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“Ordinary Time”

A sermon by William R. Barron

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 31, 2011

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8; Ephesians 4:1–6; Matthew 25:31–40

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

Long ago, before the Protestant Reformation, the Church developed a liturgical calendar to mark special days and seasons in the Christian journey. Over the years there have been several additions and deletions. Presbyterians were late to join the parade to observe it.

Growing up as a Presbyterian, I was not aware of many of the designated days. In seminary, with Joe Harvard, very little was mentioned about the church year. So—after several years in ministry—congregations began to introduce the lectionary and emphasize liturgy. I asked a wise, seasoned elder what he thought of it. The short version of his answer was, “Well, I have favorite times, favorite verses in the Bible, and favorite hymns. The new way mixes things up, and I’m not crazy about new hymns. It makes me uncomfortable, and I don’t like it! But it’s good because it makes me think.”

He was right. It is good to break out of limiting ourselves to favorites and to think. Let’s quickly review. There are four liturgical colors—white, purple, red, and green.

White represents the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, which is the overwhelming favorite! Christmas, Easter, the Transfiguration of Jesus, and the Trinity, to name a few, are mountain-top celebrations, times, or seasons.

Purple represents preparation and penitence—significantly less popular than white. Getting ready is necessary and dutiful, such as required premarital counseling. Calling a pastor is an arduous process. It requires a congregational mission study, completing a church information form that must be approved by a committee of presbytery, and other preliminary requirements before a pastor nominating committee can begin to receive information about a potential pastor.

The season of Advent is purple. Every congregation I know wants to begin as quickly as possible to sing Christmas hymns and decorate the sanctuary to celebrate the season of Christmas, rather than an extensive preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

Lent is penitence. It is far more than giving up chocolate and Cokes, but it is a time of significant soul searching, including recognizing the ways our lives are out of sync with God’s intention. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and goes to the cross of Christ.

Red is a single Sunday—Pentecost. It marks the birthday of the New Testament Church and the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. If we really let go, Pentecost offers not only celebration but a scary call to service.

Green represents spiritual growth and covers almost two-thirds of the year. It is referred to as Ordinary Time—plain, routine, hum-drum, mostly predictable, same ole, same ole Ordinary Time! It is the time in between the mountain tops and the valleys, where most of us live most of the time.

I have always found it difficult to measure spiritual growth. Pentecost was June 12th. Now, seven weeks later, how have you grown in this green season? It is much easier to mark physical growth. We, like many families, have a place where we periodically measured the height of our children, their friends, and now our grandchildren. If we did it daily or weekly, the conclusion would have been, “You’re not growing!” But it would not be true!

The Gospel of Luke summarizes eighteen years in the life of Jesus with these words: “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and people.” (Luke 2:52) Don’t you know there were lots of days that it would have been hard to measure that growth?

The scene that grabs me the most about Ordinary Time is the symbolic picture of the Last Judgment—today’s Gospel lesson from Matthew 25. The occasion and its scope is extraordinary. Jesus is seated on his heavenly throne in glory surrounded by angels. All nations of the world are assembled before him. These people are intermingled. The King separates people like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. On what basis? Simple, ordinary, plain, caring for one another—feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the unclothed, visiting the sick and those in prison. So ordinary, in fact, the sheep did not remember ever having done it.

Soon we will baptize Dorothy May Saldarini Barron—Child of the Covenant, and surely in heaven and on earth, there will be a celebration. You are asked to promise in the name of the whole church to be an example to her in the little, everyday things—to pick her up when she falls, to teach her in Sunday School, to encourage her, pray for her, and love her time and time and time again—as we are each called to do for all the children.

Several years ago, the day before Easter, I was feeling a lot of pressure. Extended family was coming, and lots of finishing touches for worship the next day remained to be done. Late in the afternoon a call came that a member of the congregation was in emergency surgery. It was critical! Instantly, it became my top priority, as it would for you, to go to the hospital. I took the elevator in the basement of the hospital. It stopped in the lobby, and a mother and her daughter, who obviously had Down syndrome, stepped in. I offered a weak smile. Instantly, I could sense that the girl was staring at me, examining me intently from head to toe. Their floor was lower than where I was going. The elevator opened, and as they were getting off, the little girl turned to me and asked, “Would you like a hug?” Her mother tried to apologize, but I answered, “I sure would! I need a hug!” She took two or three steps and squeezed hard as I leaned over. “Thank you,” I said. She smiled and said, “Happy Easter!” Though I tried later, I could not find her. I

did not learn her name, and I am sure I have never seen her again. She probably doesn't remember that time, but I'll never forget. Neither will Jesus. Amen.