

"THE ORDINARY GOD"

By Mary Anne Biggs

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Ephesians 4:25-5:2 ~ John 6:35, 41-51

August 9, 2015

I don't know what might happen here today. I never do. That's the adventure of it. I can't control what will happen. I don't mean the accidents ... like me tripping over myself ... or like last Sunday morning when lightning struck somewhere and the blew out the organ at the 7:30 service. I mean the experience of worship itself. Good things happen ... people are inspired ... find inner healing ... feel hope ... realize they are beloved of God. Lives change ... enemies are reconciled ... somebody leaves with a new resolve to be an agent for God in his family or her workplace or our community. The sick are made whole ... the blind see ... the lost are found ... and souls are saved. Wonderful things happen in worship, but we don't make them happen. We just set the table, but God serves up the meal.

Sometimes, maybe most of the time, we are disappointed. People don't throw aside their crutches and dance down the aisles. We don't leave here dreaming and daring to do mighty miracles for God. We don't see angels or hear the voice of God assuring us that all our problems are solved. In fact, most of our problems are right there where we left them ... waiting for us as we walk out the doors. But I think when nothing happens for us in worship, that it's not God's fault. I think it's our fault. I think good things always happen in worship ... only we don't always have the eyes and heart and spirit to perceive them. We want God to do something spectacular ... impress us with some special effects ... do our will on demand. But we miss the quiet, continual, steady grace of God and all that God is already doing for us. God does extraordinary things ... I have seen them happen ... but most of the time, the point of worship is to show us the miraculous grace of the *ordinary* God.

Take a deep breath and hold it for a moment. Then slowly exhale. Come on now, you can do it. What did you do to *deserve* that? How many of you ate breakfast this morning? Even those of you who didn't are blessed by the luxury of skipping breakfast because you know lunch is coming soon. You don't have to worry about it. Look around you ... you are not alone. No matter what may be troubling you in your family life beyond this church, you can rest assured that your family in this church cares for you deeply. Just look at this room ... the light streaming through the stained glass windows ... the soft grain of the wood in the back of the pew ... the glow of the candles ... the magnificence of our lighted cross ... all this beauty. And then think of what awaits you outside ... the lakes, the river, the verdant green forests ... right in our own backyard!

The grace gifts of God are everywhere ... for everybody ... all the time. I remember a time in my life - back in the eighties - when I was working so hard to become somebody ... to accomplish something with my life ... to be a success. Like most people, I was socialized to

define myself by my career ... to evaluate my worth by what I could accomplish. The goal was to do something unique ... something that nobody else could do. But one day in the midst of all this struggle to become somebody ... it occurred to me that I already was somebody. I am. I have life. God made me, and there is only one me ... like there is only one you. And ... it was like the scales had fallen from my eyes ... I realized the most important, the most meaningful, the most valuable experiences of life are available to everybody ... right out there for all of us to enjoy. The beauty of the earth ... the joy of children ... the sound of music ... the gift of friendship ... the taste and touch and smell and sound and sight of life are not extraordinary accomplishments, but ordinary graces God offers us from the day of our birth.

We take them for granted. We miss them because we are striving for something else. God gives us manna, and we complain because we want more. It's usually only when we are denied these ordinary graces that we realize what gifts they are. We don't appreciate the simple joy of work until we lose it. We don't thank God for our health until it fails. We don't attend to our friendships until they are broken. When singer, songwriter Warren Zevon was asked what terminal illness had taught him, he said, *"The importance of enjoying every sandwich."* Life is a cornucopia of miracles, one grace after another. God's gifts blossom like a garden around us, but we want God to hit us over the head with a two by four to get our attention.

In the gospel of John, Jesus scandalizes the scribes by claiming the Divine name for himself. *"I am,"* he says. In John, Jesus says "I am" twenty one times. And he often defines himself further. He says, *"I am the door"* (10:7). *"I am the good shepherd"* (10:11). *"I am the light of the world"* (8:12, 9:5). *"I am the vine"* (15:1,5.) These are ordinary images, taken from the daily life of the people. And of all them ... perhaps the most universal ... the most ordinary ... the one that is part of our communion liturgy each month ... is the one we hear Jesus say in John six: *"I am the bread of life."*

We don't live by bread alone, but we also don't live long without it. Bread is a staple of every culture. It may be made with wheat or corn or rice or any number of grains ... it may be a loaf, a baguette, a bagel, or my personal favorite, a tortilla, but everybody eats bread in some form. And most every culture makes some kind of wine as a staple drink. It was certainly the standard fare of every table in Jesus' day. Of course, the dialogue in John six is clearly a reference to the symbolic supper by which Jesus told us to remember him. Jesus is speaking poetically and they are listening literally, so they don't get it. But have you ever wondered why Jesus chose such ordinary elements as bread and wine to represent his love and sacrifice and grace for us?

Maybe it's because the grain is ground and the grapes are crushed, a symbol of his suffering. Maybe it's because of the communal effort involved in making them. A lot of people we don't even know contributed to our communion table last Sunday. A farmer raised the grain by the sweat of his brow, hoping the market would give him a price high enough to feed his family. Somebody hauled it. Somebody milled it. Somebody bought it, and baked it for us. Nothing we have in this life is our own doing. We depend upon the grace of others labors. We are made for community and society. To eat is to acknowledge our dependence ... both on food and on each other. We need each other.

Or maybe the meaning of these elements is at the other end. Last week we broke up the bread and shared it around, showing we are all members of the same table ... the same family ... the same loaf and the same cup. I wish we did it every Sunday because it demonstrates in the very best of ways that we are one. As I said last week, that's why we call it "communion," because it joins us to one another as well as to God.

So what happens when we come to our family dinner? The deacons, our wait staff of spiritual servants, set the table and our ushers serve it. But we also prepare for the table with our hunger, our invitations, our cleaning up. Our preparations include, as we have considered the last two weeks, compassion and forgiveness. A today's reading from Ephesians urges us, "*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*" (Eph 4:31-5:2).

So we invite others to join our family table ... and we gather with those in mind who lack our plenty, so we share of it. We gather to receive and to offer one another the forgiveness which makes sustained relationship possible ... the forgiveness which can only come from God ... the forgiveness which this table represents. And finally, we are ready. We gather around the table and say grace, the Eucharist or "prayer of thanksgiving." We tell our family stories, especially the story of Jesus' death and resurrection for us. We remember Jesus and he is with us. We remember others who have shared this table in years gone by ... the saints and martyrs ... our own saints and martyrs, and we sense them with us, too. And we relax and we rejoice because we know we are accepted, we are family, we are loved, and God is with us and what happens is love.

And in that symbolic supper, the symbols represent not only the saving extraordinary grace of God's active intervention for our souls, but the sustaining ordinary grace of God's constant provision for our lives. So something as ordinary as bread and wine, as common as the air we breathe, represents the universal grace ... as well as the special grace of God. The common stuff of life reminds us of our life in common and the holiness of the ordinary. A friend reminded me that in communion we take our faith into our bodies ... digesting the Divine. Let's live out the Divine nutrients in every moment. Doesn't that give us a new insight into the adage "you are what you eat"?

Last Sunday we didn't take communion ... we received it. It was a grace gift of God, which we could not fully appreciate until we shared it with others. Communion is a sustaining grace that's available to everybody, or ought to be. God intends it, and that's why we shouldn't eat of that bread and drink of that cup without remembering there are those who have been deprived even of this basic grace by circumstances and exploitations and economic powers and personal failures, whom God wants us to feed. This is also a saving grace that's available to everybody, or ought to be. God intends it, and that's why we shouldn't eat of that bread and drink of that cup without remembering there are those who have been denied this table by prejudice and apathy and disregard and ignorance, whom God wants us to invite with open arms.

I don't know what will happen as we come to the table next month. But I hope you will receive the bread and cup and remember that God has given you the grace to say "I am." I hope you will receive the bread and cup and remember all the ways God has graced your life with so many good things, good people, good experiences, day by day by day. I hope you will receive the bread and cup and remember the One who gave himself that you may have life, and have it in abundance. And I hope you will be so filled by the piece of bread and the sip of drink that your heart will overflow with gratitude to God in generosity for those who need your forgiveness ... your help ... and your invitation to share in God's bounty. I hope that generosity will overflow into who you are and what you say and what you do so that somebody who isn't even there that day will be touched by the grace of this table. But, as Brian Stoffregen suggests, "*God can lead us to the bread of heaven, but God can't make us eat.*" So I don't know what will happen. I can only hope and pray. The rest is up to you. The rest is up to God.

May we pray?

O Jesus ... our Savior ... our Friend ... our Host, in receiving your grace, may we be joined one to another and always to you ... that grace may overflow into gratitude ... and gratitude into joy ... and joy into service, in Jesus name. Amen.