Sunday, May 16, 1999
ORDINARY PEOPLE
Acts 1:6-14

Some of the most amazing changes for the good in this world have come about and continue to occur because of the faithfulness of ordinary people. The existence and ministry of the Christian church throughout history and around the world is a prime example.

In the Book of Acts, we read that following His death and resurrection, Jesus turned over the movement He had started to a group of ordinary people. He said, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). A few verses later, Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, tells us some of the names of the ordinary people to whom Jesus entrusted this task: “Peter and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James, along with certain women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as His brothers.”

Embedded in this story are several important principles about how God works in the world through ordinary people and how we are to work with each other.

The first principle is this: God often works through ordinary people who never make the headlines but are just as important as those who do. Most of the individuals Luke mentions only by their first names have been long forgotten, but it is because of their supportive roles and their faithfulness that God’s work continues.

I was reminded of the importance of supportive roles when I attended a concert. The featured soloist was a soprano, 27 years old, with remarkable talent. She was outstanding, but it was her accompanist who captured my imagination and admiration.

The accompanist was an unassuming young woman but highly talented. She had mastered the skill of being the unobtrusive servant of another’s art. She was sensitive to the singer’s phrasing, accent, and timing — always watching the face and listening to the breathing.

It was her supportive role that helped make the evening a delight. She accepted the fact that as an accompanist, she would succeed to the degree that she was forgotten.

But she did not go unnoticed. The singer invited the accompanist on stage with her for curtain calls and then, stepping aside, pointed to her in gratitude. The generous applause that followed showed that the audience was not unaware of the important role she played.

It is reassuring to know that a person does not have to be a star to make a significant contribution. Giving the support that enables another to succeed is one of the finest expressions of humility, love, and unselfishness.

One of my old professors at Yale Divinity School, Dr. Halford Luccock, tells of a college commencement in which a young man graduated with high honors. There was, in the audience, a great musician — his mother. For years, she had rendered notable music on two remarkable instruments: a typewriter and a washboard — the melodious accompaniment that made his education possible.

A researcher who studied National Merit Scholarship winners discovered that behind every one of those high-school students, there was someone — a mother, father, teacher, coach, pastor, scoutmaster, or leader — who truly cared and continually encouraged excellence, never allowing the student to settle for mediocrity.

Robert Brookfield, an actor, was once mistakenly reported to be dead. He had the rare experience of seeing his own obituary, which read: “Never a great actor, he was invaluable in supporting roles.” Though he might not have considered that a compliment, nothing finer could be said of anyone—"invaluable in supporting roles.” That was certainly true of those early followers of Jesus to whom He entrusted the future of His ministry.

“We can’t all be heroes,” said Will Rogers, “because somebody has to sit on the curb and clap as they go by.”

Joe Montana was a great football quarterback. All sports-minded Americans know his name, but there are relatively few who could list the names of even one or more of the offensive linemen who protected Montana, making it possible for him to throw a record number of touchdown passes in Super Bowl XXIV. It is to Montana’s credit that he continually spoke of his teammates when commendations were directed his way.

Great scientists have been quick to acknowledge their indebtedness to others. Jonas Salk said the work he was able to do depended on the research of hundreds of men and women whose names remain unknown but whose labors made the polio vaccine possible. Sir Isaac Newton said, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

The Christian faith, at its best, has spread around the world because of the supportive roles of countless people whose names never made the headlines. In the modern missionary movement, the name David Livingstone is widely known, but few have heard of David Hogg, the Sunday School teacher in Scotland who instilled in Livingstone a sense of self-worth and a desire to serve, which encouraged him to meet the needs of thousands in Africa.

Our superstar culture is unfair and destructive to the spirit of many people in the arbitrary way it reserves affirmation only for the exceptionally beautiful, brilliant, or outstandingly competent. Skill and brilliance do not mean an individual contributes beneficially to the world, nor does an average endowment mean a mediocre performance. The early followers of Jesus were men and women of ordinary abilities but extraordinary commitment and power.

Most of us will never be famous or widely known, but it is heartening to know that no one is useless who encourages and enables others to realize their best. This congregation is what it is today because of countless people who have supported it through the years, most of whose names are largely unknown.

This leads us to another principle embedded in this story of Jesus turning over His ministry to a group of ordinary people: we are members of one another, and we need one another. He did not entrust His ministry to an individual but to a group.

