

PREACHING

the ORDINARY

R. Carl Frazier, Jr.

AUGUST 26, 2001

12th Sunday after Pentecost

Jer. 1:4-10; Ps. 71:1-6
Heb. 12:18-29; Lk. 13:10-17

SEPTEMBER 2, 2001

13th Sunday after Pentecost

Jer. 2:4-13; Ps. 81:1, 10-16
Heb. 13:1-8, 15-16; Lk. 14:1, 7-14

SEPTEMBER 9, 2001

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Jer. 18:1-11; Ps. 139:1-6, 13-18
Philem. 1-21; Lk. 14:25-33

SEPTEMBER 16, 2001

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Jer. 4:11-12, 22-28; Ps. 14
1 Tim. 1:12-17; Lk. 15:1-10

SEPTEMBER 23, 2001

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Jer. 8:18-9:1; Ps. 79:1-9 or Ps. 4
1 Tim. 2:1-7; Lk. 16:1-13

SEPTEMBER 30, 2001

17th Sunday after Pentecost

Jer. 32:1-3a; 6-15; Ps. 91:1-6, 14-16
1 Tim. 6:6-19; Lk. 16:19-31

OCTOBER 7, 2001

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Lam. 1:1-6; Ps. 137
2 Tim. 1:1-14; Lk. 17:5-10

OCTOBER 14, 2001

19th Sunday after Pentecost

Jer. 29:1, 4-7; Ps. 66:1-12
2 Tim. 2:8-15; Lk. 17:11-19

OCTOBER 21, 2001

20th Sunday after Pentecost

Jer. 31:27-34; Ps. 119-97-104 or Ps. 139
2 Tim. 3:14-4:5; Lk. 18:1-8

OCTOBER 28, 2001

21st Sunday after Pentecost

Joel 2:23-32; Ps. 65
2 Tim. 4:6-8, 16-18; Lk. 18:9-14

The autumn of the year can be a formidable time for a lectionary preacher. A variety of issues present themselves during the long season of “Ordinary Time” and demand a hearing.

Fall schedules in many churches are crowded with a host of non-liturgical programs and activities. Homecomings, fall bazaars, stewardship campaigns, Sunday School celebrations and teacher dedications, fall program “kick-offs” and choir programs—each speaks with its own distinctive voice and cries out to be heard by preacher and congregation alike. Advent planning, whispering in the ear, may consume more time and attention than weekly worship planning.

The secular calendar competes for the church’s attention. Labor Day, Halloween, Back-to-School, local elections are, like persistent telemarketers, asking for just a moment of the church’s time. The denominational calendar offers a different kind of sound that more than compensates for the lack of “major” feast days from Pentecost to All Saints’. World Communion Sunday, Laity Sunday, and, this year, the Igniting Ministries emphasis each speaks to the church and calls the preacher to a particular kind of task (perhaps the most interesting being the task of silence on Laity Sunday!)

Another layer of noise comes from the lectionary itself. The readings rarely seem to speak with one voice this time of year. Unlike the Christmas and Easter cycles where one can detect thematic unity among the lessons, each lesson seems to present its own message. Choices must, therefore, be made. Focus is required. Something will have to be left out. Put in the language of our working metaphor, some voices may have to go unheard in order to allow one voice to speak clearly.

Finally, adding to the babble, is the preacher’s own inner voice that sings a siren call to abandon the lectionary and to strike out on one’s own. It has, after all, been a long time since Pentecost and the

journey to Advent is only half done—forty years in the wilderness seems nothing compared to this! Paraments have been green for months already with months yet to go.

Taking all of these issues collectively, the task of planning to preach in Ordinary Time may seem daunting; the cacophony, deafening. Perhaps, then, a word in favor of Ordinary Time is in order. Theologically, the season reminds us of how life is lived. Our lives are spent mostly in ordinary moments: in the gathering of family and friends at table for a daily meal, or in the rush to eat the meal while on the way to a church meeting; in getting children ready for school; in the hospital visit with a parishioner who may not see many more days, ordinary or otherwise; in paying the bills; in watching the news; in chatting with a colleague at work.

In these and thousands of other, simple, ordinary acts we find our lives. Significantly, it is in such moments as these that we are encountered by God. The Christian faith witnesses to a God who created the world and time, who entered into it and redeemed it, and who continually fills it with mercy, grace, and signs of his presence. Ordinary preaching affords the pastor an occasion to lead the church in reflection on that great mystery.

Phyllis Tickle reminds us, “As a name for a liturgical season—for half the calendar year, in fact—Ordinary Time, too, is stark in its simplicity, for, as we all know, there is no such thing.”¹

As we have noted, in the season after Pentecost the appointed lessons frequently seem to lack a thematic unity among themselves. However, a careful, seriatim reading of each set of lessons suggests ways in which their voices may be heard. The preacher may wish to follow one voice throughout the fall, allowing it to be fully heard, and its message to work its way into the life of the congregation. The voices are those of Jeremiah, the author of the Pastoral Epistles, and Luke.

