



The New England Church Pulpit

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TENDING THE GARDEN OF THE MUNDANE February 17, 2013

1 Samuel 16.14-23

Now the spirit of the Lord departed from King Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. And Saul's servants said to him, "See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let us look for someone who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better." So Saul said to his servants, "Provide for me someone who can play well, and bring him to me." One of the young men answered, "I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and God is with him." So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, "Send me your son David who is with the sheep." Jesse sent David to Saul. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. Saul sent to Jesse, saying, "Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight." And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David played the harp and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.

Tao Te Ching 8 & 24

*The supreme good is like water,
which nourishes all things without trying to.
It is content with the low places that people disdain.
Thus it is like the Way.*

*In dwelling, live close to the ground.
In thinking, keep to the simple.
In conflict, be fair and generous.
In governing, don't try to control.
In work, do what you enjoy.
In family life, be completely present.*

*When you are content to be simply yourself
and don't compare or compete,
everybody will respect you.*

*He who stands on tiptoe
doesn't stand firm.
He who rushes ahead
doesn't go far.
He who tries to shine
dims his own light.
He who defines himself
can't know who he really is.
He who has power over others
can't empower himself.
He who clings to his work
will create nothing that endures.*

*If you want to accord with the Way,
Just do your job, then let go.*

Today is the first Sunday of Lent and for most of us it's just another day. We don't make much of giving anything up for the season, assuming that practicing lent will take more time than we have to give. But reconsider. With the story of David as backdrop, take a segment of any day this past week to consider the opportunities for practicing the presence of God.

You go to lunch, for example, with a colleague to discuss business or with a friend just to get out of the house. As you walk into the restaurant, you speak to several people who you know; you sit down, not taking much notice of the single flower in the vase on the table, the chair you're sitting on or the clean table you're leaning on as you look over the menu to try to ascertain what your palate or your latest cholesterol test will determine what you will eat. Your server comes to take your order. Conversation ensues while you wait for your food and when it arrives you continue to talk. Your server refills your water glass several times, asking if everything is ok. A family comes in with two small children and sits down at the booth next to yours. The children are hungry and restless and while talking with your friend you observe unintentionally the parents' best efforts at keeping the kids occupied until the food arrives. When lunch is done, you take your check to the counter to pay, you say goodbye to your colleague or friend and you head back to your office, your home or to run more errands. It is 90 minutes of your day and it is easy to pass through those minutes as just part of the routine. But there are at least a dozen opportunities in that short time to pay attention to life's richest bounties as part of your Lenten journey.

Take this seemingly ordinary segment of the life of David as another example of the presence of God hiding in the routine of life. Here's a teenager with little to do while tending the sheep day and night out in the middle of nowhere, all by himself, with nothing to keep him company but his harp. Little does he realize that the practice of occupying his time by making music will ultimately be the salvation of the king who will find in the music of that well-played harp the calming, quieting antidote to an agitated, frenzied dementia. How could he know—how could any of us know—what the practice of our ordinary routine can mean for the future?

Gregory Jones, dean of Duke University, coaches a basketball team of 9 to 11 year old boys. "They never want to practice," he says. "They want to scrimmage so they can show off their three-pointers or their spectacular 'Michael Jordan moves.'" It is difficult to help them understand Jordan's commitment to the mundane tasks of repetition, discipline and practice. It is true of anyone who is good at anything, be it professional ballplayer, financial investor or harpist. Whether we are shooting endless free throws, keeping daily track of the Dow Jones or practicing scales, doing well is dependent upon and shaped by attention to the little things.

Such is the practice of the presence of God as well. It is an art form that is not limited to what we label as religious events but more importantly is part of the daily routine we take for granted and in doing so, miss the opportunity to see the divine in the ordinary.

Does it feel like a wasted day when all you do is tie kids' shoes, wipe snotty noses, respond with as much patience as you can muster to the "whys?" of inquisitive minds, referee spats, dry tears, kiss scraped knees and soothe wounded egos? Does it feel like a waste of time to chat with an elderly friend whose mind is not quite as sharp as it used to be and a 30-minute conversation has only involved 5 minutes of new material? Does it feel like the interruptions that prevent us from getting done what we had planned to achieve are a waste of time and energy? Perhaps the snotty noses, the scraped knee, the cajoling an elderly friend who borders on dementia or the interruptions that tend to annoy us **are** the business of the day. Maybe we're missing God in those ordinary moments.

Recognizing the presence of God requires practice. The art of tending to the mundane routines, of reframing the ordinary to see each one as something extraordinary takes practice. We tend to look for God in those earth-shattering moments of insight and divine inspiration yet in the meantime we miss golden chances of seeing God where God lives most often. Can we see what is holy and awesome in the ordinary activities of eating, breathing, taking a shower, brushing our teeth, driving to work, taking a nap? What about fixing dinner, doing the dishes, feeding the dog or tussling with the kids on the floor? These are spiritual practices that, if tended and nurtured, become pleasurable, meaningful contributions to contented and peaceful lives. In a world where faith is often defined as a way of thinking or a collection of correct beliefs, doing any of these things reminds us that faith is a way of life.

Each day of our lives is filled with mundane activities. We can be annoyed by them or we can learn to pay attention to them and by so doing engage life in new ways. Tending the garden of the mundane is a spiritual practice that can be cultivated as a worthwhile Lenten journey that will serve us for a lifetime.

Throughout the New Testament, we find Jesus happening upon things on his way, rather than doing things that get him elected as messiah. He is sitting by a well when a woman comes along that engages him in conversation. He goes to get a little rest, and he sees a crowd of hungry people. He sets off on a journey to do one thing and gets sidetracked by people who are blind, or crippled, or dying. We don't get a sense that he has a mission loftier than the mundane activities that sidetrack him. He is someone to follow, not because he did great things, but that he did small things in a great way. He reminded us to quit worrying about how things are going to get done and take notice of the birds of the air, or the flowers of the field, or the flower that sits on the lunch table.

Tending the garden of the mundane can be done without any personal trainer or expensive equipment and requires no special setting. A good way to warm up is to focus on the people who often sneak right past us because they are performing some mundane service of their own, such as taking our order or handing us our change. The next time you go to the grocery store, or are sitting at a restaurant, try engaging the person who not only takes your order but the one who clears up the table as well. Try engaging the cashier when you pay your bill. A simple "how are you today" is sufficient. Their response will often be surprised delight for so few people pay attention to them or the tasks they do.

How well do we tend the garden of daily routine? Do we draw water from the kitchen sink with any sense of awe for what water means to our lives, or the privilege it is to have clean, drinkable water at our finger tips? Do we treat every conversation with our children, our colleagues, our neighbor as if it was the most important event of the day? It may very well be that there is something holy hiding in the ordinary; without practice, we will pass it by.

So, back to lunch. Did you take stock in the friends you are privileged to have, not only the one you're lunching with but those you greeted when you came in? Did you notice the flower on the table Jesus calls attention to, that neither works nor worries but is more beautiful than gold? Did you appreciate the work someone invested on your behalf to clean the table before you got there? Did you take time to greet your server and give her a nice tip for her good work? Did you practice patience with the noisy children in the next booth, seeing them as important to your life as any other child you know? Were you aware of the many others who woke up early to be ready to prepare

your food, those who inspected the kitchen to make sure it was clean, the cashier who had just been criticized by the previous customer for inadvertently overcharging her?

Every day is filled with the glory of God. Every day is an opportunity to practice the presence of God, to strum the harp, as it were, for those who may otherwise be distracted with life's difficulties. We can practice anger, annoyance, jealousy and spitefulness if we choose, but it seems an unwise choice for discovering life's beauty. Every day is a Lenten journey to rehearse our role in the larger scheme of life and to appreciate the small, mundane, routine that makes life good. Wherever we are, we live in the world which is just waiting for us to notice the holiness in it, Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us. The good news is that we have all that we need for making each day a journey of joy. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann