as a wasteful failure, meets his father running out to "find" him. Paul could report how Jesus was executed as an ordinary criminal and yet how God used that ordinary miscarriage of justice in the most surprising and gracious way.

God's becoming human in Jesus shows that God is concerned about daily life, which when you think about it, is where we most need God. Ordinary life beats us down a day at a time and makes us numb, tired, and cynical. Daily life can diminish our faith, sap our hope, and blunt our love. In the nineteenth century, the Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, portrayed this in a story, "The Death of Ivan Ilych." "The life of Ivan Ilych," he wrote, "had been most simple, and most ordinary, and therefore most terrible."

Paul proclaims, however, that because of God's grace life doesn't have to remain ordinary nor need we despair that we're ordinary. The way God uses the ordinary makes common things useful and ordinary people holy. So, it's not unspiritual to talk about the church's need for money or to bring our financial offerings to worship. All earthly things can be used to God's glory. Most amazing is that when we become aware of God's grace to us, we begin to see holy things right here in daily life that we can do for God's glory. Here in life's mundane drudgery, God turns us ordinary humans into the saints, the real Christians, the true humans we were created to be.

As Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth, Greece, he wants to open their eyes to God's working in ordinary lives. He's telling them to seek something other than religious thrills, and he warns them not to get puffed up with pride. First, they must place their ordinary lives in God's hands, and they'll then discover what God wants to do through them. When we truly recognize God's grace, we begin to see ourselves and our gifts differently.

We're all God's ordinary creatures through whom God does wonderful and extraordinary things. Here are a couple examples.

In 1943, an aged black man died. His mother, a slave, had been carried away — no one knew where — when their master died. Her son had been dumped in a sack — puny, hardly alive — to grow up in the Reconstruction era of the South.

Never knowing his birthday, he began to wander at about thirteen, trying to find a way to go to school and to help his people. He loved to paint and received honorable mention in the 1893 Chicago World's Fair for a painting, but he put away his brushes to help his people of color. He prayed every morning and constantly when at work. He said, "I discover nothing in my laboratory. If I come here of myself, I am lost. But I can do all things through Christ."

His name was George Washington Carver. White southerners would call him Doctor Carver, but they'd never call him Mister George Washington Carver. He called himself an ordinary man used by God. He created 300 products from the common peanut, 118 from the common sweet potato, and 75 from the common pecan. God did that through an abandoned orphan.

The daughter of a wealthy Albanian family, born 1910 in Yugoslavia decided at twelve to respond to Christ by helping others. In 1937, with \$2 in her pocket and the task of helping the poorest of the poor, she moved into the streets of Calcutta, India, after having taught there for a while.

she was a Roman Catholic sister, although she took off the nun's large habit and wore a blue-trimmed, white sari instead. She became Mother Teresa in a religious order that, at her death in 1997, had more than sixty schools, sixty dispensaries, seventy clinics, twenty orphanages, and 35 homes for the dying in 67 countries, including the United States, a nation that she noted, while visiting here, is so incredibly poor. An ordinary person used by God.

Just ordinary people, like us. That's all God has — in ancient Corinth, Greece, or in our towns: Failures like us, doubters like us, spiritual orphans like us, sinners like us. God is extraordinary, and God works miracles in the ordinary. No matter how strong the temptation for Christians to designate trained pastors as the people able to do the important, religious ministries, God uses real Christians, like those Christians sitting around you, to do God's extraordinary things. God uses real Christians, like those in Corinth or those in our congregation who repeat themselves constantly, or who always talk and never listen, or who unexpectedly flash hot or cold, or who seem in perpetual crisis. God doesn't have any other kind of people to use, just ordinary people like us. But, oh what God can do through us! As Paul says it, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world ... to reduce to nothing things that are...."

Today as proof, again, that God is in our midst and that God turns the ordinary into extraordinary, we come to God's table. No matter how ornate the tables that we celebrate this meal upon, Jesus used an ordinary table of his time. Here, at this table, we trust that God will again do the extraordinary out of the ordinary. Whether we are weak, ordinary, or even foolish, for us and for our salvation God turns this ordinary loaf and this ordinary cup into the living presence of Christ. When we receive here God's gracious gifts, we become the true humans, the real Christians, the genuine saints God created us to be. Then God does extraordinary things through ordinary people like us. Amen.