

It would be an insult, wouldn't it, if someone called you ordinary? If someone labeled you an ordinary wife, an ordinary father, an undeniably ordinary lover. Worse yet imagine if I were to say: Jane, you have ordinary eyes; Barbara, you have an ordinary body; Dom, you have an ordinary sense of fashion; Ken, you are an ordinary organist! Though we all know what it means, ordinary is clinically defined as uninteresting and commonplace, with no special or distinctive features. Ordinary is thus bland and boring. Ordinary is therefore a nasty little insult.

And yet, time after time in scripture we are reminded that God favors the ordinary and the overlooked. Instead of adding to the insult, God seems to be on the side of the distinctionless. In Genesis we see it in God showing partiality for Abel over Cain; Jacob over Esau; Joseph and then Ephraim alike. Whereas it was socially agreed that only the eldest child would be favored, God flips the script and destines the younger (often the neglected and of lower status) to be met with opportunity and fortune. And it wasn't just a boon for the men either, for we also witness it in the narrative of Rachel and Leah, where God paves the way for the younger Rachel to usurp Leah and marry Jacob.

Slightly more famously, we see this pattern repeated in the treatment of Jesus. For this rather ordinary man, from Nazareth of all insignificant places, was destined by God to change the course of human history.

*For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;  
and as one from whom others hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him of no account.*

-Isaiah 53

This son of a lower class artisan, this friend of tax-collectors, this sympathizer of sinners was chosen and anointed by God to inherit the Word and to usher in the very Kingdom of the Divine. In honor of the imminent-pond-jumper, the Great Magisterial Dr. Edmund Jones, it makes one wonder then if the Virgin Birth was added to the later gospels merely to bedazzle Jesus' rather ordinary and humble beginnings.

Now speaking of bedazzling... Anya and I just got back from Vegas after a week in Laguna beach. 11:30pm Friday night to be exact. Who here hasn't been to Vegas yet, show of hands? I applaud you! A more detestable place I cannot recall! An ordinary man can only see so much, or so little, before he's left wondering what strange, intimidating, and smelly world he just stumbled into. When the first guy you meet at the arrival gate has the last name of "booze-tilt" one knows something is just not quite right here.

Moreover, if ever there were a place that is the antithesis of what we read in the second half of verse 7 in 1 Samuel 16, Las Vegas is it. Recall that the text says: "for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance but the LORD looks on the heart." Well everything in Vegas is outward appearance. That's all that matters. Are your billboards bright enough? Is your

hotel big enough? Is your skirt tight enough? Are your sunglasses, which apparently you must also wear indoors, big enough? And make no mistake: the ideology of Las Vegas isn't confined to Nevada and its boarding commissions. There are plenty of folks right here at home, both young and old, who abide by their mantra. Who make every effort to be as inauthentic as possible; who truly believe that they are starring in their own reality show; who would do anything to be labeled as different or special even if it meant abiding by the most crude of standards.

Honestly, strangely enough, our experience in Vegas kind of resembled the narrative of David's anointing. To illustrate that seemingly unfathomable point, let us recall once more what we heard in 1 Samuel. Samuel is asked by God to go to Jesse the Bethlehemite to search for a successor to Saul. When he gets to the house of Jesse, Jesse's sons are paraded like strippers before him, one by one, from oldest to youngest. First up is Eliab, and Samuel is so taken by his extraordinary physical appearance (it is said that he is tall and of good physical stature) that he immediately thinks, oh this must be the one! *For starters he is the eldest, so that's good, but wow, look at his height and those muscles!* Oh Samuel, you would have loved the Strip. There are so many muscles!

And it's at this point that God rebukes Samuel for thinking in such a way and tells him to instead judge others by the essences of their hearts instead of their outward appearances. And that by itself, if that's all that there was, would prove a perfect transition into a closing paragraph on how we too ought to do the same; Amen. But unfortunately, that's not all there is. In fact, God does something really strange just 5 verses later.

For after condemning Samuel for lacking substance in *his* judgments, God instantly anoints David just seconds after David is called ruddy, handsome, and of beautiful eyes. Huh? Isn't God guilty then of exactly what Samuel just did? Nothing is said of David's internal character. Nothing is said of his heart or of his faith. All we know about him is that he is the youngest, and apparently has striking eyes and reddish-tanned skin. It's like God forgot who God was, suddenly became seduced by the flesh, and instantly morphed into one of the voyeurs of sin-city.

Now come to think of it, while we spent the first half of this sermon celebrating God for raising up ordinary folks of low status, it seems that God's motivation for doing so is sometimes based principally on one's extraordinary outward appearance. For it's not just with David that this happens, for Rachael is also lavished with countless adjectives about her good looks before she lucks into marrying Jacob, and the same rings true for Joseph before he is blessed by God (he is called exceedingly handsome)... could God then really be just another male pig?

Several commentators have tried to answer this seemingly blasphemous question. Some have cited that it was often commonplace for heroes and heroines of antiquity to be depicted with good looks, so it's not so out of the ordinary for the heroes of the Bible to have also acquired the same fairer features. Some have argued that it's merely a coincidence authored by the human hand. Others have even gone on to pen elegant re-writings of the text, suggesting that what the author really had in mind is that David was merely pink-faced, harkening back to the image of a newborn baby. And what baby could ever be said to be truly unhandsome and saddled with the saddest of eyes? So the argument continues that David was merely youthful, and that regardless of his good looks [and ultimately his future affair with Bathsheba and all his other ill-doings] God noticed something extraordinary (perhaps his ability to unite and lead a nation; to write and sing hymns, etc.) in David, despite his otherwise ordinary worldly status as the youngest, unentitled, child of Jesse.

Now chances are, without Edmund here to teach us, we'll never truly understand God's intentions as to why he elected David so readily after he is described as handsome. But I like to think that it has more to do with that 7<sup>th</sup> verse and God being able to see what the world otherwise cannot -- what we otherwise miss when the cliché rings true and we judge books by their covers and believe that nothing of significance can be produced from an ordinary child, man, woman or lifestyle.

One hot summer in Palm Springs some years ago, a strange Danish immigrant entered town and began waving at cars and greeting people as they walked by. He had long shaggy hair, a beard at least four years in growth, short blue jeans, a red collared shirt, and sandals instead of shoes. In short, to the people of Palm Springs he looked like your ordinary bum. And to them this new bum was particularly tiresome because he kept shining his teeth at them whenever they passed him by. So annoyed by his presence, and that he didn't keep to himself like the other decrepit, the townspeople called the police and had him driven out.

A couple of days later, Eiler Larsen returned to Laguna Beach a hero. Their prodigal son had come back! *Why did he ever leave in the first place? He wanted to be somewhere warmer, you say? Okay, well let's take him in more often and provide him with more meals!* Eiler Larsen was greeted with open arms by the community who understood and adored him, and so back to his corner he went waving at commuters and greeting everyone he met with a loud and hearty "Halloo-oo-oo! Delighted to see you!"

There are now two statues of Eiler in Laguna Beach, and you can see one of them right on the Pacific Coast Highway in front of the Pottery Place on the corner he used to wave from. Often called simple by outsiders, Eiler was yet fluent in six languages, read books on science and Psychology, fought in World War 1, and hiked the entire Appalachian Trail (from Maine to Georgia) before turning westward toward California. In Laguna, he worked as a gardener and lived in a rent-free room above someone's garage. Each Californian Spring, Larsen hiked 30 miles over the mountains to attend the Easter sunrise service at Mount Rubidoux in Riverside. Although he had little, Larsen's practice was to give away everything because he felt others "need it more than I do." He simply did not want much out of life, at least, of the kind of stuff that we all typically want out of life. When asked why Eiler devoted his every free minute to greeting people, he said that he wanted to spread his Mission of Friendliness to as many people as possible and believed that one small turn of friendliness would beget another to do the same and thus make for a happier world. Eiler Larsen, an ordinary man in outward appearance. An extraordinary man in heart and soul.

Our New Testament text speaks of a mustard seed as resembling the Kingdom of God. On the surface, it seems to be an odd choice as the mustard seed is one of the most puny and simple seeds there is. But when the mustard seed grows, it takes over almost the entire garden. Now imagine if an Eiler Larsen came walking into Chestnut Hill or even this very congregation. Would we welcome him? Would we nurture his mission, planting its seeds, giving it roots, spreading it throughout our community? Or would we drive him out, labeling him as just another ordinary, insignificant simpleton, turning away our faces, holding him of no account?

From ordinary people and ordinary beginnings can come extraordinary things. Vegas probably doesn't get this, but Laguna understands this. Moreover, David embodied this and Jesus perfected this. Live simply and honestly and with a pure heart -- and rejoice, for God will favor you!

Amen.