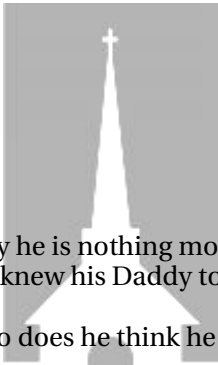


The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors



THE HEART IN ORDINARY TIME
A SERMON BY LEDAYNE MCLEESE POLASKI
ON MARK 6:1-6 AND EZEKIEL 2:1-7
PARK ROAD BAPTIST CHURCH
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Why he is nothing more than a kid who grew up right up the street here. We know his Mama. We knew his Daddy too.

Who does he think he is coming back here and talking to us this way?

He always was a little different – but I never figured on this. You’d think an oldest boy would be more responsible – have more respect. Why look – his brothers and sisters all live right here and they’re all doing real well. You don’t see any of them gallivanting around – talking crazy – embarrassing their Mama.

I ask you – just who does he think he is?

When hometown boy Jesus returns to Nazareth, folks don’t quite know what to make of him. Or rather, they know EXACTLY what to make of him – he’s just Mary and Joseph’s boy – a child who grew to manhood in their midst – brother of James, Joses, Judas, Simon, and sisters who’ve stayed close to home. He is as familiar to them as the town itself.

How then could HE be a prophet?! A messenger of God?

For his part, Jesus seems just as astounded as they are – How could they of all people fail to understand? How could these who know him best take offense and turn away?

They came to me in a peculiar teenage blend of sheepishness and defiance. Planning the communion service at the annual youth group retreat in Black Mountain – the undisputed highlight of the youth year at Myers Park Baptist Church – they had a question for me. I don’t remember which of the three of them actually voiced the query – but I do still clearly see the three of them standing before me – half hoping I would understand – half daring me to say no. “Instead of bread and juice,” one finally said, “can we use Cheese Doodles and cream soda?”

By the grace of God – that one moment of that one day – I had the ears to hear the questions behind the question. Does God inhabit the common food and drink of our lives as God inhabited the common food and drink of Jesus and the disciples? Is it God who joins our hearts together when we share our ordinary meals – and this oh-so-special once a year meal – as it was God who joined together the hearts of those at that first communion meal?

The answer of course is YES! – YES! YES! YES! YES!

And so, yes, we did celebrate communion with Cheese Doodles and cream soda. It was a move that would have shocked and disturbed probably every single one of my professors at Duke Divinity School – and perhaps even some of you – but when I witnessed these boys becoming men serving those elements to their friends and classmates, confidently and passionately proclaiming to them that God is indeed present in ordinary adolescent lives, I knew it was the right move. They had GOTTEN IT – that most difficult of lessons – the lesson that the people of

Nazareth so struggled to understand – Yes! God IS present in the common, the ordinary, common people, ordinary life.

The people to whom Jesus returns have had a lifetime of living with him – witnessing and sharing in the dependency of his infancy – the struggles and triumphs of his childhood – the angst and the growth of his adolescence – and finally his normal adult transition into taking on Joseph's work. In thirty plus years of shared life, any sense they ever had about Jesus' divine origins or special calling has faded. Any memories of a birth accompanied by angelic pronouncements and stars and regal visits have receded. All they can see is an ordinary man – a son – a brother – a neighbor -- a carpenter. Anyone could walk into his shop and see the calluses on his hands – the sawdust on his shirt and in his hair – the sweat upon his brow. Are these the marks of man marked by God!?!

And if they are – well, then, what are we to make of that? The struggle is not so foreign, is it? There are glimmers of it throughout our lives – every time a now-grown child re-enters the territory of his or her childhood and struggles to be taken seriously -- every time the excitement of a new birth turns to the ordinary challenges of raising a child – every time the joy of a new relationship turns to the common task of living together – every time the fascination of a new job turns to the regular routine of daily work – every time the promise of retirement turns to the habits of home life. Over and over, our lives go from exciting new beginnings to commonality – even the church spends much of the year in what we call “ordinary time.”

And yet – and yet – there is a reminder in this text that ordinary time is God's time – that common people are God's people – that God does inhabit Nazarean carpenters and Cheese Doodles as readily as angelic messengers, bread, and wine. If we can have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, God is present in our meals, our families, our classrooms, our relationships, our jobs, our retirements -- long after infatuation fades into habit.

I have been given to thinking a great deal lately of how God dwells within and speaks through what may well be the most common thing of all – the one reality with which each of us lives from our first breath until our last – that unspeakably ordinary, inescapably common companion – ourselves.

Within the last five years, I have made two life-altering and completely unexpected changes. Actually, change does not begin to sum it up – as my husband Tom most accurately says – “People tell you that having a baby will change your life. That is not true. Having a baby destroys your life – and then you recreate it.”

