

## Ordinary Things

Several years ago, I joined my still Roman Catholic sisters for Christmas Eve Midnight Mass.

The priest looked pretty new to the clergy life and his homily went on for a very long time!

(I know, I know, you're thinking: "And YOU should talk!")

But anyway, his homily was all about how, if we only knew what he was about to do with the every day bread and wine on the altar, why, our hair would stand on end, we might faint, we might even spend the night in rapturous adoration.

He was quite animated about the whole thing which, I suppose, is no surprise, because the central question in every religion world-wide is: how do we make the ordinary into something holy?

That's the point of the Jewish sacrificial animals and Buddhist meditation and Hindu worship and for far too many Christians, it's the central point of Christianity.

How do we make the ordinary holy?

The answer to that question gives us "born again Christians" and great personal efforts to earn one's way into heaven through all kinds of means and methods.

Making the ordinary holy is all about **our** quest for God.

But in today's gospel lesson, something far different is going on.

Today, it's not about the ordinary becoming holy, it's about the holy becoming ordinary that has everyone, especially the folks like me, the religious holy rollers, all up in arms.

John's entire gospel wrestles with this mind-numbing news about the holy becoming ordinary.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....

"The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us."

"For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son..."

How can the eternal Word of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Alpha and the Omega, become an ordinary human being?

In Luke's gospel, when Jesus begins his ministry in his hometown, when he opens up the scroll to the Prophet Isaiah and reads, to everyone's delight, about the time of the Lord come near, when the blind see and the deaf hear and the lame leap - it's all fine and dandy -- until Jesus says this:

"The time is now, the day is here!"

Well, the next thing you know, they've practically got a riot on their hands!

It seems we're most comfortable when the holy is something far away, in those outer reaches where we can pay some respectful lip service - before getting back to the blood, sweat and tears at hand.

Yet John's constant refrain is that right here -- in the very midst of our blood, sweat and tears -- IS the holiness of God.

And our human response is nearly always to say: "Not a chance!"

And so it is in John's gospel.

Jesus, the smart folks say, can't be the holy one for one simple reason: he's ordinary!

We know his folks!

We went to his little league games!

We saw him get bawled out when he came home with a "D" in French!

Case closed.

Because everyone knows that while the ordinary might become holy (like the slaughtered animals sacrificed in Jerusalem's temple) – everyone also knows that the holy cannot become ordinary.

And for good reason.

As long as the holy cannot become ordinary, we can treat what is ordinary; like each other, like this earth, and our animals; we can treat it all as we wish.

The horrific killings that happen with a sickening routine throughout our nation: these are examples of where we end up when we insist that the holy cannot become ordinary.

Only the holy deserves our respect; our awe; our reverence.

And since the holy is far away, a distant, not quite real, spiritual thing; we can get by with lip service to it, while, in our name, mother earth is pillaged for oil and gas, the oceans become the world's open sewer and animals are slaughtered with an industrial efficiency that boggles the mind – and it's all fine – because the ordinary is just so, well, so ordinary.

But if the holy becomes ordinary, then the gig up.

If the holy becomes ordinary, then suddenly — nothing is really ordinary anymore.

If the holy becomes ordinary, what is ordinary, like you and me and everyone else on this planet; like the earth and its treasures, like the animals and oceans, all of these ordinary things must also be holy.

And the distance that we thought kept us safe from the holy, why, it vanishes; because in truth the holy is in our midst, suffused in everything we see, everyone we touch, in every bit of creation.

This is the great convulsion that Jesus brings — no wonder we kill him with such relish; no wonder we nail him to a tree so quickly.

Because -- if the ordinary is now holy, whom can we hate, whom can we refuse to forgive, whom can we kill?

If the ordinary is now holy, how can we separate lives lived on Sunday morning from lives lived the rest of the week?

And I wonder if this is what Jesus is getting at when he tells us today that “whoever believes **has** eternal life.”

Not “whoever believes **will have** eternal life,” but “whoever believes **has** eternal life:” now, today, this moment!

If you can see everything around you as holy; from the wino at the bus stop to our glorious Tiffany stained glass to the gal or guy seated in front of you to the jerk who cut you off in traffic this morning to the parent or child who is driving you crazy, to the cows in the field and the grass they are eating; if you can come to believe that all of it is

immersed in holiness, overflowing with God; then you have stepped through the doorway of eternal life.

It's a narrow doorway to be sure — because our ego insists that the holy is far away and out of touch.

How else to ensure that I remain the center of the universe; so that I can say:

“This is mine!”

“This I deserve!”

That's the ego talking, and the ego demands that the holy stay far away.

Our egos keep the doorway to eternal life forever in the next world, forever in some distant place that I may or may not see someday, but only once I'm dead.

But if you ask for the grace, that narrow passage just might open right in front of your eyes, yes, those lovely brown, blue or green eyes of yours, now, inviting you to not only glimpse, but to come in..... all the way in.

As Merton says it:

“For those with eyes to see, heaven's gate is everywhere!”

Or as the blessed saint puts it:

“All the way to heaven is heaven, because Jesus says ‘I am the way!’”  
St. Catherine of Siena.

Simon Weil once remarked that the “tragedy of Christianity is that it came to see itself as replacing other religions instead of adding something to all of them.”

What Christianity has to add to all other faiths is this simple truth, the holy has already become ordinary, transforming everything that was once ordinary into that which is holy.

Paul is given the grace to see the holy suffused in every ordinary thing.

That vision is the heartbeat of his entire ministry.

It's the source of his patient advice given to us today: to be "kind to one another; tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God through Christ has forgiven you."

For this is the way of God: not vengeance or punishment or retribution; but gentleness, tenderness, and more often than not, a really good laugh!

In that gentleness, in that tenderness, and yes, in that hilarious sense of humor, is the true power that sustains all that exists.

In Jesus, the holy becomes ordinary flesh; flesh for your belly and mine; and in that flesh is the life of the world.

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