



SEEKING THE SACRED IN THE EVERYDAY

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I am a woman with a job, a husband, three children, a cat, and a dog, and I consider myself something of an expert on ordinariness. I began writing this talk one afternoon about eighteen years ago. I started it in my head as I scrubbed crayon scrawls off a bedroom wall. Just around the corner, my sons, four year old Henry and one year old Will, were sucking the chocolate off of a pound of chocolate covered espresso beans, throwing the slimy coffee beans on the floor and crushing them underfoot. I actually got out the video camera to capture the supercaffeinated aftermath as they jumped from great heights, eyes wild. (Thankfully, a trip to the ER was not required.)

It was a typical day in a life with inventive, small children and I enjoyed much hilarity and sweetness with those little guys. Still, it was a landscape without grades or paychecks. After years of college and graduate school and the satisfaction of a stimulating teaching job, my life was suddenly dominated by repetitive, never completed, routine, sticky and rarely optional chores.

This shift into chaos brought up some big existential questions for me. I thought back to my studies as a philosophy major. I tried out the resignation of the stoics, the third century Greeks who taught that if only I could get my will and my desires in accord with nature, in line what was, right in front of me, I wouldn't feel so frustrated. Even as I tried for resignation, the words of Simone de Beauvoir played in a loop inside my head: "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition."

Then I thought, "Ok, if only I can just step out of my life and go on a spiritual retreat, a pilgrimage, to a convent, I'll get to be alone. If I can pray quietly in a chapel I'll be holier and certainly feel more peaceful." But I knew that after a weekend of serenity I'd be right back in the all too immediate world of crayoned walls and manic little boys. Would I just tough it out from there—till the next retreat?

The philosopher in me was having a rough time putting a value on my life. I struggled to see worth in the unavoidable messy tasks. Was God to be found anywhere in this everyday? Part of my struggle was rooted way back in the Industrial Revolution, when work and home spaces became more starkly divided. You know what I mean. Think about our culture's ideas of "real" work. Which

people among us are most respected, which tasks are highly honored? We evaluate one another based on salary, public recognition and long term impact.

Parents of young kids aren't the only people who ponder these questions. I've come to see that daily existence is fragmented for each and every one of us. Even if your LinkedIn professional profile impresses strangers, think for a moment about the past twenty-four hours of your life. Really: how many of the things that you've done felt really important—or sacred?

Our spiritual lives are fragmented in many ways, as well. Too often, faith is matter of the mind; it's limited to an intellectual assent to a set of particular beliefs. We relegate religion to certain "holy" times and observances. Furthermore, successful spirituality can feel like just another version of professional accomplishment, yet more elusive and difficult to achieve. Don't we believe that Super Spiritual people attend more Bible studies, go to church more faithfully, serve more selflessly?

When Henry and Will were little I wasn't getting anything done, judged by both worldly and churchly standards. I was losing ground, actually. Most days now I feel pretty much the same way—especially if I grade my accomplishments by the money I bring in or by the items I check off of my To Do list.

My husband, Charles Marsh, is a professor at the University of Virginia and he is always writing a book, directing doctoral dissertations, advising majors, speaking and teaching. Google his name and you'll see that he's got a lot going on. I direct a nonprofit ministry called Theological Horizons. Theological Horizons is centered at the Bonhoeffer House, where we live with Henry, Will and Nan. My days here include the "real work" of leading a Bible study, planning for a seminar or editing a newsletter. But life also requires that I wash coffee cups after a gathering, keep track of family activities and oversee homework---and do laundry, always laundry. I cleaned up the Bonhoeffer House before I walked upstairs to the office and I can tell you that even as we speak, dirty dishes are filling the sink and Ginger the dog is probably tearing into the trash.

Even though you or I might accomplish significant work professionally, we also take care of many other matters and some are admittedly very commonplace. No matter who we are, there are things that must be done today, even as they will be repeated tomorrow. The question I'd like to ask is: are those daily tasks meaningful at all? Where is God to be found in the everyday?

Margaret Kim Peterson has written a book called *Keeping House: The Litany of Everyday Life* in which she tells a personal story. The husband she married at the start of graduate school died four years later. Over that time, his worsening illness absorbed more and more of Margaret's energy until in the last months of his life she could do little more than moan, "I can't cope; I can't cope; I can hardly get to the grocery store."

Margaret Peterson recalls. "I understood then, with a clarity that I have experienced at few other times in my life, that getting to the grocery store was one of those things that Really Mattered. My dissertation could wait; dinner could not." She just had to put a hold on all the lofty theological

ideas that her classmates and teachers were passionately debating in her graduate seminars. She had to let go of fantasies of “accomplishing something.”

Somewhere in the world people measured their days by how much they got done—at work, in class, wherever. But as she cared for her dying husband, Margaret measured her days by whether, at the end of them, the members of her household had been dressed and fed and bathed and put to bed. “If we had been, then that was a good day,” she writes. “I had done what mattered most. Everything else was gravy.”

My friend Phoebe has chronicled her daughter Sarah’s terminal illness. She says, “We do a lot of hand holding these days, walking Sarah up and down the steps and around the house—yes, she’s walking!” Phoebe and Sarah hold hands going to sleep. Phoebe has learned to hold hands and check e-mail, load the dishwasher, put on make-up. Together they experience priceless affection and connection and much love. Holding hands. What could matter more?

Is it possible to see all of this as part of an integrated life? Work deadlines, holding hands, paying the mortgage, filling the gas tank—can all of these be seen as something whole and even sacred? Can spiritual meaning be found in living a daily life? I’d like to say that yes, it can. We can find God in the everyday. But we must begin by seeing everydayness from a new perspective.

Now, I don’t know how many people would utter the words “theology” and “carpool” in the same sentence, but I’m about to. I am married to a theologian and we founded Theological Horizons twenty-five years ago. I often declare that our ideas about God really do matter. Theological Horizons works to renew Christian thinking and discipleship in every sphere of life: in the university, the church the community. Our ideas about God, that is, our theology, are at the heart of how we understand and locate ourselves in the world and then how we live our days out there, yes, even in the carpool line.

In Christian theology we look to the Bible for clues to our everyday lives. From the very opening we see a God who makes a lovely world and then keeps his creation going. In the biblical story, repetition, in itself, is not equivalent to the oppressive futility of Sisyphus. It’s part of the design. The sun comes up every morning. There are natural rhythms of the day, the week, of the year, and these rhythms are echoed by the church’s liturgies and seasons. We can see our own lives as part of this liturgy, too. The patterns of our days can mirror the larger biblical story that we, as Christians, believe is the true story of the world.

I lead a weekly Christian reading group and lunch for students at the Bonhoeffer House called Vintage. Through Vintage I discovered a book by Kathleen Norris called *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and ‘Women’s Work’*. Her word *quotidian* is wonderful. It’s Latin so it sounds smart and exotic but it simply means “everyday, customary, ordinary.”

Norris has come to believe that the true mystics of the quotidian, the commonplace, are *not* those who contemplate holiness in isolation, reaching godlike illumination in serene silence. The true mystics are those who manage to find God in a life filled with noise, the demands of other people

and the relentless daily duties that can consume the self. These people treasure the rare moments of solitude and silence that come their way, and use them not to escape or to distract themselves, but to listen for signs of God's presence and open their hearts toward prayer.

Another author, Macrina Wiederkehr, writes of gathering up crumbs. She says that the reason we live life so dimly and with such divided hearts is that we have never really learned how to be present with quality to God, to self, to others, to experiences, to events and to all created things. We have never learned to gather up the crumbs of whatever appears in our path at every moment. We are so distracted that we meet all of these lovely gifts only half there. Wiederkehr declares, "Presence is what we are all starving for. Real presence! We are too busy to be present, too blind to see the nourishment and salvation in the crumbs of life, the experiences of each moment." There is so much blessing to be noticed all around us. If Jesus truly is the Bread of Life then he can be found scattered throughout our experiences. So today let's gather a few crumbs together.

Let's notice, for example, ways in which our work can mirror God's work. I'd like to mention three.

First, our quotidian tasks are creative.

When God created the heavens and earth, God started with chaos and ended with a finely differentiated and beautiful universe. Now, doing laundry does not feel spiritual and I've never felt creative while sorting lights and darks. But think about it: housework is all about bringing order out of chaos. Taking a chaotic pile of muddy soccer uniforms and random socks and ordering it into a stack of fresh, folded laundry is creative in this way--and so it imitates God's work. This goes to other tasks. Hours spent wrestling paperwork into order, coordinating an active household or a business that is going in a hundred directions--in these acts we are bringing order out of chaos. Engaging in the larger life of the community is creative, as well, when we are working to create order out of the chaos created by poverty and injustice. God the Creator gives us the dignity and privilege of imitating and thus participating in God's work of creation.

Second, our work can be providential.

God brought order out of chaos. But God did not just launch a world that lives on indefinitely without God's further involvement. No: the very creatureliness of the universe requires the continuing presence and activity of God in sustaining all things. Indeed, the writer of Lamentations reminds us that God's love is "new every morning," even to today.

The Bible tells us of how God cares for this creation: making a lovely, nourishing garden home, clothing Adam and Eve, leading Moses and his people through the wilderness, providing water, sending manna day after day after day. Psalms like Psalm 104 portray God as a homemaker and a house dweller, God as a caretaker. The providential acts of God are not exercises in futility but in faithfulness. This word "providential" comes from the root "to provide." In the daily work we do, we are often providing for people who need us, and in this we mirror the God who provides for us.

Faithfulness rarely feels heroic; it's mostly showing up and hanging in. Our lives, our families, our communities are messy; they are not all we wish them to be. But God's world is not as God wishes it to be either. Still, God remains present even in the midst of imperfection and brokenness.

We may cultivate a similarly mindful, hopeful attitude as we care for ourselves and for one another. Our faithful, obedient providence can make the ordinary sacred, in a way, and transform the burdens of obligation into the joy of vocation. We might even be able to say, "I am not simply stuck here; I am called."

Third, our daily work is incarnational.

God does not remain at an abstract distance from our sad and broken creation. God comes right into this world to live and die as one of us. Our redemption is profoundly physical—God becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ and shares our humanity completely—and takes on a body, needs food and rest, does physical work. In Jesus, God picks up a towel and washes other people's feet, feet that will be dirty again the moment they hit the floor. Jesus feeds hungry people who will need dinner again tomorrow, heals bodies that will surely fail again, blesses wriggling children. Even after his death and resurrection we find him out on the beach cooking breakfast for the disciples.

Remember: in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to ask for our daily bread. God made us, God created us to be what we are: daily people. By becoming incarnate, God honored the everyday. Fully human life is a life of service in and through the body. And God meets us where we are, in the flesh.

We ourselves take this the incarnation of God in Jesus out into our world. Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Spanish nun expresses this beautifully:

*Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands. Yours are the feet. Yours are the eyes. You are his body.*

These three biblical perspectives of creativity, providence and incarnation show us that our "lesser" labors can be works of faithfulness, imitations of God's own work and opportunities to experience grace and even rest. We can respond with gratitude, remembering that God has given us really, really good gifts: healthy food to prepare, clothes to wash, community where we belong, family, dear ones with hands to hold.

Knowing, intellectually, theologically, that I'm made to live this physical, cyclical life is an important beginning. Still, I often think that my days should feel less crazy somehow. I want to *be* in the present moment and discover the crumbs that God has scattered ahead of me. I need to change, I need to be made aware, day by day, of the sacred right next to me, in the ordinary—I need to just be reminded to take a breath now and then. I want to be notice how God sticks with me and how God intrudes into the moments of my quotidian existence even as he keeps track of falling sparrows and counts the hairs on your head.

I cannot transform myself, nor anyone else for that matter—only God can transform. At the same time, I can arrange my life in new ways, so that spiritual transformation can take place. I can develop a rhythm of spiritual practices that keep me open and available to God—that help me pay attention. Past and present day Christians show us ways of living the ordinary life extraordinarily well, of transforming life rather than transcending it. Christian spiritual practices like prayer, Scripture reading, and silence all set out to get our attention before life goes by in one great blur. God can become more than an idea out there somewhere and be experienced as an ever present reality here.

You and I have learned to go through life nonstop. It's a hard lesson to unlearn. Now is the time to collect ourselves, even just now and then, so that God can touch us in the most hectic moments.

Gunilla Norris has written a little book called *Being Home: A Book of Meditations*. In it she offers prayers for the most commonplace gestures like Awakening, Making the Bed, Crossing the Threshold, even Paying the Bills. Here is her prayer for Setting the Table:

*As I lay the fork near the plate, let me remember this is Your table, not mine.
As I set the water glasses down and fold the napkins, let me be reminded
That every setting at this table is Yours, not mine.
Each one who will partake of this meal is a particular someone You love,
A someone You have made and whom You sustain.
In You nothing and no one is forgotten.
How vast and providential is the memory with which You keep us all.
It is only we who forget You and then one another.
It is we who starve each other and exclude each other.
Give me new eyes.
When the glass is raised by my friend let me see You drinking.
When the fork is lifted by my child, let me recognize You eating.
You are the hidden joy which feeds and keeps everything.
You are the table, the guest, the meal, and the commemoration.
Make in my person a place setting for You.
Remind me of my true nature which is recalled only in you.*

May you and I gather up a few of these crumbs and encounter for ourselves the sacred in everyday life.

25th Anniversary
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