

Mark 5:21-43 (NRSV)

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. [22] Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet [23] and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." [24] So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. [25] Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. [26] She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. [27] She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, [28] for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." [29] Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. [30] Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" [31] And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?' " [32] He looked all around to see who had done it. [33] But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. [34] He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

[35] While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" [36] But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." [37] He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. [38] When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. [39] When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." [40] And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was.

[41] He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!"

[42] And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.

[43] He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

JESUS INTERRUPTED

In Mark's gospel Jesus is constantly being interrupted. He is interrupted by Peter when he is at prayer. (Mark 1:35-39) He is interrupted by a leper while preaching in the synagogue. (Mark 1:40-45) While preaching in a home his message is interrupted by some men who lower a paralyzed man through a hole they make in the roof.

When Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, the whole procession is stopped by a blind man who cries out for help. (Mark 10:48) The disciples are dismayed that people are bringing their children to Jesus to be blessed and thus interrupting more important ministry. (Mark 10:13)

Everywhere he goes Jesus is interrupted by people in need. The crowds press in upon him.

And yet Jesus always graciously responds to the interruptions. He is always willing to go where there is a need. He is always willing to drop what he is doing, stop in the middle of a sermon and go home with the person who needs his help.

All around him people are rushed and anxious. But, Jesus remains calm and in control. What's that line from Rudyard Kipling's poem? He keeps his head while everyone around him is losing theirs and blaming it on him.

CODE BLUE

The same is true in our lesson for today. Jairus, an important man, a ruler in the synagogue comes with an urgent request. His daughter is at the point of death; he falls on his knees and pleads with Jesus to come and heal her.

Now this is a “code blue” situation. Have you seen the nurses and doctors when a code blue is called in the hospital, when a life threatening event occurs? Don’t get in their way! This is not the time for an interruption of any kind.

And you would think that the same would apply to Jesus in this situation. He needs to get to that little girl as quickly as possible. It’s an emergency. She’s about to die. A large crowd follows Jesus and presses in on him as he makes his way to Jairus’ home.

It took a lot for Jairus, a leader in the synagogue to come to Jesus, fall on his knees and beg for him to come to his home and heal his daughter. Up to this point the leaders of the synagogue have not warmed up to Jesus, to say the least. In fact, they have already set into motion a plan to destroy him.

If Jesus can heal the daughter of an important man like Jairus perhaps he can score some points with the religious leaders for a change. The crowd swells in anticipation of the big event. Everyone wants to see what Jesus can do.

INTERRUPTED AGAIN

And what happens? Jesus is once again interrupted on his way to this most important healing.

A woman who has suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years desperately desires to be healed. She’s spent all her money on physicians but she’s gotten worse instead of better. People say that this new prophet named Jesus can heal anyone. So she decides to try Jesus.

No doubt she knew that it would not be possible to interrupt Jesus’ journey to heal the desperately ill child of a prominent leader. But, this might be her only opportunity to get close to him. What can she do?

She tells herself, “I don’t have to slow him down. If I can just get close enough to touch his clothes I’ll be healed.” She does get close enough to touch his cloak, and she is healed. Twelve years of misery ends in an instant.

But, according to our Scripture, Jesus is aware that something has happened. He felt the power go out of him, and the hurried procession comes to a screeching halt. Jesus turns toward the crowd and asks, “Who touched my clothes?”

Now for the disciples (and probably for everyone else) this was a very silly question. There are people pressing in on every side as they race to heal a little girl who is deathly ill, and Jesus stops to ask, “Who touched my clothes?”

The disciples say in effect, “Come on Jesus. There are people touching you on all sides. Don’t worry about it. Get a grip. This healing is important. Let’s get going.”

But, the Scripture tells us that Jesus was not deterred by the disciples’ impatience. Instead, he stopped and “looked all around” to see who had touched him.

Can you imagine the chagrin of the disciples and the anxiety of the little girl’s father as Jesus does this? Suppose this was your little girl who was at the point of death. How would you feel about Jesus stopping at this point?

