



“Ordinary Road, Extraordinary Grace”

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Luke 24:13-16, 28-35

There are a lot of McDonalds' around, aren't there? Until I became gluten-free, I didn't really notice all of the golden arches dotting the horizon. But now when I'm looking for a place to eat, it seems that there are only McDonalds' everywhere. There are so many of them that they have become ordinary fixtures around us. It's been forever since I've eaten at a McDonalds and I don't really remember what their food tastes like. Yet, when I think of McDonalds I don't think of the food, I think of an experience I once had.

Several years ago, on an ordinary day, I stopped in to an ordinary Mickey D's and ordered an ordinary hamburger only to have something extra-ordinary happen. This particular McDonalds was frequented by homeless men and women that spent their one or two dollars on a cheeseburger and coke, and I thought that eating lunch in McDonalds and the presence of homeless people to be a rather ordinary occurrence in my busy life. Yet, I did something out of the ordinary on that particular day – honestly, I'm not sure why – and decided to give a few dollars, my left-over change, to an unshaven, unkempt, and rather uninviting gentleman sitting in the back of the restaurant. After placing the money in his hand, a grin began to creep from ear to ear as he smiled in gratitude. He then pulled me in and whispered a prayer for me that was denser and more delicious than an extra thick milkshake. That ordinary day suddenly became extra-ordinary. I, the traveler on an ordinary road, just had lunch with Jesus.

The road to Emmaus... the travelers that broke bread with Jesus... the revelation of an extraordinary moment... this is a story that we have heard many times. It is a sermon that has been preached again and again. In fact, we have heard this narrative so many times that it has become rather... ordinary. The travelers in this story were ordinary; the dusty road they journeyed was ordinary; the town to which they were going was ordinary. However, in the ordinariness that overtook the disciples as their lives got back to normal after the death of Jesus, an extraordinary grace was experienced.

After any tragic event, life, at some point, must continue forward. It had been three days since Good Friday, since Jesus died and was buried. Sunday for the Jewish people is like our Monday. Everything returns to normal. The work week begins again. We come out of the sacred space of Sabbath and into ordinary time and the travelers were wandering down a dusty road while wondering if Jesus' life had actually meant something. Their hopes and dreams had been pounded on the cross and entombed in lifeless stone. Their only glimpse of Jesus was the flimsy rumors they had heard from a trio of frightened women. There was nothing left to do.

There was nothing left to do but to get back to the ordinariness of life. Life called them back to the mundane, back to their old jobs, their old habits, their old routines. The dream was over, for

they had hoped that he would be the one who would set Israel free. And just like the disciples, what do we do with broken dreams? What do we do when the marriage doesn't work out? What do we do when the cat-scan comes back positive? What do we do when she can't come out of her depression? What do we do when the money doesn't last the month? What do we do when public and religious leaders betray us? What do we do when the hero doesn't win? What do we do?

Many people run away. This is what the travelers did. They were going to that place, any place, where they could escape from the tragedy of life. Every one of us has taken that trip to Emmaus. We want to get away from the pain, the rejection, and the hurt. We want to walk until we forget. Frederick Buechner, the poetic and prolific author and teacher, says "Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that humans have had—ideas about love, freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish ends. Emmaus is where we go, where we try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life."

These travelers were not only walking the road to escape the hurt of their lives, but also to get away from the ordinariness that had returned since Jesus' death. You see, at Jesus' birth there was fanfare as a whole choir of angels sang, shepherds knelt at the manger, the kings came from the East with precious gifts, and, of course, the star shown bright. At his trial, Jesus entered Jerusalem to palm leaves and shouts of "Hosanna" resonating off the streets and the buildings. At the cross, the sky went black and the earth shook ferociously. At his death, the curtain of the holy of holies, the most sacred place in the Temple, ripped violently from top to bottom. Jesus had led the disciples through an extraordinary adventure.

Yet, the experience of these two travelers, had become very unglamorous. They were two average "Joes" walking along a dusty road to a town that nobody had ever heard of. A common companion whom they did not recognize joined them on their ordinary journey. They did not recognize the stranger; they did not recognize Jesus. Yet, we can probably say that they did not recognize Jesus even when he was alive. They didn't know what his real mission was. They saw what they wanted to see and made Jesus into what they wanted him to be. We notice this after the resurrection when Mary saw a gardener instead of the risen Christ; she saw death instead of life. We notice this with Peter who went fishing and asked Jesus to stay for breakfast on the beach, but still didn't know who he was. We get so caught up with our ordinary lives that we don't see the extraordinary one journeying with us.

And the place where Jesus comes to us is most likely a place like Emmaus. This is the place where we spend most of our lives, the place where we go to hide; the place where we evade our pain and ignore our problems. It is the place where we throw up our hands and just say "forget it all, it makes no difference!" But there are some things that even by going to Emmaus we cannot escape. Buechner again says that we are "living human beings with blood in our veins and breath in our lungs. We cannot escape getting hungry, and we cannot escape eating. We cannot escape walking or driving down a dusty road to get from one place to another. And my point is this, that it is precisely at such times as these that life is going to ask us questions that we cannot escape for long: questions about where the road we are traveling is finally going to take us; about

whether food is enough to keep us alive, truly alive; about who we are and who the stranger is behind us.”