Some years ago, a telephone operator in a small Cape Cod town received a daily call from a man who asked for the exact time. This went on for many weeks. Finally, the operator asked the man why he called every day requesting the right time. “Because,” he said, “I am the man responsible for blowing the whistle at noon each day.” “That’s strange,” the operator replied, “because every day at noon, I set my clock by your whistle.”

A simple story, but an accurate parable of life. We are dependent on one another, and each life has a far more significant effect on others than we often realize. The early leaders of the church knew this because the Book of Acts reports, “All these were constantly together, devoting themselves to prayer.”

A third principle embedded in this story of Jesus turning over His ministry to ordinary people is that in a world of great diversity, there is one thing we all have in common: each one of these early disciples had a handicap of one kind or another. The Apostle Paul had his “thorn in the flesh,” as he called it. Peter had his temper and impulsiveness. We do not know the specific handicap of each of those men and women, but you can be sure they had one. None of them was perfect.

Each of us has a handicap of one kind or another. For some, it is physical, mental, or emotional; others suffer estrangement within the family; and some struggle with feelings of inferiority or timidity.

We all have different challenges, but the race of life is run in fetters. We are inspired by those who deal with these human struggles in creative and courageous ways, turning disadvantages into advantages.

History is filled with stories of people who refused to use their handicaps as an excuse for not contributing something worthwhile. They didn’t merely hang on — they became masters rather than victims of their circumstances.

Around us today are family members and friends who bear their burdens and handicaps without dramatizing them to others. These courageous souls lift our lives with theirs.

Dean Briggs of Harvard had such people in mind when he responded to a freshman student who came to his office to explain his tardiness in submitting an assignment. “I’m sorry,” said the student, “but I was not feeling very well.”

“Young man,” replied Dean Briggs, “please bear in mind that the greater part of the world’s work is carried on by people who aren’t feeling very well.”

What is the secret to dealing with our handicaps? First, we need to know what they are. Then we can develop a skill to compensate or eliminate some of the obstacles that hold us back. Many handicaps can be minimized or removed by competent medical care, wise counsel, and concerted effort.

There’s a story about a farmer in Maine who was seated on a wagon drawn by two horses. “Tell me,” he called out to a bystander, “how long does this hill last?” “Hill nothing,” was the reply. “Your rear wheels are off.” Even the casual observer was able to help that man see his problem.

Sometimes a friend’s or even an enemy’s comment can help us recognize our own handicaps.

It’s also helpful to see each handicap in perspective and not magnify it out of proportion. A little child breaks a toy, and his world is shattered. He cannot see this incident in the context of his whole life. Sometimes, adults too become frustrated by handicaps that do not deserve centrality in our lives.

Charles Eliot, one of Harvard's greatest presidents, was born with a facial disfigurement. It could have been a handicap or a source of embarrassment, but he was fortunate to have a wise mother who said to him, "Son, it is not possible for you to get rid of this facial disfigurement. Surgeons say nothing can be done. But it is possible for you, with God's help, to grow a mind and soul so big that people will forget to look at your face." He did just that.

So far, I've mentioned three principles from this story in the Book of Acts: 1. God works through ordinary people, not just superstars. 2. We are members of one another and need each other. 3. We all have handicaps, but that need not hold us back.

There is one more principle embedded in this story of Jesus turning over His ministry to His early followers: Two important days in every life are the day we are born and the day we discover why we were born. Sadly, many live and die without ever discovering the latter.

Isaac Watts once wrote:
Most people creep into the world
And know no reason why they were born
Except to consume the corn and fish
And leave behind an empty dish.

What a pity it is if someone reaches their final hour, only to realize they never really lived.

The most tragic funeral service a minister can conduct is for someone who never learned to live — an individual with no friends, who contributed nothing with the time and talents they were given.

William Menninger, a brilliant psychiatrist and devoted Christian, often lectured across the country. When asked the secret to a good, happy, and useful life, his answer was always the same: "Find a worthwhile mission in life and take it seriously."

People's commitments to values beyond themselves are manifested in many ways — in their families, communities, vocations, religious lives, in the standards they set, and in how they treat others.

The final principle from this story in the Book of Acts is this: people achieve meaning in life by committing to the development of their highest possibilities, to their loved ones, to humanity, and to the divine power beyond themselves. William James summed it up: "The great use of life is to spend it for something that outlasts it." That's what Jesus asks His followers to do. Amen.