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, a trembling woman comes out of the crowd. She falls at Jesus’ feet and confesses the truth. “I did it. I touched you.” But, Jesus doesn’t fuss at her. Jesus is not worried that he has been rendered ceremonially unclean by being touched by this woman.

TOO LATE?

Instead, Jesus commends this woman’s faith. He tells her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Well, that’s great for her, but what about the little girl who was at the point of death? For the little girl it’s too late. Messengers come and bring the bad news; the little girl is dead. There’s nothing that Jesus can do. Don’t trouble him any more. If only he had arrived sooner.

This reminds me of another story from the gospel of John. Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus was at the point of death. But, Jesus didn't go to heal him right away.

And when Jesus finally made his way into town it was too late. Lazarus has been in the grave four days when Jesus arrives.

The sisters of Lazarus seem angered by Jesus being so slow. Mary stays home and refuses to come out to greet Jesus, and the first words out of Martha's mouth are "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."

No doubt Jairus felt the same way. There is always great disappointment when we're too late to prevent the great disaster. We always want to second guess ourselves. We say, "If only I had done something differently, perhaps things would have turned out better."

But, Jesus reassures the leader of the synagogue. Even when everyone else has given up the presence of Jesus makes hope a possibility. Jesus tells the grief stricken ruler, "Don't be afraid. Just believe."

When our life is "interrupted" by the worst news we can imagine, Jesus does not leave us. He still goes with us and encourages us to believe and not be afraid. That's a tall order, particularly in the face of death. But, as we shall see, even the ultimate interruption, the interruption of death itself, is no match for the power of God in Jesus Christ.

GRIEF WITHOUT HOPE

Of course for those who are afraid and do not believe in the promises of Jesus, this reassurance is only wishful thinking. When Jesus arrives at the ruler's home, the mourning was already in full force.

The apostle Paul encouraged the Christians at Thessalonica not to grieve as those who had no hope. The scene at the ruler's home was the absolute opposite of what the apostle would later counsel.

The grieving customs of that day epitomized the suffering of those who had no hope. The Bible tells us that when Jesus makes it to the home of Jairus there is a “great commotion” with people wailing and weeping loudly.

Commentator William Barclay gives an interesting account of funeral customs in those days. Whenever a person would die, immediately a loud wail would be set up so that everyone would know that someone had died.

And the wailing would continue until they made it to the graveside. The mourners would stand over the body and beg for a response from silent lips. Quite often the shrill sound of flutes would add to these ghastly catcalls of unmitigated grief.

The mourners would tear their garments and their hair as a sign of despair. Our lesson for today describes it rightly. It was quite a “commotion.”

GRIEF INTERRUPTED

These were the sights and sounds that greeted Jesus when he arrived. And how did Jesus respond to their wails of grief? Jesus said, “Why are you wailing and making such a commotion. The child is not dead. She’s merely asleep.”

For a moment the flute playing and the wailing and the tearing of clothes stopped. They all looked at Jesus with wide eyes and mouths agape. And then the silence was broken by the soft sound of someone laughing. The laughter began to build and made for an odd contrast to the loud wailing prevailed just a few moments before.

But, Jesus interrupted their levity just as he interrupted their assumptions about death. He sent them all away except for the little girl’s parents and a few of his disciples. They entered the room where the child was laying. Jesus took the little girl by the hand, and told her to get up.

And she got up. In fact this twelve year old girl walked around the room. Everyone who saw it was shocked. But, Jesus calmly told them not to say

anything about what had happened, but they should give the little girl something to eat.

Notice the contrast between the quiet power of Jesus and the loud despair of the mourners. The mourners said, “Don’t bother the teacher. There’s nothing anyone can do now.” But, Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid. Only believe.”

The mourners create quite a commotion, tearing their garments and their hair and wailing at the top of their lungs.” But, Jesus is quiet and calm in the face of their mourning and in the face of their derision. Just as he had quieted the storm, Jesus silenced his critics by a display of his power.

Jesus showed them that with God nothing is impossible. And in the man Jesus the world was touched by the hope and grace of Almighty God.

