

The Fullness of Ordinary Time

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Christians sometimes think of Ordinary Time as a kind of liturgical leftover. We celebrate the great cycle of the Passion, from Ash Wednesday through Lent and Easter and on to Pentecost. And we celebrate the great cycle of the Incarnation, from Advent through Christmas to Epiphany. Ordinary Time – a little sliver between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday, and then a great chunk between Pentecost and the first Sunday of Advent – comes into sight as what is left over. It is defined precisely by its lack of particular significance. Some of the most influential scholars of liturgy reflect and extend this view of Ordinary Time. Dom Gregory Dix writes that the time outside the special seasons around the birth and death of Jesus “stands vacant.” A more recent handbook describes the periods of Ordinary Time as “gaps” in the church year.¹ Such views see Ordinary Time as defined by absence. The absence of any particular significance leaves a void that is waiting to be filled.

Local congregations find dozens of ways to fill the emptiness of Ordinary Time. Congregations excited by the liturgical renewal movement might celebrate Trinity Sunday and Reign of Christ Sunday, the little feast days that serve as transitions in and out of the longest stretch of Ordinary Time. They might give particular attention to All Saints’ Day, a refreshing splash of holy-day white in a sea of ordinary green. Even more content can come from family and civic holidays like Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and the Fourth of July. And Ordinary Time seems the natural time for all the holy days that sustain the institution and mission of the church: Stewardship Sunday, Rally Day, Youth Sunday, Ordination Sunday, Blanket Sunday, Earth Day, Children’s Sabbath, and more. Celebrations from multiple calendars gain constituencies in the congregation and places on the calendar, and they become hard to dislodge. Congregational politics usually make it easier to add a special day than to subtract one. After all, Ordinary Time stands empty and waiting, like a vacant lot waiting to be improved. Why not fill it with something special?

In this essay I hope to offer some answers to that question. I argue that the view of Ordinary Time as leftover time arises from a forgetting of history. And I argue that the view of Ordinary Time as vacant time tells only half of a deeper theological truth. I conclude with some practices for keeping Ordinary Time, for receiving the fullness we cannot create.

The First Unit of Christian Time

Before there was Christmas, there was Sunday. The earliest Christians gathered on the first day of the week, the day hallowed by the resurrection of Jesus, the day they called “the Lord’s Day.” Paul gives the Corinthians instructions for an offering to be collected on “the first day of every week” (1 Cor. 16:2). The author of Revelation writes of being caught up in the Spirit “on the Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10). Christians gathering on the Lord’s Day did not just remember the resurrection of Jesus as a past fact, as we might mark the birthday of Abraham Lincoln. They rather celebrated the new creation made present in Jesus Christ. Dying at the hands of sin, he broke the

power of sin. Rising from the depths of death, he lives as the firstborn of the new creation. Early Christian worship treated this good news not as a past event to be commemorated, but as an eschatological moment in which past, present, and future believers are swept up into a chorus of praise without ceasing. Particular practices for the Lord's Day varied from place to place, but for almost every Christian community it was the primary day of worship, the seed of the whole church year.²

Early Christian calendars also marked the feasts of Easter and Pentecost. Those who gathered to share in the body of Christ celebrated the raising of that body and the sending of the Holy Spirit to fill their sojourn as the body for this world. But Easter and Pentecost did not displace Sunday as the first feast of Christian sacred time. On the contrary, early Christian communities detached Easter from strict links to Jewish celebrations of the Passover and set it always on a Sunday. They also tied Pentecost to Sunday, fixing its date at fifty days after Easter. This tying of time suggests that early Christian communities did not see Pentecost as different in kind from every other Lord's Day. Not even Easter represented a radical break from ordinary Sunday worship. After all, every Sunday was already a little Easter. The annual celebration of resurrection simply intensified the weekly celebrations of resurrection.³

