

# IN THE ORDINARY THINGS

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A few months ago I became a parent for the first time. I'm a stepfather to a three- and four-year-old. You don't have to be a parent to know that parents are busy, and I'm not at all surprised to find myself in a hurry more often than I was before. The surprise has been the opposite—my need to learn to slow down. Learning to accept and embrace the slower pace of things is essential for me; it's the key to experiencing my time with the boys as a joy rather than a frustration. If I can resist being in a hurry, I really enjoy watching how long it takes the boys to come down the stairs in the morning. I really love playing tag with the boys at the park or just watching them spin around and get dizzy; so I have to resist the temptation to ruin it by checking my email at the park when I have five extra minutes; increasingly I just leave my cell phone at home. At bedtime, I have to resist wondering how long it will take one of them to fall asleep. Laying there in the bed, I get to calm myself, listen to the slowing beating of my heart, and the sound of my breath and theirs and take a few minutes to enjoy the blessings of the day.

If I don't do these things slowly enough, I miss out on so much, and I become much more frustrated about how long everything is taking and worried about how I'm ever going to get it all done—even though much of what I'm trying to get done isn't all that important. I can already tell that for me, being a parent isn't going to be about getting more done, it's going to have to be about slowing down and enjoying ordinary things.

I know that slowing down and finding joy in ordinary things is a challenge for all kinds of people; I hear folks say it to me all the time. It's a problem for busy professionals who have lost a sense of meaning in their work. And for older people whose minds are still active even as their bodies are slowing down. And for busy people overwhelmed with the responsibility of caring for a loved one. And for any of us searching for more meaning and purpose in everyday life.

The story we read today is about two people who have an experience of God because they notice something very ordinary. It's just a matter of days after Jesus' death, and two disciples are on a road to a place called Emmaus—already they must be heading home, getting back to work. At least they're still talking about Jesus. When

a third man walking along that road falls into step with them and asks what they're talking about, they tell him they're talking about Jesus, grieving his death on the Cross; they can't believe this man who just joined them is the only one in Jerusalem who hasn't heard about it. But it turns out that he has. This man they meet on the road starts adding his own stories about Jesus, quoting the Old Testament as he recalls prophecies about the Messiah, and he reassures the grieving disciples that everything is happening just the way it is supposed to; this man who has joined them as they walk along the road turns out to be Jesus—and we the readers can't believe these disciples were so hurried and distracted with what they're doing that they don't recognize him.

Until later. The disciples urge their new friend to join them for dinner; and at the table, it is not his scintillating conversation, or his theological wisdom, and or even his Jesus-like appearance that finally allowed them to recognize him as Jesus; no, it says that when he breaks bread and hands it to them, then "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." He was "made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

This is often how faith works. We miss God in what would seem to be the most expected signs; preaching and church attendance, reading books on religion or praying the Lord's Prayer would seem to be good ways to come to know God, and sometimes they are; but often we come to a greater awareness of God through the ordinary things, common things, unexpected things that slow us down and show us the sacredness of life.

The theologians have a word for these means of discovering God; they call it revelation.

"Revelation," says theologian John Leith, "is the clue that enables one to put together the disparate experiences of life into a meaningful, coherent whole, to see a pattern and purpose in human history, to overcome the incongruities between what life is and what life ought to be." (John Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, 30.) Revelations—these ways that we discover God—are what helps life have meaning. Revelation is a way of paying attention to life. People who understand revelation experience the pace of parenting as a joy rather than a frustration; people who experience revelation know that emails, and meetings, errands and sales calls are chances to share a little more kindness and grace with someone else. Revelation makes the sunrise a sign of God's wisdom, but also cold winter winds and dirt and insects. Barbara Brown Taylor says when we pay attention to these things they become "altars in this world" and she says that just about anything can be a source of finding God. One of her favorite examples is a mail order catalog:

"First, there are the people who produced the catalog—the designers, the photographers, the models, and the copyeditors—along with the people who

produced the goods inside. Some of those people live in Mexico and others in the Philippines...If you could lay a laminated map of the world on the floor and put a pin in every place where something in that mail-order catalog came from, you might be amazed at how prickly the map became..." All this if you slow down and think about how many lives are touched...in the pages a catalog.