I was deeply ambivalent about the idea of becoming a parent. I was about 90 to 95 % certain that I did not ever want to do it. But when I turned thirty, I began to think that I at least needed to give that 5 or 10 % of uncertainty a hearing. I thought I knew what the result would be – I had been thinking about this for years. But now I am going to share with you one of the unchanging central tenets by which I live – it was this tenet which led me to my most unanticipated decision – and that tenet which shapes my life is -- AUNT JOYCE'S THEORY OF SHOPPING. Now – this is not a Biblical tenet – this is not a Christian tenet -- this is not even what we could construe to be a spiritual tenet – and, to be completely forthcoming, she's not even MY Aunt Joyce – she's the aunt of one of my best friends. Anyway, Aunt Joyce has developed and passed down a theory that I have found immensely helpful whether I am standing in front of the dressing room mirror slipping on a pair of pants – or struggling to decide whether or not to make a go at parenthood. And that theory which I live by is simply this – If you're trying to talk yourself into it, put it back on the rack. And if you are trying to talk yourself out of it, buy it. There you have it – the way I make my most important decisions -- an immensely practical method, I have found, of discerning what I really want – what I really yearn for – what my deepest, truest self longs to do and be. And when I realized that I was spending an immense amount of time and energy trying to talk myself out of having a baby, I knew that I had discovered that that 5 to 10 % was my own heart speaking.

Like the people to whom God sent the prophet Ezekiel, I was a rebellious house – for years impudently and stubbornly refusing to hear the prophet within. But at long last I did recognize the prophet for who she was. And so, Katherine Rebecca Polaski celebrated her fourth birthday back in June. And in the midst of the Dora the Explorer cake, the ice cream, the balloons, and the stack of presents – and, yes, in the midst of a life destroyed and recreated – was one mother immeasurably glad that she had finally listened to Aunt Joyce and her own heart.

When Kate was just over a year old, I cut my work dramatically so that I could become a stay at home mom. Now, all those years when I was 90 to 95% certain that I did not ever want to become a mother, I was 100% certain that, if I ever did, I would NEVER stay at home. I knew that I wouldn't like it and would not be any good at it. When Kate was born, I cut back slightly at work, but it literally never occurred to me not to work. And then – for months and months and months – almost every night when I put her down in her crib to go to sleep and saw her sweet face look up at me one last time before closing her eyes, my immediate unbidden thought was the same, "I have not had enough time with you today." I wrote it off at first to a bad case of Mommy guilt. And when it felt like nothing more than guilt, I could see no way to make the necessary changes. It would mean walking away from a job I had loved – halving our family income – and risking losing my identity and sense of who I am. And then one night, Kate woke up crying, and as I sat rocking her back to sleep, I had a sudden revelation. What I was struggling against was not guilt but was once again the longing of my own heart. And once I recognized that this was my heart and not my guilt speaking, once I became aware of what I was trying to talk myself into and out of, I began to see ways to do what had seemed impossible. And these days, if you ask me what I do, I am likely to reply, "Mostly, I am a stay at home Mommy."

Who would have guessed?

Not me!

Now I want to be clear about a few things – I am NOT standing here to tell you that, if you'll listen to the voice within, you'll do what I have done. I am NOT here to tell you that all people should become parents – or that all mothers should stay home – I am not here to tell you anything at all. Your heart is not my heart – your wisdom is not my wisdom – God's word to you is not God's word to me. I do not wish for you all to do what I have done. I wish for you to listen – not to the cacophony of contradictory voices out there telling you what you ought to do, what you must do – not even to me. I wish for you to listen – listen to your own life – listen to the longings of your own heart. I wish for you to find and follow your own calling – however life-destroying and recreating – however ordinary – it may be.

In the next year, we here at Park Road Baptist Church have a marvelous opportunity to listen – to listen to ourselves and our lives – to understand our stories, our choices, our challenges within a context of rapid and sometimes disorienting societal change. In the multitude of offerings which will be a part of our year-long series entitled The Church and Social Change, we will be examining big picture issues – changing structures of authority, changing definitions of family, changing economics. And if all that sounds a little too academic and disconnected to you, don't worry – we're going to be bringing it down to the Cheese Doodles and cream soda level – that is, the level of our every day ordinary lives. Lives in which one person decides to become a parent, another to remain childless, and a third struggles to decide whether to use modern technology to battle infertility. Lives in which one parent decides to stay home, another to keep working, and still another struggles with the financial reality of having to work no matter what she or he desires. Lives in which we decide whether or not to put an aging parent in a nursing home – whether to move far from family to secure professional dreams -- whether to patch together an ailing marriage or to end it. Lives in which we struggle to know how to grandparent children a continent away – how to navigate our most personal relationships when the rules we learned growing up no longer seem to apply – how to balance all the competing and contradictory demands. Lives in which everyday, ordinary, common decisions have long-

lasting ramifications. Lives in which – if we listen, really listen – we might just hear the voice of God speaking within our very own hearts – telling us, if not a whole and complete plan for our lives, at the very least what writer Anne Lamott calls “the next right thing to do.”

One of my favorite things about Kate when she was just a bit younger was that whenever she found something, whether or not she was looking for it, she’d hold it up and loudly proclaim, “There’s it!” This was always followed by a joyous, “Found it!”

That’s what I would hope for all of us – the ears to hear the speaking of our own hearts, the eyes to see the wisdom within – the grace to recognize that true interior voice as the very voice of God. And when we’ve heard, to loudly and joyfully proclaim, “There it is! Found it!”
Amen.

Sources –

Mark – Interpretation Series, Lamar Williamson, Jr. – John Knox Press, Louisville, 1983.

Plan B – Anne Lamott