Sunday, January 29, 1984
ORDINARY PEOPLE
I Corinthians 1:26-31; Matthew 5:1-12

A number of years ago, Life magazine devoted one entire issue to a list of what it called the 100 most important people. This list was comprised of men and women, all at that time alive, who were on their way to positions of influence and power in their chosen profession or vocation, and it also included those who supposedly already had it made.

I suppose that most of us, like those Life magazine editors, when we think of who are the most important people in our society, usually have in mind persons of influence and power, people who make the news, people who move in the circles where other important people move, people who are celebrities, individuals who are chosen "man or woman of the year" by Time magazine.

Someday a magazine should publish an edition about the forgotten important people. Who might it include? Perhaps the elevator operator in the office building who for years and years has faithfully and good naturedly performed her job; of the courteous bus driver; the quiet, but effective police officer; the washroom attendant at the airport; the office cleaning woman who works at night; the building maintenance man; the polite waitress in the corner restaurant — the list could go on and on of faithful people who go about performing their duties at work and at home in a quiet and responsible fashion. Ordinary people we often call them — individuals who bear their burden and, more importantly, help others to bear theirs.

The list of the ordinary people might also include those mentioned in a letter which appeared in a daily newspaper not long ago. The writer said, "It was a joy to witness the following chain reaction on a city bus last week: A crippled white woman boarded a bus in midtown. There was no vacant seat. A young black woman rose immediately and offered the crippled woman her seat. An elderly white man who had been sitting next to the black woman, got up, thanked her for her courtesy, and offered her his seat. Then a young boy sitting beside his mother jumped to his feet and offered the elderly man his seat. When the crippled woman left the bus, another who got off ahead of her turned and helped her to the curb." These people would not have made the list in Life magazine, but, as the Bible would say, "Of such is the kingdom of God."

These are the kind of people that St. Paul was writing to in the church in Corinth. He wrote, as we read earlier, "For consider your call, brothers and sisters; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

1. St. Paul was reminding the Corinthians and us that, contrary to what we usually believe, God frequently uses what we consider weak and foolish ordinary people to carry out God's purposes. That's the first point in the sermon: that's what the story of Jesus is all about. A baby is born to an ordinary couple, grows up in a small town in an out-of-the-way place, is unknown until he is 30 years of age, then he beings to tell people about a God who loves and forgives and accepts all people. His enemies are the so-called important people of the time, the leaders in the temple, the government officials. After only several years, he is arrested, tried, and executed like a common criminal. But the love of God he revealed would not stay dead — his

followers are surprised that he is alive, but in a new way. And so ordinary people continue to become his followers and to spread and live his message.

But we still have difficulty in believing that God often choose what is foolish in the world, or what is weak, or what is low and despised. We have difficulty in believing that God can and does use ordinary people like you and me. We forget that it is in the very vanity, vulnerability, and insecurity of human life that ministry happens. God is at work when one person simply reaches out to another.

I was recently intrigued by such a story in Time magazine. It was about a Chinese immigrant who came to this country in his early 20s and was first admitted to an Illinois mental institution in 1952. All he was able to say in English was, “Me no crazy. This nuthouse.”

No one listened. Worse, he was never examined by anyone who could speak Chinese. Nearly three decades went by before anyone even tried to understand. In 1978, a social worker at a mental hospital in Manteno, Illinois, took the patient to a Chinese restaurant, where he had a conversation in Cantonese dialect with the cook. There was nothing wrong with this individual, the cook told the hospital staff. This set in motion a four-year battle in the state courts to win his release. His long nightmare had begun when, suffering from tuberculosis, he was admitted to a sanatorium. Because what he said seemed incomprehensible, he was later diagnosed as a retarded schizophrenic.

He was finally released several weeks ago at age 54, and an engaged couple who run a center in Chicago for Indochinese immigrants have given him a home. In the mornings he will attend literacy classes, and in the afternoons, he will try to learn his way around the outside world.

Through a simple act of kindness, an unknown social worker set in motion a process that restored a man’s freedom and dignity. Jesus said, “Inasmuch as you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.”

