

Ordinary Love
Patricia A. Donohoe
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
July 8, 2008

Matthew 25:1-13

A few drops of oil can go a long way.

A few drops of oil can light our path through the darkness.

There are times when the darkness seems unrelenting. Not a day goes by that I haven't been saddened by someone's loss or pain. Not a week goes by that I haven't been part of a discussion about how terrible the world is. Seldom do I hear or initiate conversations about the blessings we all enjoy. This is not to deny or diminish the severity of anyone's loss or the gigantic challenges we face on so many fronts. But sometimes I wonder if I take the easy way out when I keep focusing on all the horrible things that happen everyday. Maybe that's because, even though there are many spiritual teachings, Christian and otherwise, that proclaim the good news and offer messages of faith, hope, and love, I have to keep finding new ways of encountering these messages on a personal level to make them as real as the latest newscast.

Some of the books I've found helpful in this respect and that have served as inspiration for this sermon include Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, Douglas Ottati's *Theology for Liberal Presbyterians and Other Endangered Species*, Michael Lindvall's *A Geography of God*, Kathleen Norris' *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy, and "Women's Work,"* and *A Grateful Heart: A Collection of Daily Blessings from the Buddha to The Beatles*. But this is not a book report—at least not that kind of book report. Because sometimes books are not enough.

What I'd really like to talk about is the book of life—at least, the book of daily life, the life of mundane things like laundry and grocery lists, housecleaning and car maintenance. I'm talking about the routine, repetitious, commonplace, sometimes boring, somewhat ritualistic things we do day after day at home, at work, at church, and even at play. These are not the things you find in history books or biographies of great people. They are not the stuff of great truths, heroic acts of courage, or world-changing events. But, great as all those things are, for me, they don't mean a thing if they don't hit home. I'm just an ordinary person. I need those little drops of oil, those ordinary acts of love, those small acts of kindness on a daily basis. These are the things that are within my reach to give and receive.

I'm talking about little things like letting someone jump ahead of you in line at Food Lion, holding the door open for someone pushing a stroller, or wearing deodorant on a hot, sticky day. As Michael Lindvall writes, "our mortal minds, shaped as they are by the earthy stuff we know, demand spirit-soil firm enough to hold roots." The nitty-gritty is where we live. And where we can all make a

difference. When it comes to your spiritual lexicon, you could call these little lubricating acts of civility the WD-40 factor. Think about it. According to the label on the can, a few tiny drops of this magical oil "Stops Squeaks, Cleans And Protects, Loosens Rusted Parts, Frees Sticky Mechanisms," and "Drives Out Moisture." Sounds like salvation to me. There's just one thing. For the stuff to work, according to the label on the can, you have to point the nozzle toward the mark. So who or what is your mark today?

Three and a half years ago this congregation and our presbytery made me the mark or recipient of a gracious act of kindness in releasing me from my responsibilities as the associate pastor of this church. Leaving was not easy for me—but after a long struggle and a sudden revelation on the road to Eggemoggin Reach in Maine one summer day, I realized that I was being called in other directions. One of those directions involved a book project that I have been working on, off and on, for most of my adult life. As many of you know, the project involves a collection of letters written by my ancestors from about 1840 to 1890. Many of the letters were written during the early 1860s when my great-great grandfather intermittently served in the Ohio Fifth and published newspapers supporting the Union cause.

Many of you have asked me about my book project over the years. So here's another kind of book report. I would like to report that the book is done and soon to be published. No, it's not—thanks, in part, to a small act of kindness that came my way year ago this past winter. That was when I received an email from Alison Gibson, the librarian at Union Township Library in Ripley, Ohio, where my ancestors lived and published various newspapers. Ripley was a major terminal on the Underground Railroad and home to John Rankin, a Presbyterian minister who was a leader in the abolitionist movement.

Alison wants to preserve Ripley's heritage and is always on the lookout for historical materials she can purchase for the library archives. She has also been particularly helpful to a number of historians, including the author of the latest and most comprehensive book on the Underground Railroad, *Bound for Canaan*. She has helped me numerous times when I've visited Ripley to do research on my ancestors, whose last names were Wylie and Tomlinson. I stay in touch with Alison periodically and therefore wasn't surprised to get an email from her. I was surprised, however, to see what she had written.

"Pat," she wrote, "have you seen the Tomlinson letters for sale on E-bay?"

What? *Tomlinson* letters for sale on E-bay? I had never done E-bay and would never have thought to have looked there for more letters from my ancestors. But thanks to Allison's tip, I got into the E-bay game just in time. I got in touch with the two vendors selling the letters and explained who I was and what I was doing. I asked them if they had more letters and where they got them. I emailed one of the vendors with these questions on a Thursday morning. In his email back to me that evening he said, yes, he had about 100 more letters, which he had been planning to sell to a newspaper the next morning.

Did I want them? Did I *want* them!

To make a long story short, during the past year, I've been able to purchase another 150 letters from my ancestors, bringing the collection to a total of about 300 letters. So for the past year or so, I have been transcribing these letters, which apparently appeared at estate auctions in New York, where the sister of my great-grandfather went to live with her husband. The letters range from a penny postcard announcing the writer's safe arrival at a Normal school in Ada, Ohio, to the remnants of a thirteen-page letter that my great-great grandfather wrote in response to his wife's accusations about his unseemly behavior (yes, it's "X-rated").

Pieced together, these letters tell the story of three generations of a family caught up in the treacherous currents of the Ohio River borderlands during the mid 1800s. They tell the story of people who lived and died for their dreams and ideals. But, most of all, they show what life was like on a daily basis during the darkness of the Civil War and the tortuous decades before and after it. If there's anything I've learned in reading, transcribing, and thinking about these 300 letters, it's that it was the small kindnesses of everyday living that gave the survivors of those times the strength and hope they needed to heal and to have and to hold life's joys in their arms once again.

Despite the grimness of the times, life kept going on. There were still meals to fix, visits to make, diapers to change, elections (thank God) to vote in, and newspapers to publish. There were friends who needed money for their daughters' tuition, school lessons to prepare, ailing neighbors to help, and quarts and quarts of preserves to put up. There were still things to marvel and laugh at—the toddler who "takes a notion to whistle herself . . . to sleep," the amazing new "telephony," the four new eggs laid by the yellow canary. And there were still things of beauty to behold—the sun setting over the river, the bright red geraniums a daughter gives her mother, the three lemons a father sends his son up river from Cincinnati, the crate of fresh apples sent from home.

In her series of novels on World War I, Anne Perry describes these little things as "the constant small kindnesses that bind a community together and make it possible to survive shattering loss." According to Mother Teresa, these "small things of daily life: faithfulness, punctuality, small words of kindness, a thought for others, our way of being silent, of looking, of speaking, and of acting . . . are the true drops of love."

What's the smallest act of kindness you have ever received or given?

When you think about, was it really so small?

Doug Ottati writes that "despite routine injustices, massive starvations, destructive arsenals, horrifying holocausts, and terrorist attacks, progressive Presbyterians will refuse to relinquish hope" because "Grace abounds."

Got your WD-40 ready?