

# THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER



ORDINARY TIME

VARIANCE

WHAT'S GOING ON

FOR SUNDAY

## VARIANCE

*Dealing with change as normal*

by Drew Downs

There's a word we bandy about today that we should give more than a passing thought to: normal. The word normal connotes predictability; as in a pattern of life that has either little variation to it, or else a limited range. Normal. Normal is, say 5'10 or a Sunday morning church service.

And yet, life itself expresses great variance as normal. Those of us living in the Midwest know both extreme heat and cold.

Part of the challenge of living in the Age of COVID is that it highlights just how normal variation is. And, just as important, how dangerous our fixed thinking can be.

As we all long for creating a thing we can all recognize as "normal," let us also remember that *predictability + sameness* does **not** equal normal. Normal must always account for variance and variants. That is at the root of life itself.

# ORDINARY TIME

*Summer 2021*

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## WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way*

*To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

As the new school year begins for our students, teachers, faculty, and families, I'm once again reminded of the logistics of learning. We have backpacks and lunchboxes that have to be refilled every single day. We have notebooks, folders, pencils, colored pencils, sharpeners, crayons, and when you get to a certain level, the famous Texas Instruments graphing calculator.

Of course, we also have the clothes, the shoes, the planning for how to get them to school and what to do after school. As a parent, I've become incredibly aware of how much stuff goes into being a student. Far more awareness than I had as a student.

As metaphors, this is probably one of our best because the gospels assume that we are students. Not necessarily in a K-12 institution, but lifelong students in a global program. One whose teacher has set a pattern for us that involves commitment, learning, and engaging with others in a giant group project.

This week, as we continue to deal with a global pandemic that keeps roaring back, a rare tropical storm hitting the northeast, another heartbreaking disaster in Haiti, and the ongoing fallout from the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, we all have so much to process. And among this, we are planning for the final resting place of one of our classmates, Joe Sanders.

We are also preparing newcomer classes for those looking to learn more about our tradition, make an adult affirmation of their faith, or join The Episcopal Church, which will begin in the next two weeks.

In the end, we are students, and practitioners, of Jesus's Way of Love. That's the essential part of what we're up to. Everything else is just noise.

Drew+

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## FOR SUNDAY

*Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

August 29, 2020

### **Collect**

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

**Amen.**

### **Reading**

From Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

"You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

### **Reflection**

In our reading this morning, Jesus is talking about food and customs. And it seems to me that we might be taken up by the common sense of it all. Jesus confronts the Pharisees for their obsession with the rules.

This, of course, is a common critique from Jesus. That the religious leaders get fixated on the rules and forget what those rules are for (rules that *they* created to protect the foundational rules). And sometimes, *those* rules go against what God commands. Jesus's most provocative critique of these religious leaders is that they are breaking the fundamental command to police and protect the ordinances!

Or, to put it plainly: they break what is **most** important to protect what is **least** important.

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As a (mostly) life-long Christian who tries really hard to help people live Jesus's Way of Love (and as an Episcopalian who thinks our tradition totally has the best theology) I absolutely love these passages. I cheer Jesus on and get pretty smug about really "getting it."

Then I think about all the times we focus on church culture and practices, from liturgy to coffee hour. I think of local customs and expectations. How consumerist we are and our capacity to "vote with our wallets." And, as adversities rise and roil about us, how essentialist we are about **not** engaging with the political world.

In other words, just how many ways we (and I) hold to human tradition.

Oof. That gets me in the gut.

As I try to reason through this passage, about defilement and thoughts and the like, I find myself hearing all the conflicting voices. Because, in a sense, we'll all come to varying conclusions about what Jesus is "really" saying. And yet, every time I go there, it clangs in my head. Something is off in that response. Yes, it's dismissive. But it's also so... cultural. Isn't it like us to rather accept the difference of "opinion" than the challenge of God's commandment?

A commandment to affirmatively and communally love rather than police individual sin.

We often look at all the stuff going on in the world and wonder where to start. But just as often, we stop ourselves out of fear. It seems to me that this is the perfect time to give it a shot. To be the ones who reach out in love rather than the ones who slap at any hands who try.

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