Let me repeat: God frequently uses what we considered weak and foolish and ordinary people to carry out God’s purposes. That’s contrary to what the world would have us believe.

I believe that in our time we are overimpressed by image, by celebrities, by people of power and influence, by people the world things important, and we think we have to be like them to be considered important by others and by God. Otherwise, why do we get so excited when a celebrity endorses the Christian faith, or when a celebrity writes a book about his or her religious belief?

For that matter, why are we impressed when a celebrity endorses anything? Are they experts on motor oil, breakfast cereal, toothpaste, automobiles, or underwear? I’m not blaming the celebrity. His or her religious faith my be as genuine or more genuine and sincere than ours.

What we may mistakenly assume is that if we use a celebrity-endorsed product, we will become a celebrity, too. Or maybe some think because a certain important person has endorsed the Christian faith, it’s OK for us.

It’s significant that in the New Testament accounts of Jesus’ ministry, he never sought endorsement by any of the so-called important people of his time. Of course, he didn’t reject them, either. He did, however, reject celebrity status for himself. When he healed someone

because of his love and compassion, he told the individual to tell no one. He didn't want to become famous as a healer. He didn't want people following him for the wrong reasons. He knew that people following him merely because he was a celebrity would not change anyone's life. He knew, too, that the tactics that can sell detergents are not the kind that can sell commitment to the Christian way.

God is not fooled or impressed by technique or celebrities or people of worldly power and influence. Jesus said, "The first shall be last and the last first." God's celebrities are quite different from the world's celebrities.

God's will, God's love often shines most brightly through the lives and actions of ordinary people whose names will never make the headlines. As an example to us, Jesus pointed to the lonely widow as she put two copper coins into the offering box.

God's love is shown and lived out in the thousands of unknown individuals who are faithful day in and day out, who keep their commitments, and who treat other people with kindness and respect, no matter who they are. Such people never talk about their good deeds, but sometimes they are uncovered.

Remember a few years ago when there was a story about a woman no one ever heard of until some survivors of the Jewish death camps in Germany found her. Natalia Abramovitch provided shelter in her home in Poland for a Jewish family. She herself was put in prison for harboring Jews, but after the war finally found her way to this country and lived in poverty and obscurity until rediscovered by a man whose life she saved. Natalia would never have been asked to be a guest on the PTL television program or the 700 Club. She's not that kind of celebrity. She's just an ordinary person. "Of such is the kingdom of God."

Again, I repeat: God uses ordinary people like you and me to carry out God's purposes.

2. Secondly, God can and does use even our weaknesses and out liabilities, those places where we hurt and suffer our wounds.

God doesn't need an army of "holier-than-thou's" running around with halos, wearing their religion on their sleeves. God needs listening, caring people who know what suffering is, ordinary people of quiet faith. God can use you and me with all of our weaknesses to reach out to bring Christ's loving presence to those who need it.

Our own weakness, wounds, and suffering can make us more sensitive to the troubles of others. However, a word of caution is necessary. We can very easily misuse our sufferings or weaknesses by making them a form of spiritual exhibitionism. For example, a minister who talks in the pulpit about his own personal problems is of no help to his congregation, for no suffering human being is helped by someone who tells him or her that, "I have the same problem." Remarks such as, "Don't worry, because I suffer from the same depression or confusion or anxiety as you do" help no one. Henri Nouwen puts it this way in his book, The Wounded Healer: "Spiritual exhibitionism adds little faith to little faith and creates narrow-mindedness instead of new perspectives. Open wounds stink and do not heal. Making one's own wounds a source of healing, therefore, does not call for a sharing of superficial personal pains, but for a constant willingness to see one's own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all people share."

Our weaknesses and our wounds can be helpful teachers and reminders of our own condition and of our neighbor's condition, and then healing can begin to take place. So it is that ordinary people can be used by God to bring hope and healing to others.

3. Note in the third place that our Christian faith reminds us that it is neither pride of intellect not civic positions nor wealth nor power nor prestige that counts in the eyes of God. The humble minded and the unsophisticated — in other words, ordinary people — who are most capable of experiencing the living presence of God can then become instruments of God, as well. This is good news for all of us. Amen.