

# Faith in Ordinary Life

Psalm 138 & 1 Timothy 1:12-20

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This past week I got into a discussion about Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time is used by liturgical churches to define the Sundays that follow both Epiphany and Pentecost. So, in some senses, we are in the midst of Ordinary Time right now. The PCUSA has flipped and flopped over what to call this particular time; some years we have officially numbered the Sundays after Pentecost and some years we have referred to it as Ordinary Time. Currently, the denomination is numbering the Sundays after Pentecost.

However, the term Ordinary Time has a certain ring to it. I happen to prefer that designation because it tends to elicit questions from parishioners about its meaning and purpose and gives the pastor the opportunity to use some of his or her seminary training. I like it primarily because it reminds us that faith is lived out in the midst of what we might call ordinary time. In fact, I'm convinced that the scriptures bear witness to the truth that our faith is actually forged in the midst of ordinary life. It is not just the high-holy moments of encounter with God in worship or in life that leads us to an enduring faith, rather, I believe, it is the moments of ordinary life and human experience that really forges our faith.

The writer of 1 Timothy, I think would concur. Here, in this passage, the life and experience of Paul is recounted to demonstrate that God has been at work in Paul's life. Paul's life was transformed by the work of God in Jesus Christ and the writer wants to affirm that the same happens in the lives of both the named recipient of the letter and the congregation that he serves.

Thomas G. Long, one of my old seminary professors, writes convincingly of this in his commentary on our text:

**The saving power of Christ is not an abstract concept, but something that actually occurs in the midst of people's messy lives. As we see in Paul's life, Jesus Christ is a living presence at work in human life, lovingly and mercifully overcoming destruction and dysfunction and enabling human beings to flourish and to arrive at their true fulfillment.**

As your pastor, I have had the privilege of seeing this exact experience occur in the life of this congregation. Each day, there are particular moments that affirm to me that Jesus Christ is alive and well and living in the midst of his people in the presence of the Holy Spirit. I am often astounded at the grace and love that I see operative in your lives.

We are more likely to observe the signs of God's loving presence in the lives of others than we are in our own life. We have the temptation to look upon our lives as plain old ordinary and wonder at times about the movement of God that we see in other factions, sectors, or other groupings of people.

This was part of the problem that the writer of 1 Timothy sought to address in his letter. Apparently, there was a group within the congregation that Timothy served, that had broken away and began to teach a rather more fantastic gospel that involved concentration upon the importance of what one knows and experiences as the guarantee or the impetus of God's saving work. The biblical scholars call this movement Gnosticism, using the Greek word of knowledge (gnosis) as the defining feature of this particular teaching.

The writer seeks to assure his reader and the whole congregation, that faith does not come by our efforts or by our endeavors, but rather comes to us as a gift from God because of God's work in Jesus Christ. The writer is convinced that we cannot think our way into faith or even behave our way into God's mercy and grace; it must come from God.

Again, Tom Long has something important to say on all of this:

**The grip of death on us is a power too strong for us to break on our own. We cannot think ourselves free, educate ourselves to genuine humanity, or behave our way to fullness of life. Jesus Christ comes, then, to do what we cannot do on our own power, to save us from death – death at the end of life and also death in the middle of life – and to restore our humanity. ... The salvation of Christ Jesus happens, then, in the present tense, in the midst of life's pressures and failings, but it also points forward toward eternity.**

Dr. Long hits the nail on the head here in an important way. Those in the congregation that are troubling the rest of the people with all their talk about spectacular knowledge and fantastic experiences are misleading them in a foundational manner. The writer of the epistle is convinced that faith is forged in the midst of ordinary life by the extraordinary action of God's mercy and grace, given to us in Jesus Christ. Christ has done what we could have never done for ourselves; Christ has granted us mercy to become what God has intended for us all and what our own sin and desire to choose our own ways in the world has blocked; in Jesus Christ, God has made us his own people and given us the grace and mercy that transform our life into real human existence.

The Christian activist, William Stringfellow, once put it this way:

**I believe that I am called in the Word of God – as is *everyone* else – to the vocation of being human, nothing more, nothing less.**

That sounds at once very ordinary and, on the other hand, rather spectacular. We are called – summoned actually – by the witness of scripture to fully embrace the 'vocation of being human'. We are called not to become gods of our own life, but to live out life in the midst of the ordinary and even the spectacular moments, as what God has made us to be: human beings – his people. Thus, we must be conscious of the work of God in Jesus Christ all around us and all within us. We must place our trust in God working out his salvation in our lives and trust that the mercy and grace granted to us has the power to transform our lives from sin-centered lives to God-focused human life. We are called to be about the things of God and we find the more and more we look to the scriptures that the things of God are summed up in the word love.

Remember then that in the midst of this Ordinary Time, in the midst of the ordinariness of our lives, God is at work calling us to the things of grace, mercy, and love and transforming us, bit by bit, into a people that can and do with those very important things. This is spectacular enough for me; I think it is for you too.