The Christian calendar grew through centuries of both persecution and establishment. Christian communities in the second and third centuries added fasts and special celebrations to remember the "birthdays" of their martyrs, the days when those martyrs were killed in this world and born to the new creation in Christ Jesus. The fourth century brought imperial establishment of the church, and with it increasingly regular doctrines and calendars. Experienced Christians joined catechumens in fasting to prepare for Easter, and a season of Lent took hold. Feasts of the Incarnation became established, centering on Christmas in the West and Epiphany in the East. Later centuries would see the addition of more saints' days and more days celebrating events in the life of Jesus: Ascension, Circumcision, Annunciation, Transfiguration, and more. Feasts emphasizing doctrines like the Trinity and the Body of Christ (*Corpus Christi*) began to win widespread acceptance in the tenth century. Men of the Church Sunday came later still: the feasts of the programmatic church expanded steadily throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴

The gradual accretion of holy days slowly obscured the central role of an "ordinary" Sunday in the liturgical calendar. It led worship leaders to neglect the need to develop forms for Sundays in Ordinary Time, and left in those rites a little of what Dix calls the "character of a stop-gap, something upon which the liturgy falls back when the historical cycle has nothing more interesting to offer."⁵ But this loss of emphasis should not distort the historical record. The Sundays of Ordinary Time were not invented to fill the space left between the *really* holy days on the church calendar. Nor were they dead and dull days which those feasts began to redeem. The Sundays of Ordinary Time were rather the first rhythm of the Christian calendar, the days that oriented all others. And now they are not so much the leftovers of sacred time as the coals that feasts and seasons fan into flames.

A Theology for the Eighth Day

The name of "Ordinary Time" invites us to see it as common, everyday, and mundane: ordinary. Christian traditions offer powerful resources for developing a theology of the everyday, and it is tempting to develop a theology of Ordinary Time

from them.⁶ But while the “ordinary” part of Ordinary Time has taken on connotations of the mundane, its first reference is not to commonness but to the numbers that name its days. Ordinary Time is the time marked by *ordinal* numbers, as in the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Sundays of Ordinary Time. In contrast, the great cycles of the Christian year have a stronger sense of *narrative* time. They drive toward the stable or the empty tomb. A worshiper knows “when she is” by the readings, the colors, the hymns, the prayers, and the special elements of worship. While the Sundays within the great cycles might be assigned ordinal numbers—like the Second Sunday of Advent, or the Fourth Sunday of Lent—these numbers function like page numbers in a good novel. They are secondary aids, almost unnecessary to an attentive reader. The real time is kept in the body of the text, in the story. The Sundays of Ordinary Time are different. They resist assimilation to a narrative. They are not arranged as a narrative journey to some great end of the story. They are rather, each one, an interruption of narrative, a tearing of time. Because each one is a little Easter, each one declares the end of historical time. This string of ends cannot be fit together easily into a sequential story. And so a worshiper in Ordinary Time knows “when she is” by counting the days with ordinal numbers. A theology of Ordinary Time begins not with the mundane, but with this syncopated, interrupted, eschatological time.⁷

A theology of Ordinary Time begins with the time of the eighth day. Early Christian communities saw an “ordinary” Sunday as anything but mundane. They referred to it not only as the first day of the week – the beginning of a new creation – but also as the eighth – the culmination of all time. The *Epistle of Barnabas*, a text from around 130 C.E., begins to suggest what the eighth day meant to early Christians. As Jewish and Gentile Christians struggled to define themselves in relationship to rabbinic Judaism, they needed to clarify the relationship of the Lord’s Day to the Sabbath. In taking up that polemic task, the *Epistle of Barnabas* helps develop the significance of the eighth day. Making reference to Amos’ great denunciations of feasts offensive to God, the letter continues:

Ye perceive how He speaks: Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me, but that is which I have made, [namely this,] when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world. Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead. And when He had manifested Himself, He ascended into the heavens.⁸

