

“No Ordinary”
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Niantic Community Church
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Scripture: Matthew Psalm 136:1-9; I Corinthians 13:1-8, 13

*Oh this, no ordinary love, yeah
Yeah, me in awe of you now, hmm
This unconditional
devotion
Got my heart so wide open
Lifting my spirit like a Holy Ghost
Oh this, no ordinary love, yeah*

Labrinth, “No Ordinary”

When my brother, Scott, learned that my daughter, Arianna, was getting married, he offered to create video of the wedding. Given that Scott is a professional videographer as well as a television news anchor, and had produced a fabulous wedding video for Arianna’s sister, Maren, three years ago, we were all excited to see the result. And, given the song that Arianna and her finance, Graham, chose to anchor the video – a song called “No Ordinary” by the British singer, Labrinth (no misspelling), I was especially intrigued to see the video.

“No Ordinary” has been running through my head ever since they chose it, for reasons I will reveal shortly. Before leaving for Oregon, I tried to show you Labrinth’s official music video, but technical issues prevented us from playing it. Those issues have now been worked out, so now perhaps this song will get stuck in your head as firmly as it stuck in mine! (“No Ordinary”: <https://tinyurl.com/ye4kmudt>)

As beautiful as this song is, I must confess that I have an issue with its main premise. To say that you experience “no ordinary” love implies that certain love is ordinary, and other love is extraordinary (extra-ordinary). Yet, is there really such a thing as “ordinary” love?

After all, if the claim made by the writer of I John in the New Testament is correct, then the words “love” and “God” are synonymous. Says the writer, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love ... those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (I John 4:7-8, 16)

As we have observed before, if God is love, then every experience of love, no matter how ordinary that experience may be, is quite literally a “God experience.” Can there be any such a thing as an “ordinary” God experience? While the means through which God’s love is experienced may be quite ordinary, the fact that you are having a God-experience makes it quite extraordinary.

The God we are talking about is the Ground of our Very Being, the Unmoved Mover, the Almighty Creator of the Universe. There is no such thing as an “ordinary” God-experience for the same reason there is no such thing as a “little” prayer!

How can there be “little” prayers if they connect us to a Living God and Creator of everything that has ever existed or ever will exist? How can there be “little” prayers if the very lips that speak these prayers are connected to carbon-based life-forms that took billions of years to evolve from the dust of exploding stars and this star-dust would eventually transform into living, breathing human beings, created in the very image and likeness of God? (Gen 1:26-28)

“Little” prayers? “Ordinary” love? If God exists, then by definition there are no “little” prayers or “ordinary” loves. It’s all so extraordinary!

Perhaps the reason why we tend to think prayers can be “little” and love can be “ordinary” is because we don’t pause long enough to consider what we’re doing or experiencing. Prayer may connect us to the Almighty Creator of the Universe, but if all we’re doing when we pray is rattling off a few casual wishes for our day as we drive to work in the morning, then we are only dimly aware of the Presence and Power we’re invoking. If we were more aware, we might very well drive off the road!

Similarly, if we can tell our spouse, partner, or child, “I love you” while maintaining the notion that we are simply making a personal statement of affection toward our Beloved, perhaps we have not fully grasped what we are saying. If God is love, and Jesus is the fullest revelation of what God’s love looks like in human form, then saying “I love you” is another way of saying, “You mean so much to me that I would lay down my very life for you.” Yet, such a notion is far from what is expressed much of the time when someone says, “I love you.”

Speaking of Jesus, God, and Love, if we can hear the words that you are “loved beyond your wildest imagination” each Sunday during the final blessing without dropping to the floor – or at least sinking to our knees – trembling with awe and wonder, someone might reasonably wonder if we have even the foggiest awareness of what is happening.

Is it possible to be fast asleep in our pews with our eyes wide open?

In her book, *Teaching A Stone to Talk*,¹ Annie Dillard poses some challenging questions to those of us who attend worship on Sundays as if worship is just another “ordinary” thing one does. Dillard asks,

Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching A Stone to Talk* (Harper Perennial, 1992), p. 52.

It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

Annie Dillard seems like one of the few people these days who is sufficiently aware of the Presence and Power we invoke on a Sunday morning – or is sufficiently prepared to receive it in a way that transforms a person.

There are no “little” prayers. There is no “ordinary” love, just as there is no safe or comfortable way to worship on a Sunday morning if our hearts are even part-way open to the Reality are invoking.

