

Ordinary Time, and Ordinary People  
Proper 8A, June 26, 2011

When I was a small child, my older siblings went through a creative phase, or maybe I should call it a fad, that involved drawing pictures on a piece of wood and then shellacking the wood with a heavy coat of glaze. As a child, of course, I found these amateur works of art quite fascinating. Only later did I learn that they were signs of our family's somewhat adorable religious weirdness: my oldest brother did a shellacked drawing of the crucifixion; and my oldest sister did one of an older sibling filling a cup of water from the tap and handing it to a smaller child, with a caption that read, "Whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones... will receive their reward." But I was a later-born child, fifth in a line of seven, so what did I care if these art projects were a little bit strange? I loved the image of an older sibling giving a cup of water to a younger one. If only it were a better representation of what really went on in our household!

It wasn't until much later that I learned that no, Jesus is not talking about little children when he refers to the gracious act of giving a cup of cold water to "one of these little ones." This is one of those moments when we realize that our English-language translation of Scripture has led us a little bit astray. "Little ones" does not refer to small children. It refers to the less famous, less notorious, and less newsworthy faithful ones in the community to whom Matthew's Gospel was written. Said simply, "little ones" refers to—and I don't mean to give offense—you and me. Ordinary Christians—the workaday folks, the commonplace women and men who live together, pray together, work together, and sleep together, and all without any hope or desire for everlasting glory.

It is fitting that this is our Gospel reading for the first "green" Sunday of the year, the first Sunday in what the Church calls "Ordinary Time." For the last half-year or so, we have traced the incarnation, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and proclaimed once again that the Holy Spirit has come among us like a violent wind. But now we face the other half of the Christian year—a six-month period of growth and life, but not as much in the way of festivals, carnivals, solemnities, and feasts. And maybe that's a good thing. It may be impossible for us to really understand what those first Christian communities were like, since between them and us are twenty centuries of world-changing events, revolutions, reformations, and upheavals. They were really not newsworthy. They were small, even tiny bands of fervent Jewish and Gentile women and men in a distant corner of the Roman Empire. Even those of Matthew's community who could credibly be called "great"—those who were extraordinary: the martyrs, the prophets, the most important apostles—I doubt we would have heard much about them in the great cities of the world at the time.

They were "Ordinary Time" people, perhaps more like you and me than we might have thought. And so I'd like to offer you an Ordinary Time story about a few of God's "little ones."

Two years ago, as part of a parish internship, I organized a group of ten volunteers from St. Andrew's Church in Greenlake to go to New Orleans and rebuild houses for a week. We went there in late May and did, oh everything, for there was everything to be done—we sanded and mudded walls, then primed and painted them; we drilled Sheetrock into ceilings; we nailed siding onto a house; we laid ceramic tile, we grouted, we sanded, we swept, we cleaned. And it was hot. Sometimes we would feel a breeze, but even in May New Orleans is a humid place to work. And every once in a while, usually in the mid-afternoon, someone would point out that we were rehabilitating houses in a drained swamp, a former bayou, a section of land that lay several inches below sea level. If you walk up to a levee, you can see the Mississippi flowing *above* the city. Why would we do this? What's the point? Won't this basin flood again? And given global warming and the disruption of weather systems around the world, wouldn't it flood very soon? Isn't this madness, what we're doing?

And it's not only that. Some of us were well aware that we were not exactly skilled construction workers. One person on our team noticed one day that others kept coming behind her to redo all the work she had done. By the end of that day, she was frustrated. Another volunteer felt even more discouraged. He meant well, but he felt he had a long, long way to go if he wanted to fulfill his dream of, in his words, "making a difference" in New Orleans. There were many frustrated tears that day.

Even those of us who thought we were a little more skillful, or at least trainable, nurtured few illusions that we were making a big

impact. On the day when we hung Sheetrock, I think we only managed to attach five or six pieces to the ceiling. It's discouraging to get to the end of a long workday and see that only a few more rectangles of Sheetrock are hanging on the ceiling, and whole rooms still wait to be finished. Whole rooms? Whole neighborhoods. A whole city. We were there to make a difference, but we felt very, very little...disturbingly ordinary.

And this is where I felt I had to say something, do something. At dinner one night, I made a little speech. I reminded these good people that they came from St. Andrew's, a parish that has a deep and broad gift for action. At St. Andrew's, it's not a big deal to send not one but two groups to New Orleans in a typical year. Like us, they participate in the Teen Feed program, but also the monthly community dinner for homeless folks, and Tent City, and environmental-justice projects. St. Andrew's is good at tasks, agendas, objectives. St. Andrew's gets things done.

But in New Orleans, it doesn't always work that way. It's a funky, unpredictable, rough, wild place. The problems are overwhelming, yet somehow, in some bizarre way, if you can see all the problems through the eyes of the "little ones" of New Orleans, they're not such a big deal.

In such a wild and troubled place, our simple presence was a ministry all its own. Our volunteer who felt discouraged when others redid her work—it was she who spoke at length to a homeowner, a New Orleanian, a woman who stopped by her house to meet all the strangers who were working on it, and identified this volunteer as a kindred spirit. The homeowner singled her out—our friend and coworker—to sit down for a chat. "You," she said. "Come and sit with me. I need someone to talk to." And nothing could have been more valuable. Most of the people in New Orleans feel lonesome, bereft, and strung out. The whole region was traumatized. To simply go there, sit down, and chat with someone is a tremendous contribution.

One of the odd truths about mission trips like these is that, in the end, we realize that we didn't have to go. We could have stayed in Seattle, stayed in our lives, stayed with you, stayed in our workplaces, stayed with our families and partners. Neighborhoods in Seattle need Sheetrocking. Your workplace and mine cry out for the ministry of simple presence, a ministry that might be free of religious language (at least in this part of the world) but is full of God's life, God's flourishing life.

I wonder—can you sense the grace of God in your little, ordinary life? You're a teacher, and some days you wonder what anyone has learned from your labors. You are a nurse, and you've seen one too many tragedies, and the gray dawn finds you ruminating about the career you chose. You're an environmental activist (I met a few of these at St. Andrew's!) and you feel discouraged by the magnitude of our planetary crisis. Or it's much smaller: you're in a relationship that confounds you. Or you're confounded by loss, by loneliness.

During this long, Ordinary season, we are invited by Jesus, the first and littlest of the Little Ones, to deepen our listening, deepen our awareness of the growing kingdom of God in our small lives, our small contributions. Like my old Sheetrocking friends, all of us are saying and doing tiny things, making little efforts. Sometimes it's just a kind gesture, or a silent embrace. Sometimes it's a small act of justice, a standing up, taking a stand for yourself, or for your co-worker. Sometimes it's just holding a suffering person—or a suffering city—on your heart. But be comforted, be encouraged: the tiny patch of land that you're tilling in your workplace, the tiny patch of land we're working in our Teen Feed and Care Team ministries, all the different little patches we're working—these are part of the great garden of God, flourishing in the summer sun of God's grace.

And so I'll close with a little poem by William Stafford, a poem for you and me, the Little Ones, as we move into Ordinary Time together. It's called "Starting with Little Things":

Love the earth like a mole,  
fur-near. Nearsighted,  
hold close the clods,  
(their fine-print headlines.)  
Pat them with soft hands --

Like spades, but pink and loving; they  
break rock, nudge giants aside,  
affable plow.  
Fields are to touch;  
each day nuzzle your way.

Tomorrow the world.

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