The *Epistle of Barnabas* contrasts the old, unacceptable Sabbaths to the eighth day as the “beginning of another world.” The Sabbath is the seventh day of a seven-day week. It is a day of rest, a day to delight in creation. But it can still be fit comfortably within a cyclical sort of time. After the seventh day comes again the first, as the wheel of time rolls on.⁹ The *Epistle of Barnabas* argues that Christian worship is ordered by a different kind of time. The resurrection of Jesus is the culmination of all that has come before, but it cannot be a moment on a cycle, a time after which things simply “reset” and start the cycle as they did before. It is the “beginning of another world.” It is like the eighth day of a seven-day week, a day both in and out of the flow of time, a day when the wheel of the week flies off its track to turn in the sky. If it returns – and who knows if it will? – it will not be the same.¹⁰

The good news of the eighth day announces our deliverance from a world in which every moment is fit into a narrative in which it is a means to some other end. Contemporary American society tends to view time instrumentally, defining the value of a moment by its usefulness for achieving some good to be enjoyed at another time. In this view, no fraction of time has value in itself. By itself it is empty—but also malleable. If it is not valuable as it is, it can at least be used for the production of something that is valuable. This is the time of both manufacturing and service economies: an hour may not be worth anything in itself, but it can acquire value if it is used for the production of some commodity or the performance of some service. On this view of time, ordinary Sunday worship stands waiting to be redeemed by incorporation into a process of production. That production need not be “economic” in the narrow sense. We might use the time to produce awareness of and action on a set of social issues, as on the Children’s Sabbath. Or we might use the time to produce the money that will sustain the congregation’s institutional life, as on a string of Stewardship Sundays. More subtly, we might let the time lie fallow, even grow a little bit boring, in order to produce stronger responses to upcoming holy days.¹¹ All of these views assign an instrumental value to Ordinary Time, and so conform on a deep level to an already pervasive economic mindset.

A celebration of Sunday as the eighth day breaks open this dominant view of time. Easter is the end, the *telos*, of all time, not a means for making people better able to go about their daily routines. Just so, the eighth day of each week shares in the resurrection that is the fulfillment of time. The eighth day cannot be used as a means to some other end – there is no ninth day in which the real end could come. The eighth day cannot even be fit into a cycle, like a seventh-day Sabbath that has value because it provides rest that enables work. The eighth day shatters the dominant culture’s instrumental view of time. It breaks open, as present reality and eschatological hope, the order in which time and land and all creation have value only in their usefulness. In the eighth day creation receives deliverance from the tyranny of utility and blessing with the new life that is itself the source and substance of all goodness. Such deliverance and such blessing are not goods that remembering the eighth day can help humans produce. They are rather the gifts of God, received and enjoyed for their own sake in the eighth day.

Practices for Receiving the Gift of Ordinary Time

There is a perpetual temptation to overstate the significance of liturgical reform, as if the Good News of Easter depended on our right celebration of the day, or as if the Incarnation depended on the adequacy of our Advent preparations. Liturgical practices do not make the gospel they celebrate, but they can help us to delight in and proclaim that gospel. More strongly, they can be means by which we share in the gospel, even sacraments in which the gospel is realized. They are, to borrow a phrase from Dorothy C. Bass, “Christian practices for opening the gift of time.”¹²

Congregations eager to open the church year might begin by recognizing the creep of many calendars into Ordinary Time. They might prune those calendars in ways that let the eighth day breathe. The church has engaged in such pruning for centuries. Various reformers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries trimmed the calendar in different ways, but all of them took some action to restore the centrality of ordinary Sunday worship. The Second Helvetic Confession, published in 1566, followed

Martin Luther's lead in cutting feast days that remembered human beings and retaining those that focused on events in the life of Christ (like the Ascension, Circumcision, and Passion).¹³ The Westminster Directory for Worship, published almost a century later, took the task of pruning even further. "There is no Day commanded in Scripture to be kept holy under the Gospell," the Westminster divines insisted, "but the Lord's Day, which is the Christian Sabbath." All other days had no warrant in Scripture, and so should not be celebrated. The Westminster reforms effectively moved the Christian calendar from an annual one to a weekly one, with Sunday as its chief feast.¹⁴