And yet ... and yet, something does ring true when Labrinth sings about an experience of “no ordinary” love, does it not?

While an experience of any form of love is a God-experience, and therefore is theoretically of equal value, I would be lying if I claimed that the love I experience from, and for, my wife, Melanie, or my daughters, Arianna and Maren, isn't several orders of magnitude greater than the love I feel toward, or experience from, other women and children.

What led me to propose marriage to Melanie, and her to accept my proposal, was an experience of “no ordinary” love. This experience of “no ordinary” love is also what led Graham Pansing Brooks to propose marriage to Arianna, and Will Kaufman to propose to Maren, and to them accepting the proposal.

We may say, “I love you” to a lot of people, and sincerely mean it, but we only “put a ring on” one of these loves. In fact, trying to put a ring on more than one love tends to make the whole thing fall apart!

So, there is a certain exclusivity that comes with love between people, even as God may be experienced in all forms of love.

Curiously, this same tendency toward exclusivity applies even when it comes to loving an inclusive God. In the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, there is an insistence that we are to only love one God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength. (Deuteronomy 6:4) “No one can serve two masters,” says Jesus. “Either they will hate the one and love the other, or they will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” (Matthew 6:24-26)

I think the reason we are to devote ourselves to loving just one God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength is because only this God loves us in ways other Gods cannot, or do not. Jesus says, “You cannot love both God and money,” for instance. (Matthew 6:26) If money is your God, then you will experience “god” only when you have money. But what about when you don't have money. Where will money be for you then? The God we are to give our hearts to is the God who loves us whether we are rich or poor. In other words, God loves us

not just in extraordinary times – times we are rich – but in *ordinary* times, when we are rich, poor, or somewhere in between.

We can count on God’s love being here for us at *all* times: in good times and bad, in happy times and sad. We can count on God loving us when others despise us. We can count on God being willing to forgive us when others are shaking their fists at us. In Christ, we know we can count on God going to the Cross for us, even when the world wouldn’t cross the street to help us.

In this respect, this everyday ordinariness is what makes our love for life partners so special. What is it we typically promise in wedding vows? We promise to love and sustain one another “in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live.” In other words, we promise to love each other at all times, not just at certain times. Ordinary times, not just extraordinary ones.

This kind of extraordinariness-within-ordinariness is what the apostle Paul is getting at when he names the kind of love that is so fundamental that he considers himself nothing without it. Says Paul,

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Paul even says that he can do all kinds of extraordinary things – like speaking “in the tongues of mortals and of angels” or having prophetic powers, or understanding all mysteries and knowledge – but if he doesn’t have love in the most ordinary of circumstances, then he is nothing but a “noisy gong or clanging cymbal.” “I am nothing,” he says. “I gain nothing.”

In a marriage, we commit ourselves exclusively to one person due to the extraordinary love we feel for our Beloved, and experience from our Beloved, but if we only express our love at extraordinary times, this doesn’t make for much of a marriage. Love only becomes extraordinary through its ordinariness.

Curiously, if God is love, this principle applies to God as well as to human beings. If we take this point seriously, it might transform our whole notion of who God is, and what God wants from our relationship. Hear Paul’s famous passage on love if we replace ourselves with God as the referent:

If God speaks in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but does not have love, God is a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if God has prophetic powers, and understands all mysteries and all knowledge, and if God has all faith, so as to remove mountains, but does not have love, God is nothing. If God gives away all that God has, and if God hands over God’s very self so that God may boast, but does not have love, God gains nothing.

God is patient; God is kind; God is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. God does not insist on God’s own way; God is not irritable or resentful; God does not rejoice in wrongdoing,

but rejoices in the truth. God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end ... And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is God's love.

The reason why we love one God above all others, counting God's love for us as "no ordinary" love from "no ordinary" God, is the same reason we tend to love one person above all others, counting their love as "no ordinary" love from "no ordinary" person. It's because the greatest of loves is the kind of love that is not in any way extra-ordinary. The more ordinary love is, given or received, the more extraordinary it becomes.

In the following video, which my brother created for Arianna and Graham's wedding, let us be reminded that the beauty we see is a reflection of how utterly ordinary their experience of love is for one another, and therefore how ordinary is their experience of God in and through one another.

[Video found here: <https://tinyurl.com/paybeut9>]