

July 3, 2022

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

The Reverend Garrett Yates
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

“Baptized in the Ordinary”



When I was growing up I remember a local radio station's motto: "Different is Good." These were the days when Indie music was taking off. Indie: the NOT mainstream. The implied message of this Indie station is that if you want something fresh and unique, turn your dial to them; otherwise, enjoy the tired, overplayed songs of the other stations. I was walking down the street the other day when I spotted the shirt: *I am different*. I love these expressions. And I think highlighting particularity and difference is hugely important, and yet I also wonder if there is a fear lurking here. If we fear that appearing like others signals an even deeper disease, and that is that we fear others.

In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, Joe Pinsker explains the rapid rise of one-of-a-kind baby names. Whereas sixty years ago, parents would intentionally choose popular baby names so that their kids would fit in, today's parents are naming their children so that they'll stand out. "American naming is now in a phase where distinctiveness is a virtue, which is a departure from the mid-century model of success," writes Pinsker. By contrast, the post-war era's definition of success was more communal than today's individualized culture. Conformity was something seen as honorable in that it pointed to the greater good. Now, parents, Pisker contends, feel the need to separate their kids from the pack. Like a catchy brand name, your success depends on your distinctiveness.

The need to be extraordinary extends to every realm of life. Take fashion, for example. It is often seen as an embarrassment when two people are wearing the same thing. What was intended to be a person's "statement piece" becomes a cliché when someone has already made the exact same statement. Years ago, in a crowded bar, I noticed another guy wearing the same shirt I had on, and I instantly became flustered. I went from being a unique contributor to society to being part of the crowd. It took me three months to build up the courage to wear

that shirt in public after that, lest I ran into my evil twin again.

The need to be extraordinary, singular, unique, seems to have been what Naaman in our reading from 2 Kings was all about. Naaman was an important military commander. An important personage. A highly decorated 4-star general in the Syrian army. Naaman was much loved. Even his name in Hebrew means “pleasant.”

But there was one problem. Naaman had leprosy... this mighty warrior was infected with a disease so devastating that his skin seemed to be rotting on his bones. Leprosy was the most dreaded disease of his day... and even worse, it was no respecter of persons... which means that regardless of how successful you have been, you were as vulnerable as anybody else. We may have built a life that is great, but we live in a world that does not think we are too special to hurt. So, what do we do when the hurt finds us? Who do we turn to when the hurt finds us? It all begins with Naaman, but then someone else enters the story.

She is a slave whom he had carried off in a victorious raid into Israel. Mighty warriors were accustomed to taking booty. They could have whatever they wanted: gold, silver, chariots, horses... and people who became slaves. This particular slave girl had been yanked from her home and now served Naaman's wife. She is as small as Naaman is big. The power he has is the power she lacks. She was the least of the least – a slave, a child, a girl. Yet, she knows something - something that none of the “high and mighty” in Syria know. And she is not silent: “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria,” she told Naaman's wife, “he would cure him of his leprosy.” Now why did this young girl care about this man whose army had carried her away from her own people?

That's one question, but here's another: Why did Naaman and the king even listen to what this slave girl

had to say? It was a preposterous suggestion – when the king’s own elite doctors had failed to cure Naaman he was supposed to go hunting a faith healer in Israel on the advice of a pre-adolescent servant-girl? But Naaman jumped at the chance. Why?

Well, if you’ve ever been that sick yourself, you understand why. Once you run out of doctors and specialists, once you’ve taken all the pills, applied all the ointments, practiced positive imaging 20 minutes every day and nothing has changed... if someone tells you about little-known doctor in Mexico who has discovered a substance that works wonders, chances are that if you have the means, you’ll hop on a plane and go there. When there’s something THAT’S WRONG in your life, things like fame and fortune, reputation and appearances just don’t mean as much... and you are willing to go about anywhere... maybe even come to a place where the power of God is rumored to be found.

What’s interesting to me about Elisha’s cure is how ordinary it is. Go wash in the river and be clean. Naaman expected something hard. Something that would cost money. An exclusive treatment option. But that is not what the text says. Here’s what the text says:

Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in rage.