Such trimming is not only the work of Protestants. Monastic communities have long maintained a weekly rhythm in counterpoint to the annual rhythm of the church year. In most communities the psalms set for the services of the "little hours" change according to the day of the week rather than the season of the year. Sunday's arrival can bring a bigger shift in these services than the coming of a season like Advent. The liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council also stressed the centrality of Sunday worship. "The Lord's Day is the original feast day," according to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, "and it should be presented to the faithful and taught to them so that it may become in fact a day of rejoicing and of freedom from work. Other celebrations, unless they be truly of the greatest importance, shall not have precedence over Sunday, which is the foundation and kernel of the entire liturgical year."¹⁵ Both Catholic and Protestant reformers have seen the need to plan the church calendar in ways that receive the gift of ordinary Sunday worship.

Congregations join this tradition when they examine their calendars and consider whether and how to change them in ways that celebrate Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time usually starts to disappear into functional time when congregations consider requests for "special" dates one-by-one. "Feast days" can accumulate beyond any individual's intention. A congregation might begin to reform its calendar by setting up a way of considering proposals for special observances that remembered and protected the gift of ordinary Sunday worship. A congregation might also set aside time to consider the year as a whole and decide which feast days really need to be kept in ordinary Sunday worship. (Others might be kept on other days or in other settings.) It is not that the sacred days of civic, familial, institutional, and even liturgical calendars are necessarily bad. They often play good and important roles in the life of a congregation. But they are not primary in the way that Sunday is, and something significant is lost when the whirl of special days displaces the deep, weekly rhythm of Ordinary Time.

A congregation committed to receiving the gift of Ordinary Time might also hold certain elements in Sunday worship constant, regardless of season or holy day. As monastic calendars retain strong elements of a weekly cycle, so congregational calendars might keep some aspects of worship common to every Sunday. Celebrating the Eucharist each Sunday not only reminds a congregation of the eighth day but makes the gift of that day present in especially powerful ways. But even if a congregation chooses not to receive the Lord's Supper each Sunday, it still might hold to other practices that mark the weekly cycle. Psalm 150, for instance, has long been associated with Sunday worship. Singing or saying it weekly lets worshipers share more consciously in the cosmic praise of the eighth day. When practices are common to every Sunday, it is clear that they are present not because it is Advent, or because it is Scouting Sunday, but simply because it is the Lord's Day. The common practices make visible the ways in which the ordinary Sunday liturgy is the seed from which all

other worship grows. They help to make clear that a Sunday in Ordinary Time is not simply a warm-up for some other day, because the next Sunday—even Easter—will still involve some of the same practices. Practices common to each Sunday help congregations receive the eschatological gift of each eighth day.

As congregations might carry elements throughout Ordinary Time and into Easter, they might also bring traces of Easter worship into Ordinary Time. A complete Easter worship service would be out of time, but a congregation might sing an Easter hymn or say an Easter prayer. Singing “The Day of Resurrection” on an Ordinary Time Sunday is not simply a time-bending gimmick, like a “Christmas in July” sale. Each Sunday, by the grace of God, really is the Day of Resurrection. The stone has been rolled away, and we are set free to sing Easter praise. When little glimpses of Easter appear throughout the year, they make clearer the ways in which the Easter season gathers and intensifies the stuff of ordinary worship. Both Easter and Ordinary Time can become richer for congregations that remember their mutual connection.

Congregations might also live into the eschatological promise of Sunday through practices like the Black Church tradition of giving thanks for the chance to gather “one more time.” Such thanks might come in an opening prayer or a song:

One more time, one more time
He allowed us to come together one more time!
One more time, one more time
He allowed us to come together one more time!¹⁶

Thanksgiving for Sunday worship remembers the great and always surprising gift of the eighth day. It remembers and celebrates the goodness of gathering for worship, of sharing in the wedding feast of the Lamb. It also remembers the perils of the week, and even of the eighth day itself. When every Sunday brings the end of time – and the new creation – the next Sunday is by no means assured. Giving thanks for each Sunday recognizes that time does not roll on like a smooth wheel of fortune on a frictionless surface. It is rather punctuated, interrupted, and redeemed by the presence of God in Jesus Christ and in the church that shares in Christ’s ministry. The coming of another Sunday is a little miracle, an occasion for wonder, thanks, and celebration.

All of these practices remember that Ordinary Time is not a dull void that waits to be filled, improved, or put to use. It is a kind of emptiness. It is the emptiness of open, ordinary days on the calendar. It is the emptiness that refuses human attempts to corral time too closely, to pretend that we can shape time always to our own ends. It is the emptiness of a church that knows how to wait, how to refuse filler until the real meal comes. In the emptiness of Ordinary Time the church opens itself to receive a gift. Into the open Sundays of Ordinary Time God pours the fullness of a time we could not make and cannot control. It is the fullness of the eighth day.

Notes

1. Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1945), 359. Hoyt L. Hickman, Don E. Saliers, Laurence Hull Stookey, James F. White, *Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1986), 21.
2. In these paragraphs I try to sketch a rough outline of a generally agreed-upon history of the church year.

I rely especially on Dix; Hickman, et. al.; Maxwell E. Johnson, ed., *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2000); and Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press).

3. See Dix, 341.

4. *Ibid.*, 348-49.

5. *Ibid.*, 360.

6. Preachers interested in thinking through a theology of everyday life might begin with resources like these: *St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1948); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and "Women's Work"* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); Nancy Mairs, *Ordinary Time: Cycles in Marriage, Faith, and Renewal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

7. On the first reference of "ordinary" in *Ordinary Time*, see, for instance, Stookey, *Calendar*, 133.

8. Epistle of Barnabas 15:9. This translation comes from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., as revised by A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 146.

9. In contrasting the eighth day with a seventh-day Sabbath, I do not mean to suggest that the Sabbath is always encased within a cyclical notion of time. Too many contemporary exhortations to keep Sabbath *do* stress its functionality, its ability to renew a worshiper for the rest of the week. But the best Jewish and Christian commentators on the Sabbath consistently refuse functional arguments for the Sabbath and stress instead its eschatological dimensions. [See, for instance, Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 14 and pass.] The best Christian theologies of time will keep notions of both the Sabbath and the eighth day in play.

10. My sense of the significance of the eighth day has been formed especially by Mark Searle, "Sunday: The Heart of the Liturgical Year," in Maxwell Johnson, ed., *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 59-76.

11. Laurence Hull Stookey, one of the best contemporary commentators on the church year, slips into an instrumental view of *Ordinary Time* when he stresses the value of "contrast by alternation" in the liturgical calendar. While it may be true that humans thrive on cycles of feasts and fasts, the meaning of *Ordinary Time* is not simply to prepare worshipers for the "really" holy days. Stookey remembers this elsewhere, stressing that the "liturgical calendar as a whole exists in large part to remind us that Christ has sanctified all of time, bringing us and the whole of our experience into the orbit of resurrection." As sanctified time, the moments of *Ordinary Time* receive meaning in themselves, and not merely as preparative contrast for other days. Cf. Stookey, 133-134.

12. Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

13. The Second Helvetic Confession, in the *Book of Confessions: Part I of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, 5.226.

14. *The Westminster Directory: Being a Directory for the Publique Worship of God in the Three Kingdoms* (1645; reprinted Bramcotte, Notts.: Grove Books, 1980), 32.

15. "Sacrosanctum Concilium" (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, Austin Flannery, ed. (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Co., 1996), §106, p. 150.

16. Traditional. I learned the song in this version from JoAnn Price, Director of the Sanctuary Mass Gospel Choir at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia.