

“Ordinary Time Can Provide Some Extraordinary Experiences”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for the Sixth Sunday After Pentecost, July 16, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Joint Service with St. Mark’s United and St. Peter’s United Churches

Scripture Readings: Psalm 119:105-112 (VU #841, part V);

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Walking through a dense coniferous forest, you would think the trees are impervious to outside forces. How could the wind even get through the way that trees form blockades in almost every direction. And how could a tree even fall over, for it seems all the other trees are strategically placed to make sure nothing can be toppled. Yet trees do fall down in the forest. Winds can gain strength and blow them down, or shifting soils due to flooding can erode their base, and they soon topple.

We have learned this past couple of weeks that tall, very green trees can burst into flames on a moment’s notice when the heat is intense from surrounding fires.

When examining this phenomenon of coniferous trees and these trees’ stability, one soon learns that the root systems for most coniferous trees are spread over the soil or ground. Their root systems are very wide, but rarely more than 6 – 8 inches deep. That means trees can survive in the driest of conditions, for any moisture at all – even dew in the morning – can be captured by the roots for the wellness of the tree. Neighbouring trees and their root systems intertwine with each other, making what might be a very unstable situation much more solid and lasting, for together the trees hold one another up.

One tree may not survive a vicious wind, rising flood waters, or shifting sands, but a forest has the ability to last and survive much more effectively, together.

We can learn a lot about life in ordinary experiences. Jesus was a master at the simple story to tell a deeper truth. Were I not a land owner in northern Ontario, I would never know that coniferous trees, for the most part, have a very shallow but broadly stretched root system. That allows them to grow almost anywhere – on rock faces, in shallow soil, on the edge of river banks – for they need little dirt and moisture to develop and thrive. But that same reality means that the trees are susceptible to being displaced and blown over at any significant provocation by other forces of nature.

Jesus used a parable about a sower to speak about a similar reality. Seeds have a way of speaking to us as to how we can develop and grow. They remind us that development in life – natural development, human development, social and economic development – is never a straight-forward, simple reality. There are bends and twists and turns that we must be prepared for, and not always aware of.

Four years ago I served on a search committee for a congregation seeking new ministry leadership. This congregation had gone through some trying times, and had had six different ministers in a span of 4 ½ years. The search then underway was seen as a critical

step in determining the future health and vitality of the congregation. Every person on the committee was careful not to make a mistake this time round.

After about 10 interviews and visits to other congregations to hear potential candidates, not one person reached the level of being seriously considered. Four months had gone by and the committee was no closer to reaching a decision. Some despaired that the process would never end. Individuals on the committee devoted a large chunk of their summer holidays to visiting churches to hear ministers and potential candidates. Most claimed they enjoyed the opportunity to be a part of the summer activities of small town Ontario, but they realized they could have spent their vacation time in more relaxing, less stressful activities.

Then, suddenly, an applicant arose that seemed to be hopeful. The application came two days after the deadline established for applications, but the committee secretary wisely made the decision to forward the name and resumé to all. Enthusiasm rose at the possibility of interviewing this candidate, and the excitement grew even stronger after a delegation went to hear her preach and lead worship at a church some three hours away.

The decision was all but sealed when, as part of the array of set questions that they asked every candidate, this individual was asked: "What is your favourite season of the church year, and why?" Others had answered the question in a variety of ways – some engaging, some perfunctory, some with little focus and some with great passion. The answers were fairly predictable: "Advent," "Easter," "Christmas, especially Christmas Eve," "Thanksgiving." Each candidate had his or her own reasons for the answer given. None of the answers surprised, and certainly none were inappropriate.

But this candidate caught the committee's attention with her quick and direct answer: "My favourite season is Ordinary time – the time during the summer months." She went on to explain: "Most people dismiss that time, or hardly think of it. They are more worried about holidays or time off. But I love that time, for it is filled with the rich stories of Jesus that speak to the ways that we are called to live our lives day by day, in ordinary, regular moments of life."

She went on: "Faith for me is much easier in the high moments of the church year. Who cannot be joyful when gathered in community singing the Christmas Carols, or who lacks hope when they hear again the story of Easter and the promise of resurrection. But most of us need to live our faith in ordinary times when we must find the strength and courage to carry on when we lack that special impetus and insight to make a difference in our lives. When faith touches my ordinary, everyday life, I am a whole person."

I could tell the vast majority of the committee was ready to offer her the position right there – an answer insightful, enthusiastic, inspiring, and authentic. In a congregation where people wanted the life of the community to be richly blessed in ordinary, everyday times, they had found their candidate.

Ordinary time – in whatever form it takes – can provide some extraordinary experiences. Northern Ontario has a lot of trees and rocks, and for diversity lots of rocks and trees. But on those rare yet memorable moments when in the midst of an ordinary trip along highway 11 or highway 17 where one sees a constant barrage of rocks and trees and trees and rocks, one comes around a bend and suddenly sees a small lake to the side with a moose standing on the shoreline, sipping water, and unexpectedly the ordinary becomes majestic.

In the last 20 years, sand hill cranes have started to settle in Ontario during the summer months. Previously limited to the prairies and places further north, their migration to the east has provided some impressive experiences, as they squawk and fly overhead. The sound of their wings whistles for the hearing of anyone below, and that loud noise warns anyone that they are in the area, looking for fish. I am sure any smaller birds get the message that it is time to move on. An event that has become ordinary in remote forests of this region, but extraordinary in its impact and memories shared.

Gordon Wray, a member of First United Church in downtown Waterloo, has written several hymns, and one of his latest honours the ways that nature rebounds in the midst of challenging times. It is printed in the Pentecost 1 edition of *Gathering*, a United Church worship periodical. One verse of that hymn celebrates the way that vegetation bursts forth after rain falls in the desert. What had been an arid and barren landscape blossoms almost immediately.

The verse goes as follows:

Come, drab deserts, burst with flower!
Now, refreshed, and all aglow;
Praise God's life-renewing power
With a richly festive show.
Prophesy, with great elation,
"Life returns to barren sod!"
Share with joy your re-creation
By our life-affirming God.

Each verse ends with the words: "re-creation/by our life affirming God."

A sower went out to sow seeds. Some of them fell on the path and quickly were trod upon, and some fell on rocks and germinated only to quickly die. Some fell on dry soil and could not be found and some fell on wet soil – so wet that they were drowned and washed away.

But some seeds fell on rich, fertile soil; those seeds grew and developed, and eventually shared the bounty of the produce that came from the seed.

Jesus reminds us if we can focus on where there is abundance and richness of opportunity, we need not be discouraged in the ordinary times of life.

Ordinary time and ordinary events can remind us of the extraordinary reality of the hope that God places upon us and shares with us. Thanks be to God.