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Three Cheers for Ordinary Work
April 7, 2016

I wonder what kind of work you grew up dreaming that you would do. Did you dream of becoming a doctor, or perhaps a fireman, a dancer, or an athlete, or maybe a movie star? Chances are there was something spectacular, something daring, something heroic about what you wanted to do. But now look at what you are doing? Most of us are just doing ordinary work! What a sad lot we are! Or are we?

Some of you are familiar with *The Onion*. You may have even fallen into one of their traps. They push out articles that have absolutely no basis in fact, and if you are gullible enough you share them on Facebook only to be told by your friends that you have been duped. I love *The Onion's* tagline: "America's Finest News Source." A couple of years ago they published an article entitled, "Unambitious Loser with Happy Family, Fulfilling Life Still Lives in Hometown." Clearly lots of tongue in cheek there, but let me read with you some from that article.

CAMDEN, ME—Longtime acquaintances confirmed to reporters this week that local man Michael Husmer, an unambitious 29-year-old loser who leads an enjoyable and fulfilling life, still lives in his hometown and has no desire to leave...Sources close to Husmer reported that the man, who has meaningful, lasting personal relationships and a healthy work-life balance, is an unmotivated washout...

Childhood friend David Gorman said of the unambitious, completely gratified do-nothing, "As soon as Mike graduated from college, he moved back home and started working at a local insurance firm. Now, he's nearly 30 years old, living in the exact same town he was born in, working at the same small-time job, and is extremely contented in all aspects of his home and professional lives. It's really sad."¹

Ah, typical *Onion*. Telling the truth without telling one shred of truth! Michael Husmer, the family-guy contented with his work at a local (not even national) insurance firm, is looked down upon by everyone else. How could he possibly be satisfied with just ordinary work that gives him just an ordinary life? It's pretty easy to laugh at such a perspective.

Of course, he could be satisfied. But isn't there a bit of reservation in our laugh. Can we really be satisfied with ordinary work?

I don't know if you are like me, but I am fascinated by start-up companies. I love the innovation that flows from them. I love to see how someone can take an idea and in the matter of a few short years create a company worth millions if not billions of dollars. I am obviously not alone in my fascination; the top business magazines are always featuring these companies and teaching us lessons on how we can be successful at leading one too. Apart from the obvious financial rewards, being a part of a successful start-up just sounds a whole lot more interesting than Michael Husmer's insurance job.

Now, please don't get me wrong today about anything I am about to say. I love the innovation of start-up companies and even of many churches. I love the products and services that many of them provide, and I love the jobs and opportunities that they are creating for people. And who knows, maybe one day I will be a part of one of them. But it's not their tune that I want to sing today. It's not high-flying start-ups that I want to celebrate. Today, I want to celebrate plain old, ordinary work.

To do that I might need to bring the word *ordinary* back from the dead. As one author put it:

Ordinary has to be one of the loneliest words in our vocabulary today. Who wants a bumper sticker that announces to the neighborhood, "My child is an ordinary student at Bubbling Brook Elementary"? Who wants to be that ordinary person who lives in an ordinary town, is a member of an ordinary church, has ordinary friends, and works an ordinary job? Our life has to *count*. We have to leave our mark, have a legacy, and make a difference...We have to live up to our Facebook profile.²

But ordinary is really not all that bad. In many ways, it describes the very things that make our lives not just more livable but a great joy. I for one am very glad for the ordinary work that civil engineers and cement truck drivers and asphalt rollers do in putting our roads in place. I like that there are ordinary lane widths and ordinary signal light put in by ordinary work. I play tennis regularly. I have for many years. You may not think of tennis strings very much, but I do. I break them about every

third time I play, which means that I restring my racquets often. I certainly wouldn't like it if every time I put new strings in my racquet I found that someone was innovative in how they made the next set so that I had to adjust to the strings every time I played. I am very thankful for the guy who is attending to the machines that make my strings. I am sure his is an ordinary job, but it is a job that in the end brings me a lot of joy.

What I think is interesting about most start-ups is that behind their success is really a lot more ordinary work than there is spectacular work. There is someone that is doing the endless coding in developing the company's online presence. There is someone who is reading over contracts with suppliers. There is someone handling HR so that all the employees are cared for properly. There are those on the assembly line putting together the product, and those who are boxing up the product for delivery. And then think about the delivery process once it has been handed over to UPS or FedEx. There is an endless number of ordinary processes that must be completed to land the box, from the innovative start up, on your front door. The hip, millennial may have come up with the idea (and we are all glad she did), but that idea would still be sitting on the shelf if it wasn't for a whole lot of ordinary work.

