

**“Ordinary Blessings in Ordinary Time”,
a sermon shared with the congregation of
St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury,
on Thanksgiving Sunday, October 9, 2016
by Rev. Catherine Somerville.
Scriptures: Psalm 100 and Philippians 4: 4-9**

I need to ask you a question...

How many of you like receiving Christmas newsletters with your Christmas cards? You know what I mean, the letters people send detailing their activities throughout the year.

How many of you send those Christmas letters?

Well, I do. Not every year, mind you, but I like the practice of reviewing and keeping family and friends up to speed with our lives. There is only one small problem with this practice. When I receive these letters, I hear how my friends traveled to distant lands, redecorated their houses, visited with their over-achieving children and worked to solve the issue of world peace. Let me read you part of the letter we sent out a few years ago...

“Every Christmas, we receive a wonderful letter from friends living on Manitoulin Island. Last year, I called Gail and told her how much I enjoyed their letter. She asked why we didn’t send one of our own. My answer was that, compared to them, our lives are really, really boring, and a Christmas letter from us would either put people to sleep or make them grateful that they don’t live such an uneventful existence.”

I went on to tell how Jack had repainted the kitchen, and how he makes my supper every night. I talked about our kids, both getting by in their jobs. I talked about how I was singing in a small community choir and enjoying my work. The highlight of that year’s letter was a paragraph about the night our cat had brought a live mouse to bed. I had thought it was her squeaky toy, until I realized she didn’t have a squeaky toy.

I ended that letter with these words: May the ordinary moments of your own life bring their joy and contentment. May we each realize how blessed we are to live here and now. Our Christmas wish for you is that your soul will be full, and you will find a chance, however it comes, to offer a simple prayer of gratitude for all the ordinary moments, which fill our lives to overflowing.”

The reason I have been thinking about ordinary things is that, here we are, gathered on Thanksgiving Sunday, one of the big Sundays in the calendar year, and it falls right smack in the middle of what is known in the church calendar as Ordinary Time. It is the long season of the church year, which stretches from Pentecost in June, through the summer and fall, and ends at the Reign of Christ Sunday, right before we start Advent and count the days to Christmas.

When I told Bill where I wanted to go with this sermon, he offered the observation of how much easier it seems to live and worship during the high moments of life: Christmas, Easter, and all the special holy days. We both agreed that the bigger challenge for us is to

find authentic ways to live our faith day after day. In the midst of all the ordinary things that take up our time, and call for our attention, we are invited each Sunday, every single day in fact, to celebrate creation, the goodness of God, the abundance we have, and resurrection, to commemorate the profound gift of new life we have found in Jesus Christ.

So I wondered: how do we live lives of gratitude when life is so often very ordinary? One answer to that question is found in our Philippians reading. Paul was writing from prison to the church at Philippi. He loved this church, and he spent his days waiting and longing to be reunited with this beloved community. Like Paul, the church had also been living through a time of suffering. The joy that energized the community at its beginning was waning, partly because of his prolonged absence. And as sometimes happens during uncertain times, tensions started to surface. There was bickering between two of the church leaders. Paul's advice was to "keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." Then, he invited the community to rejoice.

Rejoice in ordinary time. Rejoice when the leaves are green on the oak and the pine and the maple. Rejoice in the growth that happens during the warm summer months. Rejoice when the leaves change colour, and the geese fly south, and the harvest is gathered. Rejoice when the first frost comes and the world starts to turn cold. Rejoice as you go about your day, as you live out the everyday promises of faith you have been given.

When we live like that, we are reminded of the profound truth of blessing, in what may at first glance appear to be merely ordinary. Keep on with your everyday work of gentle, prayerful living. Bake a loaf of bread for the woman down the street whose husband just died. Take a bag of groceries to the food bank. Visit a church member who has moved to a nursing home. Volunteer some time and drive people to cancer appointments. Rake your neighbour's leaves. Seemingly ordinary acts bear the extraordinary gift of God's love. Ordinary time, both in church and in our caring, teaches the world about the persistent, everyday powerful promises of God's grace given to us in Jesus Christ.

Paul used the language of rejoicing both to encourage and to remind. The church at Philippi had a story of faith. Just like we do. They had experienced God's presence in their midst. Like we have. He invited them to allow their faith to flavour their relationships. Like we do around here. Radiate gentleness, offer non-anxious prayerfulness to your activities, let your thoughts overflow with whatever is honourable and just, whatever is pure and pleasing, whatever is commendable. And when we live that way, we join with a people, who because of God's nearness, know beyond a doubt, that we are abundantly blessed. This is the sort of knowledge we need to keep deep in our souls when times of pain come. We need to rejoice so that we can remember the constancy of God.

This is our Thanksgiving invitation. We are being invited to weave the colourful threads of joy through our days. 'Ordinary time' rejoicing, though not as flamboyant as Christmas or Easter rejoicing, bears out the truth and wisdom of our faith. God in Christ is near all the time. There is so much to celebrate, so much for which to be thankful.

In one of her prayers, United Church minister and author, Keri Wehlander, writes about these ordinary blessings: to wake from sleep, to hear the laughter of a child, to sip a glass of clean, cold water, to watch a sunset paint the sky, to share time with a friend, to smell the fragrance of the earth after rain, to feel the comfort of clean clothing, to form the words that make a prayer, all these things are gift enough for thanks.

May the ordinary moments of your own life bring their joy and their contentment. May you realize how blessed we are to live here and now. May your soul will be full, and may you find a chance, however it comes, to offer a simple prayer of gratitude for all the ordinary moments, which fill our lives to overflowing.”

Sources used:

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, pages 158-163, section written by Jill Y. Crainshaw. Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

Joy is our Banquet: Resources for Everyday Worship, Keri Wehlander, The United Church Publishing House, 1996, pages 93-94.