

“Oh, How Ordinary!”

Dr. Bob Hawkins

Common parlance apparently assumes that “ordinary” is ho-hum, common, and not to mince words, downright boring -- oh! so predictable. This is not encouraging news for Christ’s holy church as we enter the long stretch of what church calendar keepers term “Ordinary Time.” Do we really want to project the life of faith as a boring, ho-hum enterprise? Is it any wonder that we ring our hands while considering sparsely populated pews, faltering educational and music programs, or congregations who seem only to age? Where are the children, the youth, the young adults, the peppy, the dedicated, and committed, we ask in our frenzy? Some hope to enliven spirits with fun and games, Christian-lite pep talks, or maybe installing an ATM in the narthex and perhaps a Starbucks®, too. Some have! Others are just as likely to obsess over mythic good-ol’-days, although hard-nosed historians of church practice easily demonstrate that the communal memories of such times tend to be rather faulty.

First, it may be helpful to renovate our understanding of “ordinary.” Rather than ho-hum or humdrum, its meaning is closer to “...that which reasonably can be expected in the normal course of events.” “Ordinary” is what the *Declaration of Independence* understands as truths which are “self-evident.” Those self-evident truths suggest life as it *ordinarily* should be lived – in peace, freedom, with liberty tempered by gracious concern for others. That which is ordinary comes as no surprise. It affords us the dependable rhythms of life or patterns of living which allow us, for example, to negotiate the morning shower without scalding ourselves, drying our hair without being electrocuted, making coffee and putting breakfast of some sort on the table – all of these done while we likely are still meandering in our sleep. The ordinary patterns and rhythms each day allow us to live well in relationships, in communities, and in society. It is what the *Declaration of Independence* describes when “...we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” It is the stuff of solid wedding vows and pledges of fidelity “made in good faith.” In legal matters, an “ordinary” is a judge who exercises appropriate oversight without the distractions of frequent campaigning for reelection, such as Supreme Court justices of the United States. Ministers of some denominations bear the title of “The Ordinary.” Should you meet the recently appointed Ordinary of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charleston, you’d be chatting with *Bishop Jacques Fabre-Jeune*, CS.

Personally, I’m relieved we have returned to “Ordinary Time,” what we call the steady sweep of the clock’s hands in this post-Pentecost season of twenty-plus weeks. We’ve just survived the conclusion of the festival part of the Church Year, punctuated this time by the conclusion of Pastor Hill’s ministry with us. That alone causes major upheavals for a congregation and its ministries, but so do the seasonal uproars of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and its aftermath, the Great Fifty Days of Easter to Pentecost, and the last hurrah for the Holy and Blessed Trinity. Chat with the office staff, council, choir, the altar guild, the worship committee, or the many who go forth with poinsettias, palms, or lilies, constantly changing banners and paraments, anthems, coffee and cookies, and all of the social occasions which festivals call forth both at church and elsewhere. Because of Covid we have missed church dinners and receptions, not to mention other enjoyable gatherings – we have longed to plan and to participate

for far too long. However, such enjoyable events also take inordinate work, cooking, baking, preparing, rehearsals, and schedule-crunching to make it all happen.

Why we consider “the ordinary” boring and ho-hum is likely an obsession with finding things to distract us. People “party till they drop” to help forget that their everyday lives don’t seem like much of a party. A parishioner I once knew had learned of a parent’s seriously compromised health, a chronic condition that would mean a new level of care. Her first response was to sign up for a retreat so that she could “...restore her spiritual buzz.” The Holy Spirit doesn’t intend to put us in an emotionally inebriated state any more than Jesus commends alcohol or drug-related stupor as the way to address life’s complexities and challenges. We turn a blind eye and deaf ear to questionable and even harmful behavior of those with whom we associate politically, socially, and even in our parish and families, stymied how we might appropriately, lovingly, and faithfully challenge while remaining supportive.

The major challenge is this, brothers and sisters: The festival cycle each year provides the foundation for our faith: the prophets’ proclaiming God’s call to return, God’s insistence on justice and respect for humankind and all creation, God’s desire for peace, tranquility, and the renunciation of *anything* that prompts violence and harm, prejudice and aggression. The festival cycle tells us the stories of Jesus and his disciples who provide the rhythm, patterns, and structures of our own discipleship. It reminds us that while Jesus’ love for us is fully evident in the shadow of the cross, his suffering, death, and resurrection’s upheaval were Jesus’ means of his mission for us to become One in the Lord and One in community with God’s children and creation.

What Ordinary Time provides each year is up to twenty-seven weeks to practice daily with diligence how we as God’s people live out our faith-filled love. It is our annual summer training and beyond to pattern and exercise our hearts, minds, speech, and actions to demonstrate “...that which reasonably can be expected in the normal course of events.” It’s hard work and God expects no less from us, but grants us abundant gifts and blessings, wisdom and compassion, and the dogged determination to do it. It is God’s constant presence in, with, and through us that makes the ordinary days of our lives so very extraordinary, thanks be to God!