The most well-known prayer in the church is the Lord's Prayer. One of its lines reads, "Give us this day our daily bread." It is a calling out to God for provision in the day. But have you ever considered how God answers that prayer? Sure he could send manna from the sky as he did in days of old, but more often than not it comes through ordinary work. It comes through the sweat of the farmer, the endless road of the trucker, the experience of the baker, and the know-how of the grocer. Sure there have been innovations in all of those processes over the years (I mean aren't you glad for the self-serve check-out scanners when all the lines are long?), but the vast majority of what it takes to give us our daily bread is made up of nothing more than ordinary work.

Now most of you here, probably all of you, are not part of any of that kind of ordinary work. You are not a farmer or a baker. You have a title. Perhaps it's not a title with VP in front of it, but it's meant to give a sense that you don't just do ordinary work. But I think if you are honest you would probably admit that as interesting as you may make your job sound, there are many parts of it, if not most parts of it, that are rather

ordinary. There are parts of it that you have done many times before in one fashion or another and you will have to do them many times over again. In fact, there is probably much that you do that if someone congratulated you on doing it, you would find it a bit odd. It is just ordinary work. But ordinary work does not mean that it is not important work.

Prior to the Protestant Reformation of the early 16th century, there was a certain dualism that was prevalent in the minds of many. That dualism separated the secular and the sacred. The sacred was that which had to do with the church. Those who worked for the church, like me, were part of a sacred occupation. Everyone else, however, was doing secular work. Necessary work, but hardly as important as what goes on in the church. But with the Protestant Reformation came the breaking away of that delineation. Instead of some occupations being sacred and others being secular, all were seen to have the same potential of being pleasing to the Lord. I wonder if you have ever thought of your work like that—that it has the potential to be remarkably pleasing to the God of the universe.

This week I was even reminded that how we approach ordinary work will in large part determine the kind of person we will be. Since work fills up the largest proportion of our waking hours and since most of our work is just ordinary work, the way we approach it does much to shape the kind of person we become. Are we perpetually dissatisfied with our ordinary work, such that every word from our mouth is one that is laced with negativity? Do we so disdain ordinary work that laziness sets in? Do we let ourselves become so bored of our ordinary work that we pursue fantasies in our mind, and then eventually live them out to the destruction of others? Is our desire to rise out of the ordinary so strong that we will cut any corners to see it happen even if it is to the long-term detriment of shareholders or customers? Yes, ordinary work is a powerful stage for developing the kind of person we become. In that sense it is not ordinary at all.

Tish Harrison Warren speaks to the powerful way ordinary work can shape us. She was once involved in unordinary work in helping the poor in Africa. It was heroic work. But circumstances eventually took her to Austin where she now works on the campus of UT and is a mother of small children. She writes this about her now ordinary life:

[I went] to a top college where people achieved big things. They wrote books and started nonprofits. We were told again and again that we'd be world-changers... We were challenged to impact and serve the world in radical ways, but we never learned how to be an average person living an average life in a beautiful way.³

I'm not sure anymore just what God counts as radical. And I suspect that for me, getting up and doing the dishes when I'm short on sleep and patience is far more costly and necessitates more of a revolution in my heart than some of the more outwardly risky ways I've lived in the past. And so this is what I need now: the courage to face an ordinary day—an afternoon with a colicky baby where I'm probably going to snap at my two-year old...—without despair, the bravery it takes to believe that a small life is still a meaningful life, and the grace to know that even when I've done nothing that is powerful or bold or even interesting that the Lord notices me and is fond of me and that that is enough.⁴

So today, when you leave you and return in large measure to ordinary work, I hope you will hold your head high. Ordinary work is not unimportant work. Ordinary work is not meaningless work. Ordinary work is the backbone of life and is what produces so many of the good things you and others enjoy. It has the capacity to mold us into exceptional people. And it is sacred ground in which we can offer something pleasing to God. Hip, hip, hooray, to ordinary work!

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¹The Onion, "[Unambitious Loser with Happy Family, Fulfilling Life Still Lives in Hometown](#)," (July 23, 2013), accessed March 31, 2016.

²Michael Horton, "[The Ordinary Christian Life](#)," Ligonier Ministries, accessed March 31, 2016.

³Michael Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World* (Zondervan, 2014), Kindle, loc. 229-233.

⁴Tish Harrison Warren, "[Courage in the Ordinary](#)," *The Well* (InterVarsity, April 3, 2013), accessed March 31, 2016.