

Preaching the Texts of Ordinary Time

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Ordinary People, a novel-turned-movie by Judith Guest (1976), tells the story of an ordinary family coping with the pain of the accidental loss of one of its family members – a son, who dies during a boating accident on Lake Michigan. A younger brother struggles with survivor guilt; a mother strives for suburban perfection to quell the emotional chaos within herself; a father rethinks what he had assumed was self-made success, as little more than random luck. In short, it is a story of how ordinary people live, grieve, and continue to live in the aftermath of losing a beloved member of their once-tight family unit.

Since we spend a majority of the liturgical year in Ordinary Time, most of it encompassing the six months from Trinity Sunday in June, until the First Sunday in Advent in December, I thought it might be a refreshing pedagogy to hear the voices of some ordinary people exploring the gospel texts, most of them from Mark's Gospel, as they relate to the ordinary lives and struggles of a doctor, a widow, a teacher of the law, a personal body guard, and a student. For I think there is always something dignified, noble, and moving when ordinary, regular people reflect the gospel as members of the larger, organic human community. As Mark begins his account, "the beginning of *the gospel* about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1), our intertwined stories about our lives and Jesus' life lean towards the gospel/good news of the Kingdom of God now being close at hand, regardless of how difficult that might be to believe. Ordinary people in Jesus' days and ordinary people now form *a community* when we listen and watch for God's good news reflected in each other's lives and dreams, as affirmed by the following poem:

*I am yes. I am Yes to you, to a you for
me,
to a you for me.
People are a dialogue, I say,
if not their words would touch nothing
like waves in the cosmos picked up by no
radio
like messages to the uninhabited planets,
or a bellowing in the lunar void
or a telephone call to an empty house.
(A person alone does not exist.)*

Ernesto Cardenal, from *Cosmic Canticle*, published 1989

Mark's Gospel roots Jesus very succinctly in the ordinary. Mark drops the fully-grown Jesus into a people trying to be faithful during a Jewish uprising against Rome, the pending destruction of Jerusalem, and their ensuing dispersion (CE 66-72). Mark "immediately" drops the adult Jesus at the feet of the very earthy character, John the Baptist, more richly described than any other secondary character in Mark's Gospel,

as sandal-slinging, locust-eating, and camel-hair clad. Mark's John evokes images of dirt under fingernails, of unkept facial hair, and of breath that prepares the way for the word to be made flesh. John is a prophet, not ordinary in his calling, but perhaps ordinary in his complete acceptance of his own unembellished humanity. So, when the young man, Jesus, wanders onto the desert scene in Mark 1:9, we are prepared for the physical body of Christ to share those attributes of humanity which are our daily concern – cleanliness, hair, feet, food, clothes, conversation, calling, vocation, location, forgiveness, hope. Jesus will meet ordinary people: menstruating women and myopic men, crowds he'd probably like to pepper spray, egotistical teachers, gamey children, and penniless widows. He meets them where they are and addresses their very real concerns, and the Kingdom of God will take root on earth, in a people who must deal daily with suffering by a God/man who comes to bring triumph through suffering.

Because healings, exorcisms, and miracles account for almost a third of Mark's Gospel; because thirteen healing stories (four concerning women) are told in Mark; and because sickness is part of what makes us genuinely ordinary and human, I spoke first with a doctor, an obstetrician-gynecologist, concerning her take on the healings performed by Jesus. In *Ordinary 13* (Mark 5: 21-43) two women present with debilitating illnesses: Jairus' daughter, who is mortally ill and a woman who is running out of resources to alleviate her twelve-year battle with menstrual problems. My friend says that she is "amazed that they even talk about this in the Bible, something so personal, quiet, something that makes one ritually unclean and pulls one away from the community. There would have been nothing anyone could have done in that period of time to mitigate her suffering," she notes. "There would have been no hysterectomies, no adequate medicines; nothing short of a huge miracle would have helped her. And this woman's desperation is huge: she's untreatable, she can't be with anyone, she's like a leper, cut off from the community." She comments that the way that Jesus heals her is to hear her truth, her pain. "Where she feels totally excluded, Jesus calls her daughter and accepts her as a member of a larger family," she says. As an aside, my friend laughs and suggests that maybe the woman hits menopause when she touches Jesus, and the life-long bleeding comes to a sudden halt! She also imagines the frustration of Jairus, who in triage fashion, has life-and-death need of Jesus, but who must tolerate the untimely interruption of this unclean woman imposing herself upon Jesus as they rush to aid his dying child.

In *Ordinary 23* (Mark 7: 24-37), Jesus makes a house-call to the home of an immigrant woman whose daughter "has an evil spirit." This woman, like Jairus, also falls at Jesus' feet and begs on behalf of her child. In the following pericope, people bring a man to Jesus who is deaf and dumb, and they beg for healing, too. My doctor friend notes that parents are frequently agents of healing, and usually genuinely concerned about the welfare of a child. Friends, however, can have different motives for requesting help. Perhaps the friends who bring the deaf and dumb man to Jesus just want to see what Jesus can do. "Perhaps they want to see this guy in action for themselves – to test his true abilities," she says. It's not only the sick who are touched by Jesus, she notes. This Syrophenician mother is affirmed by Jesus for her valid retort to his off-putting comment, and her daughter is healed. And the friends of the deaf and dumb man are likewise affirmed and given what they perhaps seek: the razzle dazzle miracle, the excitement that overwhelms them, and the potential for

even more miracles by this healer, Jesus.

In reviewing the healing by others using Jesus' name in *Ordinary 26* (Mark 9: 38-50), my physician friend refers to this phenomena as "downstream information," and notes that it is perfectly valid and happens all the time. "If I give a patient advice about getting proper exercise, taking vitamins, and changing her diet, and she relays this information to her next-door neighbor, that's downstream information," she said. "It's a perfectly legitimate means of achieving public health." Interestingly, she comments upon the imagery of "salt" at the end of the passage, noting that she thinks of salt most often as used in IV saline solutions to achieve balance in someone's system – to keep someone's blood from "diluting out." "Perhaps to have salt in yourselves and peace with others is about balance," she notes. "My patients need to be at peace with themselves, with what's happening to their bodies, and with their proposed plan of care, or they won't follow through. They also need to be at peace with me and trust me as their doctor, for optimal healing. Peace, trusting yourself and another person, are as essential to our sense of self as salt, perhaps," she says.

And finally, in *Ordinary 30* (Mark 10: 46-52) we have the story of Blind Bartimaeus, the last healing story in Mark's Gospel. The blind man, recognizing that Jesus is near, shouts out for Jesus to have mercy on him! "It's interesting what *have mercy* might mean to this man," my friend notes. "It could mean, take time and listen to me. It could mean, relieve me of this trial. It could mean, give me a blessing, or all of those things." Jesus, she chuckles, sounds like some surgeons I know; the way he treats this man--"Go get the patient!" "What do you want?" Jesus is blunt, direct, and not exactly gentle, she notes. "Maybe he wants clarification as to what *have mercy* means to this man. Nevertheless, his bedside/roadside technique is to truly hear what this man is saying, to be totally present to him, even through the cacophany of others around them, some rebuking him, some cheering him on. Jesus employs an economy of talk in this story; his actions speak for themselves," she says. "It's a minimalistic approach: he heals one, giving evidence through this one, of his potential power for systemic healing," she adds.

My second ordinary "saint" is a 78-year-old widow, who lost her beloved husband four years ago, and who also has lost seven extended family members over the past two years. I wanted to hear her commentary on *Ordinary 28* (Mark 10: 17-31), another story of someone approaching Jesus with a request so heartfelt that he falls to his knees: a request for the key to eternal life. What must he do to gain it? Is "being good" enough, or is something beyond that required to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus presses him further, with a demand to dispossess himself and give everything to the poor. My widow friend resonates with the word "poor," and tells me that she came from a very poor farming background, where her mother was a teacher and her father was raised in an orphanage. She said she met her future husband when she was fourteen, and that God has been good to her and blessed her with children, with a home and food to eat, and with the opportunity to serve as a missionary with her husband. Upon hearing this story, she notes that although losing her husband has left a huge vacancy in her life (she said this three times), maybe this story means that she hasn't lost everything after all. "Maybe it means that one always has more to give than one thinks."

And when Jesus speaks of the one who "loses" home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me, how does a widow hear this, who has

lost her husband and many beloved family members in a very short time? What does she think her reward will be? “Maybe,” this widow notes, “my reward is simply that I am still here to help anyone who needs me – anyone who is not a family member.” She says she never considers herself to be first in anything, since she grew up poor. “To think that the last might be first means a lot to me,” she says. “But you must love God first to understand any of this.”

In *Ordinary 32* (Mark 12: 38-44) Mark juxtaposes two styles of discipleship: that of the teachers of the law, who are all show and no substance, and that of the poor widow, who is all substance and little show. The widow in Jesus’ story gives everything and is totally dependent on God for her livelihood. My widow friend read this and notes that the widow must have felt good about giving, but didn’t make a show of it or a display of her giving. “She did what she could do,” she said. “She didn’t try to say things to put herself above others.” She also said that giving means more than giving money – that it means “singing in the choir and ringing handbells, sitting with the sick, caring for new mothers and new babies, and working for reconciliation between groups that are predominantly one race or another.”

Because one of Jesus’ primary roles in Mark’s Gospel is that of “teacher,” using the verbs “preach” fourteen times and the verb “teach” seventeen times and referring to Jesus as “teacher” twelve times, then it is not surprising that the primary opposition to Jesus’ ministry comes from those in the teaching profession: the teachers of the law, the scribes, and the Pharisees. So, my third saint is a teacher of the law, a university professor of philosophy and law, who was asked to share how he understands this conflicted relationship between Jesus and other teachers. In *Ordinary 10* (Mark 3: 20-35), after Jesus’ own family members suggest his insanity, teachers of the law from Jerusalem confront Jesus with their own assessment that he is possessed by demonic or satanic spirits. Jesus responds with a series of sayings concerning Satan, culminating in the “truly, I say to you” issue of one unpardonable sin, blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, or in other words, the confusion of good and evil – which seems aimed directly back at the accusatory teachers of the law. Jesus calls their bluff. So it comes as no surprise in *Ordinary 14* (Mark 6: 1-13), for Jesus to be rejected in his own home town for his teaching. My teacher of the law friend muses that “familiarity can breed an unwillingness to accept authority” in this case. He notes that his own capacity to teach often depends on his insight into his students and who they are. But in this story about Jesus, his own hometown people’s insight and understanding of Jesus are used to shut him out, lock him out. And this lack of trust, lack of openness on their part, actually hamstring Jesus’ ministry there. “You can’t teach by steamrolling,” he says. “You have to bring them along.” My teacher of the law said this reminds him of the commission directly following Isaiah’s call, “Go and tell this people, ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (Isaiah 6: 9-10).

In *Ordinary 25* (Mark 9: 30-37), Mark’s second passion prediction, Jesus wants to talk seriously with his disciples about ultimate things, threatening things like betrayal, death, and “rising,” which they don’t understand and are afraid to even question him about. They prefer to talk about petty things like rank, esteem, and reputation, things that get in the way of their understanding about more serious issues. My teacher

friend notes that Jesus' responding pedagogy is demonstrative, using his body in an enacted parable, sitting down, pulling a little child to stand among them, taking the child in his arms, to perform his message. "It's performance preaching," he noted. "Jesus' conversation had the potential for shaking up their world," he said. "But they were not listening to him because they were more concerned about how they were seen in the eyes of others. Children are not into the esteem game," he said. "They need only love and affirmation."

The issue of favoritism arises in *Ordinary 29* (Mark 10: 35-45). Will Jesus do a favor for James and John? Will Jesus grant them favored status in glory? Remembering that James and John (Peter and Andrew) were with Jesus at his mountaintop transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13), this request does not come from left field; it comes from their prior experience with him. Jesus answers them with one of his classic reversals, asking if they can remain close to him in the valleys as well – the suffering, the dying. My teacher notes that "sometimes in order to drive home a point, you take what the students give you and turn it around on them, turn it upside down to get them to go to a deeper level. That's what Jesus seems to be doing here. Favor is key. I don't think they want to be great. I think they want to remain in Jesus' inner-circle, close to him in his glory, as they have been in his ministry, loved by him then, too."

Finally, in *Ordinary 31* (Mark 12: 28-34), something extraordinary happens: a teacher is affirmed by Jesus, the only time this occurs in Mark's Gospel! Is it because the teacher of the law asks a good question: Of all the commandments (613), which is the most important? "Maybe," my teacher friend says, "it's important to ask *the* pertinent question. But I think it's more likely because this teacher of the law didn't try to trap Jesus; because his question was sincere; because he had no hidden agenda; because he was being straight-forward, with no scheming or devious intent. I think Jesus recognized that they were on the same page and affirmed this teacher in a significant way by acknowledging his proximity to the kingdom of God."

My fourth saint is a body guard who was in the personal protection business and provided security for the likes of Bobby Brown and Whitney Houston, Beyonce, Eminem, Alvin Iverson, Alicia Keyes, Earth, Wind and Fire, Jayzee, Will Smith, Kelly Clarkson, and Clay Aiken. He knows the phenomena of "crowds" very well, and since crowds play a major role in Mark's narratives, he gives interesting insight into their function in the stories. In *Ordinary 8* (Mark 6:30 -34, 53-56) Jesus and his disciples retreat by boat to escape the maddening crowd, but they follow him, and he has compassion on them because they are "like sheep without a shepherd" (v. 34). My friend says that you can tell if a crowd is wanting to do harm to someone. "Mostly, they are genuine souls," he says. "They just want to be close to someone who has charisma. You can tell by their emotional state – they shake, cry, become hysterical. You have to put yourself in a good frame of mind to deal with them. Jesus leads with his heart. He puts others' happiness before his own. He gives me the power to do that when I deal with crowds of people like this, and the crowds give me the opportunity to do Jesus' work." Later in the story, when the crowds throng to Jesus, bringing their sick on mats to touch and be touched by Jesus, my friend comments: "Touch is weird; some want to, others don't. Some touch with love and some touch with fear. Their touch gives energy to Jesus, too. We should not assume that touch is always draining to Jesus. It gives him energy, too. Wouldn't you rather preach to a crowd? Doesn't that give you energy?" The same thought carries over to *Ordinary*

10 (John 6: 24-35) where the crowds take to boats to follow Jesus to Capernaum. “Jesus is gaining momentum by using the crowd,” my friend notes. “He is working that crowd! You can use the whole group to control the behavior of a few and keep them in line. I think Jesus is using the crowd to make his point. He speaks plainly to them and speaks truth to them and connects with them by speaking about something they all understand: hunger. The approval of the crowd is a sign of his leadership skills and their trust.”

And in *Ordinary 16* (Mark 8:27-39), where Jesus reveals to his disciples the true nature of his Christhood for the first time in Mark – suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection—and they refuse to believe him, Jesus then pulls in the whole crowd to make his point. Again, my friend notes, “When you talk to a crowd like this, you have to get close to them, be soft and gentle with them, earn their trust. No crowd is stable. It is risky being with a crowd. You never know their intentions.” He suggests that Jesus is noble, not brave, but noble, to go through a crowd like this. “He controls the crowd by speaking the truth,” he says. “He earns their trust by speaking truth to them plainly, probably in a soft, gentle way.”

My last saint is a student, 16 years old, very articulate about her faith for someone her age. She looked at two very familiar passages where a child is a major character, and shares her insights. In the horrible story of political intrigue from *Ordinary 7* (Mark 14-29), where Herodias manipulates the beheading of her arch-enemy, John the Baptist, my young friend says that from the young girl’s perspective, it’s a matter of guidance – or misguidance. “Young girls look to their mothers for guidance,” she says. “I’m looking at colleges, and I turn to my mother a lot for guidance. This mother should have been more concerned for her daughter and for what would have benefited everyone. Instead, she and the king are swayed by peer pressure. They are all more worried about how they appear to the public, and what will happen to them. This story reminds me of the Bravo show, *Toddlers and Tiarras*, which is more about manipulative moms than about the children. This kind of manipulation could be labeled abusive, because it does damage to the child,” she notes.

And finally, in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand from John’s Gospel (*Ordinary 9, John 6: 1-21*), the only telling of the four Gospel accounts that includes a child/boy as a character (v. 9), she notes that this makes children feel special that they are part of this very important story. “It’s like Jesus saying, ‘Let the little children come to me.’ It’s a sign of inclusion and respect for children. It’s saying ‘don’t exclude children from the possibilities of Jesus’ miracles.’” She says that including a little boy in this narrative reminds her of one of her favorite verses, 1 Timothy 4: 12, which she has inscribed on a favorite necklace: “Do not let them look down on you because you are young.”

My point in this is pedagogy: use the ordinary people in your community to gain insight into the stories of Jesus. If the story includes a teacher, speak with a teacher. If the story includes a child or a widow, speak with a child or a widow. They love sharing with you their views on the stories, and they enhance the way Jesus might have touched the lives of those around him then, and now. And these ordinary friends have valuable spiritual truths to share, as they have been touched by these stories about people like themselves, and as they also have been touched by Jesus himself.

My sincerest thanks to the “saints” who shared their heartfelt spiritual insights with me and allowed me to publish them in this article.