Enter the Jordan. The Jordan was no extraordinary river. Compared to what Naaman would have seen in Syria, this was a little muddy swamp, a little puddle. Here’s the cure: just go into those ordinary waters; take

an ordinary bath; recognize that you are sick not just with leprosy but with a craving, an ancient craving, to be somehow set apart, special, extraordinary.

Now I know we are Americans and what I am saying runs directly against everything we've been taught. We highlight the importance of each person being unique, different, special – education, parenting, career choices, vacation options – we are climbers of Mt. Extraordinary. I have a clergy mentor I talk to a few times a month who is an old, wise soul. We talk about a lot of things – but mostly just about you all. David is an extraordinary priest, who held some very distinguished postings – the cathedral in Atlanta, a massive church in the Dallas area. He climbed the mountain, until he stepped down in his early 60's and became a spiritual director.

He says, "I realized something. So much of my ministry, so much of why I did what I did, is that I really just wanted to be adored." I can relate to that. There is nothing better than for you to tell me – oh Garrett, that was just an extraordinary sermon. I'd be mortified if you said, thanks for that ordinary message. Maybe you can relate to this in your own world. We suffer from, what author Brené Brown calls the "shame-based fear of being ordinary."

The desire to be considered extraordinary and special runs deep in the human heart, and while it's not altogether bad, it can reflect a subtle superiority complex. We've seen other people and, frankly, we're unimpressed. As Pinsker said himself, "to be extraordinary is to be virtuous." The word "holy" literally means to be set apart. To secure our place in the world, we have always rejected the idea of reducing humankind down to one common denominator. The Greeks would talk about themselves in contrast to the barbarians. The Romans would talk of "the Romans and the rest." In recent years, our collective identities have become so particular that each individual is its own subset to society. "Us versus them" has turned into "me versus everyone else."

There's one catch to this furious attempt to be unique: trying not to be like everyone else has paradoxically become the definition of conformity.

And so it turns out, if you want to be a true non-conformist, wear white sneakers, be a project manager, and name your kid John. As author GK Chesterton once said, "All people are ordinary people; the extraordinary ... are those who know it." In that sense, to be truly exceptional, you must have the humility to realize that you are just like everyone else. If you ever find yourself able to swallow that pill, it might go down easier than you thought.

Accepting your ordinariness might not condemn you after all, but set you free. One author says, "It is a relief to discover the option of being no one in particular." Amid the never-ending demand that we be unique in order to be enough, our lives regularly point in the opposite direction. Though we might try to cultivate a few relatively distinctive attributes, we possess the same limitations, failures, and flaws as everyone else. Circumstances may change, but the struggle is universal. We aim for the exceptional, but always seem to find ourselves in the bookstore's self-help section.

Imagine us just accepting our ordinariness. Do you wish you could exercise more – we all do. Do you wish you had more satisfaction with your career, or maybe a better work life balance – yeah, I think that's most of us. Do you worry sometimes about the vitality of your marriage, or do you struggle with your faith, or grow a little depressed when you look out and see the suffering in the world – we're in it together. It's very freeing to realize that none of us are terminally unique, another way of saying, terminally alone.

Read Jesus' ministry this way, and see that while yes, he was affirming individuality, uniqueness, particularity, he was also always reintroducing people who felt so inescapably different into the healing of community.

Jesus seemed entirely uninterested in our efforts to distinguish ourselves from others. We are all wearing the same boring shirt, failing in all the same predictably unremarkable way. As for our one-of-a-kind names, he gives us new ones at the drop of a hat. “Did you say your name was Simon?” he asks a certain stranger. “Well, you look more like a Peter to me,” never bothering to ask permission. He graciously refuses to let us craft our own identities. He sees right through our attempts to distinguish ourselves from one another. And yet, he also sees each of us as special. Every sheep may look like every other sheep that has come before it, but he keeps careful tabs on each one. He doesn’t love us because we’re special, after all. It’s the other way around.

When Namaan enters into the ordinary waters; when he accepts the ordinariness of his healing, the text says he becomes a whole new person; he receives a whole new identity: he emerges, and his skin was restored like the flesh of a young boy. The Hebrew is even more literal: he has the flesh of an innocent child. I love that. No more armor. No more posturing. And no more shame. He is free. He is free to accept his ordinary self and his ordinary life, and therein to meet and discover the extraordinary God.

That offer is on the table for us, too.