

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

Alice M. C. Ling, Senior Pastor

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

24 June 2007

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

What time is it? How you answer that question depends on a lot of things, like how precisely you set your watch, and when the last time was you did it. For most of my life I've had a small enough watch that there were no numbers on it and no second hand, so my times were always approximate, compared with the computer that regularly goes in search of Greenwich Mean Time, precise down to the very last second. Now that I've graduated to numbers and a second hand, you'd think I'd work toward more precision, but I'm still leaving that to my computer and cell phone. And then there's the question of what time zone you live in. As a family, we currently live in all 4 time zones across the continental US – which always gives us pause when it's time to call someone. Which zone are they in, what time is it there, and is it too early to expect them to be home, or late enough that they may be trying to get some sleep before the baby wakes up again? And then there are our friends in Zimbabwe, who part of the year are five hours ahead of us, part of the year 6 hours – and I can never remember which part of the year is which. And actually when we've been with them, we've learned about another time altogether, which we affectionately refer to as Zim time. Zim times says they'll pick us up at 8, so we get ready and stand and sit and pace until they finally show up sometime later, sometimes much later. And if there's a place they want to stop on the way to where we're going, they stop. A person they think you should meet, even though there may be two hundred people who have been waiting for you for more than an hour, you stop and meet this other person – because it honors them to do so. It's a time that's slow and easy paced, more open to life and people, less driven by external measurements and expectations.

We had an interesting conversation about time recently in Diaconate. Now, in the big scheme of things, it wasn't one of the most important conversations we've ever had, but in its own way, it did have significance. The conversation was about how we're going to measure these weeks between Pentecost and the first Sunday in Advent. It's a season that stretches on nigh unto forever and for most of the years that I've been in ministry, we've counted those weeks as how long it's been since Pentecost: three weeks, ten weeks, twenty-seven weeks. In the past couple of years, the United Church of Christ desk calendar has started to count them differently, and that is to name them and count them as ordinary time. I'll admit that the first year I saw that shift, I wrinkled up my face, and said, well, that's weird. I've never done it that way before. Why are they suggesting this foolishness? So I ignored it for a year, or at least I thought I did, but apparently something was stewing inside me. Because the second year, it resonated in a different way, and I began to like the sound and feel of ordinary time.

The truth is that the Christian calendar of the church year talks about the seasons after Epiphany and after Pentecost as Ordinary Time. While Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter are all seasons that last for a certain number of days or weeks, there are these two other periods of time that follow the day of Epiphany and the day of Pentecost. They are weeks when the suggested lectionary readings make their way through the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Epistles and the Gospels. The color is green, as a color for life and growth and the ongoing nature of what it means to be in this world. We're not pointed in any particular direction by a season of preparation or of birth or of suffering and rejection and failure or resurrection. We're living life as it comes, and seeking to be faithful in the midst of that.

I've come to really like the notion of counting these weeks as ordinary time, because of what they suggest to me about how we live and what it means to be people of faith in the world. These are not the high, holy days of religious observance; these are the common, everyday, ordinary days of getting up in the morning, getting the kids off to school or day care or summer camp, getting ourselves out of the house, tackling the chores that stretch before us, meeting the challenges that land in front of us, making the choices and decisions that everybody has to make from time to time, carving out some time to get away on vacation or to sit quietly while an aging parent reminisces, and catching a ballgame or a documentary on TV before we go to bed. And being aware of God in the midst of it all. Honoring God's claim on us, responding to God's call to us, living as the people of faith that we say we want to be. It's one thing to set aside a season for religious things; it's quite another to live everyday as disciples and followers and people of faith. It's one thing to turn to God for an hour or so on a Sunday morning, it's another thing altogether to weave God and discipleship into our work and our play, our spending and our investing, our loving and our wrestling. Ordinary time meddles in the everyday things we do with our every day lives – from how we treat the people we work with and for, those who work for us and wait on us; to what we do when we discover the cashier gave us more change than we had coming to us; how we respond when we hear racist jokes or watch someone being abused; what decisions we make about economics and politics and the cars we drive and the funds we invest in. God lives in the midst of all of that. God asks us to be attentive to the presence of God, and responsive to the call of discipleship – wherever we are and whatever it is we're doing. You never know when God is going to make her presence known, so pay attention – even in the most ordinary days of ordinary time.

Take that Gerasene pig farmer for example. He was just trying to make a living, raise enough food to feed his family, produce some meat he could take to market with the hope of bringing home the supplies and cash he needed to make ends meet. I don't know how diversified his operation was, but I suspect that herd of swine represented a very significant investment. And I don't know anything about the world of pig farming in ancient Gerasa, but a good number of the farmers I've lived around have barely eked out a living; certainly not had enough that they could afford to go throwing it over a cliff and into a lake. And for what? For that pathetic old lunatic who lived out in the graveyard. Yeah, sure he was a nuisance. A menace, actually. The men of the village did everything in their power to keep their wives and kids away from him. The man was mad and they all knew it. He ran around buck naked, screaming all sorts of wild things at the top of his lungs night and day. They'd periodically tried to lock him up in order to keep people safe, but nothing could contain him. He'd spin and swirl and foam and froth until he broke free of whatever shackles they'd use, and then be off again to roam the woods and cower behind the

tombstones. They'd had lots of conversations about what ought to become of him, and let me assure you, none of it had included their swine herds. Not that Jesus had consulted them, of course. He'd stepped out of his little boat, walked ashore and before he could think twice, the lunatic was sprawled at his feet, shouting at the top of his lungs, What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me. Jesus ordered the demons to come out of the man, which they did – and then begged him not to send them back into the abyss. They preferred the swine herd, so the swine herd it was – filled with a whole platoon of demons, driven over the cliff, and drowned in the lake.

Word of this spread throughout the town and the countryside as fast as sensational news always spreads, so the townspeople came running – only to find the lunatic clothed, in his right mind, and sitting at Jesus' feet like a disciple. He looked different enough that they hesitated, but only a second – before they turned on Jesus – stunned and appalled by what he had done to the herd. Who cared about this reject? How dare he take their livelihood and throw it into the sea? They were filled with rage, with overwhelming fear at what he had done and how much more he might do, and they ordered him to get back on the boat that brought him to their village before they tossed him overboard to sink alongside their pigs. As Jesus was climbing aboard, the man who'd been liberated from his demons pleaded with Jesus to let him come with him, but Jesus said no, your work is here. Stay with these farmers and tell them what God has done for you. Help them to see and feel and believe in and accept the power of the Most High and most loving God.

Not exactly a technique we'd tend to recommend to convert people to Christianity, but there they were, a man liberated after years of torment by a legion of demons, and a farming community with one fewer swine herd. The man was welcomed by Jesus as a disciple, and the ministry to which he was called was to stay home and help the people he lived among see and feel and accept and embrace the presence and workings of God. It was far from a high, holy day – the people weren't even Jews! But here they were, like it or not, confronted with the power of God, and the way of God, and the inescapable clarity from God that quality of life matters, wholeness of life matters. This human life matters, has been restored and stands now in front of you as an example of God's intention to restore and heal and build up and liberate.

I don't know how God will work in the midst of our summer and fall and all of the weeks of ordinary time that stretch ahead of us. I don't expect that it will be nearly so dramatic and costly as it was for the farmer of Gerasa, but how do I know? Who are we to predict and assume the ways of God? Let's enter these weeks of ordinary time open to the presence of God, searching for the hand of God, doing what we can to be open and receptive to what God is doing in our midst. You just never know where God may show up. The question before us is how we will respond when the time comes.