It is precisely in those Emmaus times that Jesus appears. He comes into the very center of our lives at its most real and inescapable moments. Not in the dramatic pageantry like Jesus’ birth and death, not in the midst of a well-crafted worship service on a Sunday morning, not in a heavenly vision or ecstatic daydream, but... at suppertime, or walking along a road. Christ comes in the common, Christ appears in the ordinary. Jesus appeared to the disciples, in the middle of dinner, while they were eating around a table. He came to these two travelers in the midst of their supper by breaking into the moment and breaking bread. He didn’t approach them from on high or come down in a pillar of fire or use a thundering voice. He appeared in their midst, in the midst of his people, in the midst of dinner, in the midst of real life, in the midst of their confusing questions. That is where Jesus dwells. He resides in every face you see in this room; every person you meet on the street; every beloved who is ignored by society; every common moment in life; in the very food that gives us life.

So, where are our priorities in this rather ordinary life that we walk everyday? Are we lost in the ordinary or are we watching for Jesus? We try so hard to escape our lives that we keep our eyes closed to the divine appearing in the world, through others, through us, and among us. We don’t seem to realize how important it is to walk with Jesus in our ordinary, daily routines until for some reason our world wobbles, our customs crumble, and our schedules are shattered.

The two travelers, even in their hurt, loss, and brokenness, knew what their priorities were. They knew what extraordinary task had to be done. They instinctually offered for the stranger to stay with them that night. They centered their hearts and actions on this person whom they had supposedly never met instead of deciding to dwell in the misery of escape. They helped a fellow human being. They saw Christ in the ordinary, in the stranger. And to their amazement, it was Jesus.

We need to have the same eyes, the same attitude, as the travelers had. We need to see beyond the ordinariness of life and notice God’s love, God’s presence, God walking with us on this long, ordinary, dusty road. And if we look with our hearts and spirits, and listen with our whole being—if we try not to live from escape to escape, but instead live from the miracle of one precious moment to another—we might, like the travelers, finally see Jesus.

Fred Craddock, one of America’s great teachers of preaching, tells the story of what should’ve been an ordinary breakfast experience. He was stuck in Winnipeg, Canada and in the midst of an early October snow storm which paralyzed the city. Everything was shut down and his host could not even make it to his hotel to pick him up for breakfast.

So, for breakfast, Craddock found himself at a crowded bus depot café about two blocks from his hotel. As he entered, somebody scooted over and let him get in a booth. A big man with a greasy apron came over to the table and asked him what he wanted. Not knowing what the café served, Craddock asked to see a menu. “What’d ya want with a menu?” the man asked. “We have soup.” “Then I’ll have soup,” he said. Just what he wanted—soup for breakfast.

The man brought the soup and Craddock says it was an unusual looking soup. It was grey, the color of a mouse. He did not know what was in it, but he took this spoon and tasted it. Awful! “I can’t eat this,” he said. So, he sat in that crowded café warming his hands around the bowl, railing against the world, stuck in Winnipeg.

Then, the door opened and someone yelled, “Close the door,” and she did. A woman came in. She was middle-aged, had on a coat, but no covering for her head. Someone scooted over and let her in a booth. The big man with the greasy apron came over and the whole café heard this conversation:

“What’d ya want?”

“Bring me a glass of water,” she said.

The man brought the water, took out his tablet and repeated the question. “What’d ya want?”

“Just the water.”

“Lady, you gotta order something.”

“Just the water.”

The man's voice started rising: “Lady, I’ve got paying customers here waiting for a place, now order!”

“Just the water.”

“You order something or you get out!”

“Can I stay and get warm?”

“Order or get out!”

So, she got up. The people at the table where she was seated got up, people around got up, the folks that let Craddock sit at the table got up, Craddock got up, and they all started moving towards the door. “OK,” the big man with the greasy apron said, “She can stay.” And everybody sat down. He even brought her a bowl of that soup.

Craddock asked the man sitting next to him, “Who is she?”

“I never saw her before,” he said, “but if she ain’t welcome, ain’t nobody welcome.” Then Craddock said, all you could hear was the sound of people eating their soup. “Well, if they can eat it, I can eat it,” he said. He picked up his spoon and started eating the soup. Craddock said, “It was good soup. I ate all of that soup. It was a strange soup. I don’t remember ever having it. As I left I remembered eating something that tasted like that before. That soup that day tasted like bread and wine.”

As we walk along the roads of our lives, talking about all the things that have come to pass, participating in the ordinary, we must keep our eyes open. At first, we might not recognize the stranger among the common occurrences and simple stories, but then we will sense a growing warmth, as our hearts begin to burn within us. And then we will see Jesus, in the breaking of the bread, in a simple meal, in a shared bowl of soup. That is his way. He is walking with us, accompanying us on the journey. And although we feel as if we are on an ordinary road, it is there that we find extraordinary grace.

Amen.