

Wax on. Wax off.

(Nothing Ordinary about “Ordinary” Time)

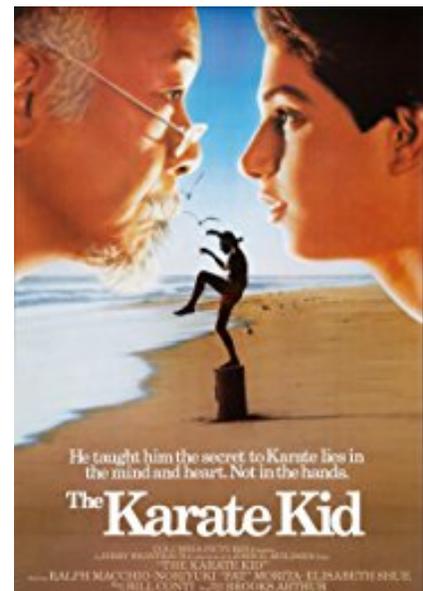
*Keep on doing the things that you have learned
and received and heard and seen in me,
and the God of peace be with you.
(Philippians 4:9)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, **July 29, 2018**
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Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

Imagine we’ve videotaped your kitchen this past week, cameras rolling 24-7 in order to share it this morning with the congregation, a documentary titled “A Week in the (insert your name) Kitchen.” It would, of course, be time-lapsed, a sharing of your domestic enclave in *Ordinary Time*, perhaps even set to music. There you are in hyper-speed, the video transforming your kitchen visits into a blur of herky-jerky movements, flitting from refrigerator to stove, stove to counter-top, counter-top to table, and forking food into your mouth at lightning speed. Then, of course, at the sink. Now rinsing, now bending to the dishwasher, now up again -- down up, down up, down up, Over and Over and Over, a blur of 21 total kitchen preps and clean-ups.

When our girls were pre-teens one of the most popular films for kids was *The Karate Kid*, released in 1984. With mundane repetition – Over and Over and Over – I watched it with them. I didn’t mind, honestly, finding the film an excellent sermon for kids on the importance of mastering fundamentals, living with discipline and honor, and trusting one’s teachers, even when wondering, “*How can these Ordinary tasks, so unspectacular, be important?*”

Perhaps you recall the story. Young Daniel and his single parent mom move from New Jersey to California. Soon enough he discovers that a dark-haired Italian boy from Jersey doesn’t easily fit in with the blond-haired surfer crowd. He feels isolated and is threatened by school bullies from a karate club. Slight of stature and lacking in confidence, Daniel wants to defend himself. Befriended by the handyman taking care of his apartment building, the mysterious Mr. Miyagi from Okinawa, Daniel asks Mr. Miyagi to teach him karate. At first reluctant, Miyagi at last agrees to mentor Daniel when he sees first-hand how bad the bullying has become, with he has one condition. Daniel must agree to submit to his instruction and not question his methods. Mr. Miyagi may as well have quoted Paul, “*Keep on doing the things that you learn,*” Over and Over and Over. Daniel accepts that condition and enters into covenant with his teacher.



He shows up the next morning eager to learn karate. He has, of course, envisioned in his mind how these lessons would progress but, instead of learning spectacular karate moves, Mr. Miyagi tells Daniel to paint the fence surrounding his house, demonstrating the precise motions of applying the paint. Daniel is to “observe” and “imitate” -- up down, up down, up down -- Over and Over and Over. *“Keep on doing these things that I’ve shown you.”* Having with precise specificity instructed Daniel, Mr. Miyagi leaves to go fishing, Daniel working through the long, hot day all the while wondering, *“Is this any way to learn karate?”* He has promised, though, and true to his promise, he remains silent.

Thinking that first day to have been some sort of peculiar initiation, Daniel appears at Mr. Miyagi’s house the next day eager to commence training. Miyagi tells Daniel to scrub the deck behind his house. Once again, an exact method of doing the job is prescribed and, once again, Miyagi leaves Daniel alone. Caught in the drudgery of the Ordinary, so lacking in the spectacular, Daniel wonders, *“What can this possibly have to do with karate?”*

On the third day Mr. Miyagi instructs him in washing and waxing three cars, again prescribing the precise circular motions. *Wax on. Wax off.* Daniel completes the job, but has reached the limit of his patience. When Mr. Miyagi returns Daniel dares to question his teacher’s methods, bursting out in anger.

“I thought you were going to teach me karate. I’m doing your chores!”

Daniel has now broken his pledge. In a stern response, Miyagi uses the moment to show Daniel that he has, indeed, been teaching him the fundamentals



of karate. The motions Daniel has been mundanely repeating in the drudgery of Ordinary Time are now put into action.

“Show me, paint the fence,” Miyagi says, and those motions, once accomplished seemingly without purpose, now block each of Miyagi’s offensive thrusts. *“Show me, Wax on. Show me, Wax off.”* Each motion now protects Daniel from a specific attack, and it happens in a blur, in hyper-speed, Daniel now realizing what his work during these days has actually accomplished. Stunned at what seemingly pointless days of drudgery have taught him, Daniel’s *Wondering* (*“What could possibly be the worth of this ordinary work?”*) is transformed into *Wonder* (*“Wow! Look what I’ve learned!”*).

How true is the aphorism, *“When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”* Daniel hadn’t been ready three days ago to see in Miyagi a teacher, his mentor. But after this long stretch of

“*Ordinary*” Time that was in no way *Ordinary*, Daniel at last recognizes what was there all along. Blessed is the moment when our eyes are at last opened to what has been there all along.

Miyagi bows, turns, and walks away, leaving Daniel in a daze. Out of Daniel’s sight Miyagi breaks a slight smile, aware that now his student realizes that what he had imagined to be meaningless chaos, like dirty dishes daily piling up, was in fact filled with purpose.

One of the most formidable obstacles to learning is pride. The foundation for learning is to empty oneself of the presumption of knowing, then to persevere in ordinary exercises that bring mastery of the fundamentals. “*Keep on doing the things that you have learned of me.*” This lesson takes Daniel to a karate championship (not to mention several successful sequels, including one – *Cobra Kai* – THIS summer with Daniel and his old nemesis, 34 years later).

I love the Wesley Covenant Prayer, adapted by John Wesley for use in the churches. Let’s pray these words, as have Methodists across centuries and continents:

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O Glorious and Blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

I suspect many hear these words as a bit peculiar, as odd as Daniel regarded Miyagi’s “*Wax On, Wax Off.*” The words, though, would hardly have been odd to Paul, who wrote to the Philippians, “*I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*”

This motif of Paul as mentor illustrates the teacher/student dynamic, the importance of the repetitions of the fundamentals during “*Ordinary*” Time. How often a student grumbles at the lack of grandeur, learning at a pace which seems agonizingly slow.

Good writers build up to the moment of revelation, several strands of a plot working at different angles until they come together in a surprising way, transforming the reader’s Wondering (“*Where can all this possibly be going?*”) into Wonder (“*Wow, now I see how each part fits!*”).

I suppose any good teacher seeks to reach that “*Ah-ha!*” reflex in the student, the moment when a student discovers for him/her self the importance of what they’ve learned, realizing that the teacher hasn’t merely provided them with an answer, but with a path to that answer. That’s why Miyagi walks away with a subtle smile, knowing his student is now familiar with the path.

There are no short-cuts, I'm afraid. Some things can be learned only when repeated, Over and Over and Over.

I began this message by imagining a video cam on your kitchen 24-7, an *Ordinary* week of 21 meals. I want to conclude by talking about the 27 weeks in this year's liturgical calendar which we call the season after Pentecost. Today is the *10th Sunday after Pentecost*, a season of our liturgical calendar that will continue for 17 more weeks, ending with the Sunday after Thanksgiving in late November.



In some liturgical traditions this expanse of time is known as *Ordinary Time*, and the primary liturgical color is green. It's natural to tire of this *Ordinary* green, longing for richer colors of the festival times in our liturgy. I've often had church members mention their craving to shed the long expanse of Green during Pentecost, longing for the *Blue* of Advent or the *White* of Christmas Day or the brilliant *Red* of the Day of Pentecost.

This green expanse of "*Ordinary*" time may be looked upon as Daniel first regarded "*Wax On. Wax Off.*" But let's not miss the spiritually subtle significance of this green as a reminder that we are on a long journey during which learning through repetition is key to growth, just as regular watering is key during this long summer to the green of our lawns.

May our souls be green with life as we "keep on doing" the things that lead to life!