DIVINE INTERRUPTIONS TODAY

Jesus interrupted the cycle of despair and cynicism that was a part of their world. And Jesus can do the same in our world as well.

Jesus’ divine authority is still placed at the service of desperate people. And his example to us is this: interruptions can be more than just a disruption in our day. They can be opportunities to serve and see the power of God in action.

I must admit that I had more than my share of interruptions this past week. A family stopped by to see if we had any food in our pantry. I’m not sure how many children that woman had but there were a lot, and they were all over the church!

I’ve got a sermon to write and now I have to deal with little boys scampering up the steep steps of the fellowship hall! But, then I remembered the theme of my sermon and thought to myself, “Perhaps I should be patient. Maybe this is an opportunity for ministry instead of a distraction.”

That evening as I unloaded an inordinate amount of groceries into my car an old man in a motorized wheelchair drove up and asked, “Can I have something to eat?”

I wanted to say, “Don’t you see that I have my hands full? I bet you’re going to buy liquor with any money I give you. Here, have a frozen chicken breast.”

But, then I remembered the theme of my sermon and thought to myself, “Perhaps this is an opportunity for ministry. I gave him a bit of money, and he said ‘God bless you.’” And I thought, “He just did.”

The next day I decided to stay in the office longer to make up for all the interruptions. I closed the blinds and hunkered down behind a closed door. And just as I was firing up the word process guess what happened. You guessed it. Someone was ringing the church’s front doorbell.

I reluctantly answered and a man at the door asked, “Are you the pastor?”

You don’t know how many times I’ve wanted to respond to that question by saying, “No, I’m the custodian. The pastor is on vacation this week.” But, then I remembered the theme of my sermon and thought to myself, “Perhaps this is an opportunity for ministry.”

It turns out this man’s need was the greatest of all. His wife had died, and he needed someone to “say a few words” at her funeral. Funerals are always difficult, but they are especially difficult when I don’t know the person.

But, in this case I knew what was required. Someone needed to proclaim a gospel of hope, and that someone was me. And I was glad that he had interrupted me and reminded me once again what was really important.

The next day I preached the funeral, and the bereaved husband told me as we left, “God led me to you yesterday.”

I’m sure he did. God has a way of “interrupting” my sermons and my life.

And like the disciples I sometimes want to send the little children away. Their needs seem so great, and my resources seem so small.
And I'm so busy!

But, then I remember a time when I came to Jesus. Like Jairus I came begging. Falling on my knees I asked Jesus to come home with me and to heal what was broken in my life. And He did it. He gave me hope, and he called me to follow him.

How can I ever view another person as an interruption when the Lord of life took time with me?

THE INTERRUPTION IS THE MIRACLE!

Henri Nouwen was a very productive and busy man. He was a Roman Catholic priest, a psychiatrist and a very popular author. Toward the end of his successful career he wrote, "You know ... my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work."

I entitled my sermon this morning "A Miracle Interrupted." But, perhaps a better title might be "The Interruption is the Miracle."

A long time ago the world saw no need for God, at least not the God revealed in Jesus. The world had government, the efficient if somewhat brutal Roman government. They kept the peace.

In addition they had the rules of religion. Do this. Don't do that. If you kept you nose clean and paid your taxes, that was the best you could hope for. It wasn't a perfect world, but at least it was predictable.

But, God decided to interrupt that world. He sent his Son into the world. In a world where people were only valued for their tax value, Jesus took time to have compassion upon the crowds who were like "sheep without a shepherd". In a world where woman and children were to be seen and not heard, Jesus spoke up for them and spoke to them and touched them.

In a world of betrayal and death, in a world where people mourned as those who had no hope, Jesus brought an impossible hope. Jesus said, “All is not lost. Even in the worst situation, I can interrupt. I can make things whole again.”

If we're too busy for Jesus, we're too busy. Maybe what we need are a few more interruptions in our life! And maybe we will begin to see that our calling and our salvation are found in the interruption.

May God interrupt our lives this week that we might discover the hope of life eternal. Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN