

Preaching the Texts for Ordinary Time

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Just as the vast majority of Christian history unfolds between the out-pouring of the Spirit on the church at Pentecost nearly 2,000 years ago and the future fulfillment of God's dreams for the cosmos in the "second advent" of Jesus, so the bulk of the liturgical year comes between Pentecost Sunday and the First Sunday of Advent. We sometimes call this long season—24 Sundays in 2014—"Ordinary Time." Though the season technically gets its name from the "ordinal" numbers which mark its progress, we may find it both irresistible and helpful to think of these Sundays as invitations to reflect on the church's faithfulness and effectiveness in the challenges and opportunities of its mundane, day-to-day, and "ordinary" existence.

"Housework": The Tasks and Opportunities of Ordinary Time

An image of the community of Jesus' disciples which appears in two of the lectionary texts of this season is "household" (Matthew 10:24-25, June 22; Matthew 13:51-52, July 27). When we imagine God's community as a "household," we can also think of the tasks and responsibilities of church life as "housework"—the ecclesial equivalent of such ordinary things as preparing meals, washing dishes, doing laundry, and paying bills.

Years ago, when poet Kathleen Norris had just begun to date the man who later became her husband, they attended the Roman Catholic wedding of one of his high school classmates, an Irish-American fellow from Long Island. Norris had left her Presbyterian roots behind in college, and she attended worship only when she visited her grandparents in South Dakota. She was unfamiliar with the actions and practices of a Catholic mass, and she was intrigued by the Eucharist. She says,

At one point, I gasped. "Look at that! The priest is cleaning up! He's doing the dishes." I found it remarkable—and still find it remarkable—that in that big, fancy church, after all of the dress-up and formalities of the wedding mass, homage was being paid to the lowly truth that we human beings must wash the dishes after we eat and drink. . . . And I found it enormously comforting to see the priest as a kind of daft housewife, overdressed for the kitchen, in bulky robes, puttering about the altar, washing up after having served so great a meal to so many people.¹

The Lord's Supper is bread and drink, baptism is a bath, and preaching is family story-telling; worship is, in many ways, housework. Housework is, by its very nature, repetitive. You work all weekend to get the clothes clean for Monday, and when Friday arrives, you have to start all over again. Cook dinner, feed the family, do the dishes, and make the grocery list for tomorrow's supper; on and on it goes, the same things, again and again.

Similarly, in the household of God, there is a lot of recurring housework. The church year is a grand cycle: Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Ordinary Time, and back to Advent. Some years fly so quickly by that it seems we were just

putting away the Advent wreath when it is time to get it out again. In church life, there are scores of repeated and predictable tasks. Each year, for instance, we nominate and elect leaders, draw-up budgets, promise to fund them, and offer ministries which we hope will be transformational. Such tasks are as regular and as common as mowing the lawn in the summertime.

We occasionally grow weary of these “church chores,” which is understandable, but we also know that when we can no longer see the value of them, it’s a sign that something has gone wrong, just as a lack of attention to the condition of one’s home or body is a possible indicator of depression. Ordinary Time gives us opportunities to reflect on the significance of unspectacular but steady faithfulness to the mission and ministry of the church. Most of us will not demonstrate our love for God and neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40, October 26) in a single gesture of heroic self-sacrifice; instead, we will show our love by our diligence in the daily tasks of caring for the people, communities, and places we call home. Housework matters because we do not have healthy and welcoming homes without it.

A Community of Self-Giving Love: Trinity and Reign of Christ Sundays

We do “housework” of ongoing church life with the assurance that we are part of a community of self-giving love. The First and Twenty-Fourth Sundays after Pentecost frame Ordinary Time. The First Sunday (June 15) is Trinity Sunday, a day to celebrate the mystery that the one God is a community of three persons who delight in mutual, generous, and other-regarding love. The Twenty-Fourth Sunday (November 23) is Reign of Christ Sunday, on which we acknowledge that Jesus’ gracious and truthful reign creates a beloved community of justice, compassion, and peace. The entire season, then, is held in the embrace of divine love—the love who is Trinity and the love which energizes and characterizes Jesus’ rule and realm.

Trinity Sunday (June 15): Genesis 1:1-2:4a; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

When we attempt to describe God, we often reach for western philosophical terms like *omnipotent*, *omniscient*, and *omnipresent*, abstract labels which have far less resonance in Scripture than relational words like Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Only a handful of biblical texts make straightforward ontological claims about the nature of God (Exodus 3:14; I John 4:8), but there is an overwhelming abundance of texts which helps us to know who God *is* by what God *does*. We know God primarily by means of verbs: God makes, blesses, and sets limits. God judges, forgives, and reconciles. God sends, gathers, and hosts. God suffers, rejoices, and, most of all, loves.

The God who is Trinity also calls people to share the divine mission in the world, a mission which extends God’s life-giving and life-gladdening love to everyone and to all things. Our texts describe two mandates which God gives to God’s people: to tend wisely and well to creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4a) and to make disciples of Jesus (Matthew 28:16-20).

At the dawn of creation, having spoken the world into order out of chaos and having fashioned human beings in the divine image, God gave them this vocation: “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon

the face of the earth” (Genesis 1:28).

In the lingering light of his resurrection, Jesus gathered his followers on a Galilean mountain and gave to them this commission: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). Both mandates are global in scope: “Fill the *earth* and subdue it.” “Make disciples of *all nations*.” Both are grateful responses to the generosity of God. We labor to nurture it and to tend to the earth which sustains it. Filled with wonder over the grace given to us by the crucified and risen Jesus, we work to share his gospel with the world.

We answer these mandates as people whom the Trinity deeply blesses by making us part of the community of God’s own life. Immersed in God’s Trinitarian nature, we experience “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Corinthians 13:11-13). We live in the “love of God” who is our Creator and the Source of our worth and value. The God who made us loves us with an everlasting love. We live “in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” who accepts us as we are, forgives our sins, and has mercy on our brokenness. His grace frees us to live passionately and joyfully. We live in “the communion of the Holy Spirit.” We are never completely alone, even when we feel most afraid and most forsaken. We are held in the *koinonia* of the Spirit, a *koinonia* which is both the inner life of the Trinity and the shared life of the church which the Trinity creates and sustains.

Reign of Christ Sunday (November 23): Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

The Bible’s most enduring image of leadership is not *commander*, *warrior*, *judge* or *elder*. It is, instead, *shepherd*: one who tends, protects, leads, and nourishes the flock. *Shepherd* isn’t, as we might think, merely an image of religious leadership. It’s an image of what we would call civic, cultural, and economic leadership as well. Like the other peoples of the ancient near East, Israel thought of its kings, not only or mainly its priests, as shepherds.

For us, anyone who is in a position to care for the well-being of others is a shepherd. Elected officials are shepherds for their constituents; CEOs are shepherds for their corporations; doctors are shepherds for their patients; parents are shepherds for their children; teachers are shepherds for their students; and pastors are shepherds for their congregants. Everyone who offers leadership, however vast or modest its scope, is a shepherd.

All of us need shepherding. We need guidance: someone to help us find the right path or to rescue us when we have strayed from it. We need protection: someone to warn us of hidden dangers, to shelter us from avoidable adversity, and to provide for us havens of restoration. We need nurture: someone to share with us the nourishment of truth and the sustenance of wisdom.

Because we all need shepherds, it’s especially heartbreaking when the people we trust to care for us seem too busy, distracted, or insensitive to do so, and it’s crushing when the people who were supposed to be our shepherds use and abuse us. Shepherds who do not care tenderly and skillfully wreak havoc and inflict great harm. Think of the damage done by indifferent or corrupt shepherding:

Clergy who are merely professional in their care and offer staged compassion and pretend empathy to the struggling,

CEOs who drive their corporations into bankruptcy, take a golden parachute into luxury, and leave average employees without jobs or hope,

Elected officials who grow rich in office but become calloused toward the legitimate needs of the poor and marginalized,

Parents who neglect or abuse their children.

Shoddy or unethical shepherding wounds the body, bruises the soul, and rends the heart. Shepherds are accountable to God for what happens to their sheep, and the Hebrew Scriptures tell us that God has particular anger toward selfish shepherds. In verses which precede our text from Ezekiel, God warns Israel's heedless shepherds of impending judgment (Ezekiel 34:1-10). Then in our text, God pledges never to leave the vulnerable, lost, and hungry sheep of Israel in the hands of those self-centered shepherds (see 34:11-16).

Christians believe that God's pledge found its most complete fulfillment when Jesus came to live among us. In Jesus, God searched for scattered sheep. In Jesus' arms, God carried the injured back to safety. In Jesus' mercy, God nurtured the weak back to strength. Jesus shows us that God is a shepherd who does not rest until all the lost are found, all the displaced have been welcomed home, and all the hungry are satisfied.

In Matthew's Gospel (25:31-46), Jesus told a story about the last judgment which makes it clear that, as St. John of the Cross put it, "At the end of the day, the subject of the examination will be love." The parable's shepherd-king does not divide the sheep from the goats on the basis of beliefs they professed, doctrines they affirmed, or positions they defended. This judgment hinges on the presence or absence of compassion. The shepherd-king says that when people showed mercy on the least and lost, they were merciful to him.

With this story, Jesus claimed to be starving with the hungry, to be clothed only by shame with the naked, to be silenced in the voiceless, to be uprooted in the homeless, to be desolate with the abandoned, and to wrestle with limitation in the sick. Jesus wants to know: Did you see me in the least of these? Did you feed me by sharing your bread with the hungry, clothe me by offering a coat to the naked, visit me by spending time with the prisoners, care for me by nursing the sick, and love me by welcoming the stranger?

A couple of years ago, I met a young woman, an entrepreneur and activist in our town, who introduced me again to the Jesus who told this parable. A mutual friend had brought us together for lunch. As soon as our food was in front of us, she looked me searchingly in the eyes, and with a quiet but intense voice said,

I grew up around here. My grandfather was a preacher. I heard the stories about Jesus from him. I don't have much to do with organized religion, because, to me, the people in churches don't sound or act much like him. They spend a lot of time fussing over and protecting things he didn't seem to care about. If I understand what he said, when I feed hungry people, I feed him. Right? And when I help them find shelter, I shelter him. Right? So, what I want to know from you is, what do you intend to do about all

these people in our own community who don't have enough to eat or a decent place to live or any hope for a real job?"

My new friend wasn't harsh with me, and she didn't attack the church, either. In fact, in an odd way, she believes that the church has more potential for good than some of us believe it does. With fierce love in her heart, she challenged me to listen again to the Jesus I talk about all the time—the Jesus whose rule and reign creates and sustains a beloved community of justice, compassion, and peace.

Broken Families and Salvation History: The Genesis Texts in Ordinary Time (June 22-August 17)

God often creates beloved community out of broken relationships, just as God created the heavens and the earth from the swirling chaos of a "formless void" (Genesis 1:1). The readings from Genesis in Ordinary Time are the stories of shattered and shattering families; in another way, they are the stories of God's salvation. There are childless couples who yearn for a baby, and parents who grieve over the lives of the children they do have. We read about preferential treatment, raw ambition, and deceitful scheming. There is envy, hatred, and violence alongside occasional incursions of mercy, love, and peace. Divisions in the families of Israel's patriarchs and matriarchs were in Genesis the seedbed of much of the hostility which came to exist between Israel and its neighbors. These all-too-human stories provide astonished testimony that God brings salvation to God's people precisely through brokenness.

That astonishment pervades the stories about Joseph which occupy roughly the last fifth of the book of Genesis (chapters 37-50; see the readings for August 10 and 17). As Genesis narrates his story, Joseph's envious brothers sold him into slavery, but he rose from servitude to become one of the most powerful men in ancient Egypt. Toward the end of his life, he was reconciled with his family when his brothers came to Egypt during a time of severe famine to beg for food.

The Joseph stories warn us about the effects of arrogance and jealousy, inspire us to live with courage and integrity, and urge us to hope in God's providence. The narratives show how a rejected brother became the source of deliverance for his estranged family. They give evidence that forgiveness can transform malice. These stories tell that God works with us to absorb adversity and pain into a larger purpose. They invite us to trust that God is present even when we can neither see nor hear nor feel the intimations of that presence.

The Gospel of Matthew, Discipleship, and Ordinary Time

The Gospel lessons for Ordinary Time are from Matthew, as they are for nearly all of Advent 2013-Pentecost 2014. This gospel intends to shape its readers into devoted disciples of Jesus who "hear his words and act on them" (7:24-27) and who respond obediently to his commission to "go and make disciples of all nations" (28:18-20). Matthew tells the story of Jesus in a way that seizes us with the same amazement that grasped the people who encountered him in the first century: Jesus' teaching "astounds" us (7:28), his compassion touches us (9:36), and his call makes us his followers (4:18-22).

A concern for the formation of faithful disciples permeates Matthew's Gospel. In Matthew 10, Jesus prepared his disciples for a brief "mission trip," an opportunity

for them to do the kinds of things they had seen him doing (narrated in Matthew 8-9). At the heart of that training session, Jesus offered this brief and compelling description of discipleship: “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master. It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master” (10:24-25, June 22). To be a disciple of Jesus is to be engaged in a process of becoming progressively more like him.

In Matthew 16, following Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus spelled out the terms of discipleship: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (16:24-25, August 31). Disciples of Jesus lose their lives—they set aside the limited definitions and distorted images of self which give them their identity—in favor of the authentic life Jesus offers, defined by the will and way of God, shaped in the image of Jesus. As our lives become increasingly like his, we are able, as Peter did, to confess Jesus to be “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” (16:16, August 24).

Matthew presents Peter as an exemplar of discipleship and affirms his central role in the community of Jesus’ followers. Matthew does not “photo-shop” his picture of Peter by editing out the impulsive disciple’s flaws and failures. Instead, Matthew unflinchingly shows that Peter, like us, often stumbled along the path of following Jesus. For instance, Rudolf Schnackenburg believes that Matthew’s story of Jesus’ walking across stormy waters toward his frightened disciples in a wave-tossed boat (14:22-33, August 10) presents Peter as a “paradigm of faith and doubt.”² On the one hand, Peter risked stepping out of the boat to move toward Jesus; on the other, he was distracted from Jesus by the upheaval and chaos which raged around him. Sinking in the water, Peter’s cry for help is also the continuing prayer of the church: “Lord, save me!” (14:30).

Throughout his gospel, Matthew unhesitatingly describes Peter’s capacity for bluster (26:33-35) and denial (26:69-75). Nonetheless, Peter was the disciple to whom God first revealed Jesus’ identity as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (16:16, August 24). Matthew records (Mark and Luke do not.) Jesus’ affirmation of Peter’s confession: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven” (16:17). Jesus also identified Peter as “the rock” on which he would build his church (16:18) and as the bearer of unique authority (“the keys,” 16:19) in the Christian community. The nature and extent of Peter’s authority became (and continues to be) a cause of debate between “Catholics” and “Protestants”; however, Peter’s central and vital importance in the early church is clear. At least until the ascendancy of the Apostle Paul among Gentile Christians, Peter was the pivotal leader of the early Christian movement.

It is well-known that Matthew organized his gospel to present Jesus as the church’s Moses—its authoritative teacher. Matthew includes five major discourses of Jesus which parallel the Pentateuch, the “five books” which comprise the Torah of Moses. Each discourse contains collected teachings of Jesus on particular themes. The five discourses and their general themes are:

Chapters 5-7

Chapter 10 (June 22 and 29)

Chapter 13 (July 13-27)

The Nature of Christian Discipleship

The Disciples’ Mission in the World

The Kingdom of Heaven on Earth

These discourses are preceded and followed by extended narratives of Jesus' actions; in fact, the whole of Matthew's gospel is patterned by this alternating rhythm of Jesus' "words" and "deeds"—the words disciples are to obey and the deeds they are to do.

This five-fold organization of Jesus' teaching in Matthew underscores Jesus' Moses-like significance for the church. Jesus is not so much a "new Moses"; he is, instead, a still-deeper revelation of the heart and soul of God's will, the same will of God toward which Moses and the prophets had pointed. Jesus did not come to "abolish but to fulfill" the law which Moses received and taught (see Matthew 5:17-20).

Jesus concluded this third discourse with a brief parable which describes a "well trained scribe" (or "fully-discipled teacher") whose calling was to be a "master of the household" and to tend to a storehouse of wisdom which had been stocked with treasures "new" and "old" (Matthew 13:51-52, July 27). In Jesus' culture, householders managed large estates which belonged to the wealthy. A householder was responsible for meeting the material needs of everyone in the household. He managed its business affairs, supervised its servants, and saw to education of its young children. This job required sound stewardship. The manager could waste nothing: things both new and old—hand-me-downs and new garments, stored grain and fresh produce—had to be used.

Jesus' followers have a similar task: to use all of the resources of God's wisdom, both new and old, to meet the needs of the household of faith. For members of Matthew's church, this text assured them that they would have the wisdom they needed to meet the challenges they faced after Jesus' death and resurrection. They had "old" treasures, which were their memories of the ministry of the earthly Jesus. They would also receive "new" treasures from his always-speaking Spirit. Jesus had promised, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28:20).

Notice that Jesus mentioned "new treasures" first: they were to be given highest priority. This text cautions the church about the danger of our allowing the "old, old story" to become "old hat." It challenges us not to turn our hearts into museums of things past and invites us to allow the Holy Spirit to make them theaters of God's ever-new drama. God is always up to something new, beckoning us into the future, *and* God is always reminding us of something old, anchoring us to God's mighty deeds in the past.

Ordinary Time invites us into the storehouse to rummage around in the apparently everyday, mundane, and familiar resources of revelation and to discover in them the eternal, the miraculous, and the surprising gifts of God. In this season, we have the opportunity to discover that all times are ordinarily extraordinary.

Notes

1 Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 1-3.

2 Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 8.