FROM CALL TO HOPE JEREMIAH'S WORD

From the 12th through the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, the first voice heard in the reading of scripture is that of Jeremiah of Anathoth. Weaving back and forth through the book that bears Jeremiah's name, worshipers are led on a journey from God's call, through despair and lament and, finally, into hope. While Jeremiah is often portrayed as a prophet of "gloom and doom," one who stands close enough to hear him may discover that there is more hope and grace within Jeremiah's voice than otherwise imagined.

The initial word from Jeremiah is an account of his call—an account which gives occasion for worshipers to reflect on their own. In Jeremiah 1:4-10, we learn that Jeremiah is called at a young age and that God announces a foreknowledge of Jeremiah's life. One of the more fascinating scenes in this account is the touching of Jeremiah's mouth with the word which must now be spoken. What word has God given us, placed in our mouths, that must be spoken?

That word is not always, at first, a positive word. Jeremiah is immediately sent (2:4-13) to speak against Israel's apostasy. Note however the good news almost hidden in the text: while Israel has been faithless, God has remained faithful. A powerful image for preaching is found in verse 13 with Israel abandoning the "fountain of living water" for the "cracked cistern" that they dug for themselves.

Jeremiah further calls the people to task by relating the commonplace scene he witnesses at the potter's house: a potter fashions a clay vessel which spoils and must be remade. By allegory, we are allowed to hear that we are clay to the potter God's hand. Jeremiah speaks a word of repentance and of the determination of God to effect change.

After two more weeks of lamentation and desolation, the lectionary brings us to Jeremiah's visions of hope. In 32:1-3a,6-15, he purchases land during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. The action was ill-conceived and illogical, yet a prophetic sign act. What seems worthless now will be of value again. God will, in time, restore the people to the land. It is a hope-full act.

Finally, the lectionary draws us into Jeremiah's vision of the new covenant (31:27-34). God has reversed the trends

of the book, indeed of history, and establishes a "new" covenant with the people of Israel. Judah and Jerusalem will be restored; each will know the Lord; sins will be forgiven. This is the radically forgiving and gracious work of God. The preacher who finds herself in a community overcome with despair or drifting toward faithless forgetfulness may find Jeremiah's a voice to listen to this fall.

THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH A WORD TO TIMOTHY

The writer of the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) makes his reason for writing quite clear: ". . . I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God. . ." (1 Timothy 3:14-15). While one may debate the authorship, dating, and location of these letters, their purpose seems fairly straightforward: to instruct the church, and its leaders, on the nature of the church and the shape of Christian living. At a time of year when church and its program schedule is very much on the minds of the congregation, the voice spoken in these letters may be helpful in directing us toward the deeper meanings of what it means to "be" the church.

The word from the pastorals is first spoken on September 16 (1 Timothy 1:12-17). Here, the author

reminds us of God's mercy and grace which has "overflowed" in his life. Moreover, that mercy has changed his life, has made of him "an example." The church that has received mercy becomes a community of people who, in the praise of God and by the grace of God, live exemplary lives. We are a changed people.

As a changed people, a people of God's mercy, we become a people of prayer (1 Timothy 2:1-7). The kind of prayers that we are to be, however, is quite

specifically spelled out. Paul directs that prayers "are to be made for everyone" (verse 1). In fact, three times within this one passage instruction is given related to praying for "everyone" or for "all." Our prayer and worship life should not simply reflect concern with our selves and our community. Rather, the church is called beyond the narrow confines of parochial concern and instructed to share in Christ's concern for the world. Our prayers—supplications, intercessions, and thanksgivings—should reflect that larger vision.

As should our lives. A week later, in 1 Timothy 6:6-19, we find instruction on the shape of faithful living. A godly life, we are taught, brings contentment—one that is rooted in Christ Jesus and the discipline of his way rather than in possessions, wealth, or gain. Here we find the famous teaching that "the love of money is the root of all evil" (6:10) and instructions to the "rich" that they should trust in God rather than in their financial portfolios. Gain in life, along with contentment, is to be found in Christ alone. It is

a word that will challenge many in our congregations who seek contentment and satisfaction elsewhere.

The second letter to Timothy begins where the first left off. As 1 Timothy closed, the hearer was instructed to "guard what has been entrusted to you" (1 Timothy 6:20). Paul begins 2 Timothy with the same language (2 Timothy 1:1-14). He writes of a faith that is transmitted from genera-

tion to generation, of tradition that is handed down with care from one to another, and of a gospel which we should be bold to confess and to preach. We are reminded that "church" did not begin with us, nor will it end with us. Moreover, Paul invites the faithful to "rekindle the gift of God that is within you" and to live shamelessly in the gospel.

That gospel is rooted in Jesus Christ and the church is called in 2 Timothy 2:8-15 to exercise its memory of Christ. "Remembering" Jesus Christ is the

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essence of who we are and what we do as the church. The preacher is directly instructed to “remind them of this.” The faith which we possess is a concrete faith rooted in a person and in his work, not faith in the theoretical. Such a faith allows one to put our lives—our suffering, our deaths, our faithlessness—in the context of Christ’s steadfastness. It even puts our disagreements (“avoid wrangling over words”) in proper perspective.