She also notes that "In China, where cashmere goats are bred to produce sweaters for American consumers, traditional grasslands are so overgrazed thousands of square miles turn to desert each year..." And "then there is the paper and the ink: "Pine is the cheapest, most renewable source of pulpwood for paper. I use paper, and I know it has to come from somewhere. I just hate thinking that a whole forest came down for one run of a mail-order catalog, especially since I saw so many copies of that catalog in the trash at the post office." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 31, 34.)

Some people don't like hearing these kinds of examples. Often we would rather just enjoy a sweater we ordered, a book full of paper, a hot shower, or a nice dinner without feeling guilty about the resources consumed in the process. Didn't God put at least some of those resources on the earth for us to enjoy.

Well, sure that's true. I think what she's saying is not, for instance, that you should never eat a steak; it's about appreciating where it came from. The point is that when you eat a steak, slow down and consider the amount of water, fossil fuels, people, and not to mention a no-longer-living animal that contributed to the meal, it's hard not to have a greater sense of reverence for the amazing good fortune you have and the connectedness of it all. All too often we just mindlessly consume dinner, griping about why the service or the company isn't a little better as we wait for the check to come, and then we marvel that Jeff Ruby can charge \$75 for this. A little dose of reverence can help us appreciate our good fortune. You may not make peace with the \$75 thing, but at least you know you're blessed.

I wouldn't spend so much time on this—reverence, these revelations about the sacredness of common things—except that thinking about these things has a healing effect in our lives. It gives some meaning and coherence to the meals we eat, errands we run, and work and personal tasks we accomplish in the course of a day. They become less just things to get done and, instead, opportunities for grace.

That may sound esoteric or theoretical, but there is a very practical element to it. People who are busy or overwhelmed with one or more choices in their life often find themselves dreaming about what life might be like if they did something different. So they try harder and harder to figure out if it's their relationship or their job or some other commitment that they need to change in order to get it right. And many folks make wasteful mistakes in chasing those dreams. And then they beat themselves up when

they try to do things in a different way, they are disappointed to find that things don't change much—the same frustrations are still there. I made a comment or two earlier about how those two disciples on the road were already getting back to their regular lives, and those comments may have sounded like those disciples should have been doing something else. But the fact is, they were right where they were supposed to be. God intended to become known to them in the breaking of the bread. Part of the lesson before us today isn't that God wants us to be doing something else, but that God may want to be found in what you're already doing. God blesses the life that you have, and wants for you to be able to receive that blessing.

One way of describing this is found in the words of a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer—he was a German pastor during the 1930s who led a community of Christians, and wrote about their experiences in a book called *Life Together*. One of his insights was about the danger of dreams. There are plenty of good things to be said about dreaming, having a goal to chase and a vision for the future, hope in what could be. At the same time, said Bonhoeffer, as he watched his friends trying to live together, he said, "there is nothing more dangerous to authentic community than our dreams for it, because we love those dreams more than the people around us." (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 26-7.) If you want to love your life, you can't waste all your emotional energy longing for it to be different. You have to love the life you have; that's how you find God in things so common as the breaking of bread.

It is often suggested that revelations of God—the experiences that give life meaning and coherence, are supposed to be otherworldly and extraordinary, but that's like dreaming for something other than what most of us have. What most of us have is a regular life, full of regular chances for work and play, frustration and joy; it's a life God wants to bless; a life God hopes for us to love. And we know this because God can be known in regular things—a trip to the playground; a phone call to a friend; a day at the office; the breaking of bread.

Amen.

Text:

Luke 24:13-35