Appropriate words, however, are another matter. Such words are to be found in the scriptures themselves (“the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus”). Careful attention is required, however, in the teaching and proclamation of scriptural truth. In an age of relativism and in a time when Christians debate the authority of scripture among themselves, a text such as 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 provides a starting point for conversation about the place and importance of the church’s book in the church’s life.

The last word heard from these letters is a word of farewell. Paul tells us of his departure and of the end of his ministry. Yet, he locates even his death in his faith in Jesus Christ and invites all his listeners to do the same. In 2 Timothy 6:6-8, 16-18, Paul speaks of having finished his work, but witnesses to his conviction that the future belongs in Christ’s hands. Such a faith results in a resounding singing of the Doxology! (“To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”)

In some ways, over the seven weeks of journeying through the letters to Timothy, we end where we began—with the witness of a life changed by the mercy of God and the grace of Jesus Christ. For a church that in the fall of 2001 promises “Open Hearts, Open Doors, and Open Lives” it is a helpful word.

**THE EXTRAORDINARY
IN THE ORDINARY
A WORD
THROUGH LUKE**

Throughout the year, the gospel voice that has been spoken has been Luke’s. His particular nuances, inflections, and accents should be familiar to the congregation by now. Those who have spent much time listening to Luke should know that his is an ideal gospel for Ordinary Time. God’s extraordinary

work is, time and again in Luke's telling, revealed in the most ordinary of ways. A priest in the Temple, doing his duties, is visited by an angel. A young girl is invited to share in God's work and give birth to a child. People in everyday vocations—shepherds watching sheep, fishermen in their boats, a tax collector watching a parade—are all visited by the extraordinary working of God's grace. Table hospitality—the sharing of bread and fellowship—becomes, in Luke's narrative, a window of grace.

As Ordinary Time leads us into the fall, Luke continues to lead us into seeing the extraordinary presence of God in the most basic of life's moments. A crippled woman is healed (13:10-17). Neither she, nor anyone else, has sought the healing for her; Jesus simply offers. The irony is that Jesus, in doing God's work, has done it on the Sabbath and is criticized for doing so. It seems that for some, even God can only work certain hours.

Following the healing of the crip-

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applications for a life of discipleship.*

pled woman, the lectionary reading of Luke delves into two weeks of instructions: first, on humility (14:1,7-14); and, then on discipleship (14:25-33). Each lesson draws from life for its point. The lesson on humility finds its genesis in a discussion of table manners at a wedding banquet. One simply does not go to the head table without being invited—to do so risks potential embarrassment. Further, hosts are warned not to invite only those who can repay. Rather, kingdom living invites all and participates in the gracious nature of

God who invites us even when we cannot repay.

The instructions that follow on discipleship challenge definitions of family and employs metaphors of construction and preparations for war. Essentially, Jesus reminds us that anything less than full commitment is something less than full discipleship. It is interesting to note that Jesus is talking to people who want to follow. He is not trying to motivate the disheartened; rather he is being

direct with the enthusiastic.

The next several weeks offer a series of expressions of "ordinary" life being transformed into extraordinary work. Six weeks of parables follow. Parables, in their most basic form, are drawn from life and make application to some aspect or aspects of the sovereign rule of God. Their genius lies in taking something the listener can understand and using it to unfold mysteries that otherwise would be incomprehensible. So, Jesus tells of the joy of having found a lost sheep or coin (15:1-10) and the

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listeners understand something of the joy of God at finding a lost child. Jesus teaches of a shrewd manager who secures his future by being prudent in the present (16:1-13) and the listeners begin to sense something of managing this life in such a way as to reflect the prior claim of kingdom life. Jesus goes even further and tells of the rich man who paid no attention to the poor—a failure which leads to his eternal torment—while Lazarus, a poor man, enjoys the blessings of Abraham (16:19-31). The careful listener understands that life allows the opportunity to reflect God’s love and life. Jesus tells of servants (17:5-10) who, at the end of the day, receive not reward but more service; disciples begin to understand that obedience to God is an occasion for service, not a place of privilege. Jesus tells them of a parable of a judge worn down by a widow’s persistence and his followers understand that prayer is a matter of persistence and one should not “lose heart” (18:1-8). Finally, Jesus relates the story of two people at prayer—one proud and pious, the other penitent and humble. Listeners are reminded that we are called to trust in grace, not in ourselves (18.9-14).

The weeks build, parable upon parable, and Luke leads us deeper into Ordinary and closer to apocalypse by drawing from everyday life applications for a life of discipleship. One who is looking for a place from which to stand and speak a word to an ordinary people concerned with stewardship campaigns, Labor Day and Halloween, and managing to juggle family, career, and discipleship would do well to consider standing near Luke and “overhearing” his telling of the tale. □

1 Phyllis Tickle, *Ordinary Time: Stories for the Days between Ascensiontide and Advent* (Nashville: The Upper Room), p. 15.



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