

July 8, 2018

Mark 5: 21-43

Prayer: Our Father in Heaven, We ask for your wisdom and understanding as we go to your Scriptures for guidance. Help us to discern your word and to apply it to our lives. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Jesus, Interrupted

When I took this job at Triune 13 years ago, I quickly learned something about myself: I am task-oriented.

That is, I am driven to finish a task. And I get agitated when I'm prevented from doing so.

It doesn't particularly matter what the task is – writing a bulletin or a sermon or a speech or a book. Preparing a grant evaluation. Performing a wedding or a funeral.

But I function best when I can identify a beginning, a middle and an end – and arrive at that end. I'd never had to really think about it before because newspaper writing, by definition, was task-oriented. You interviewed sources for a story, you wrote it, you handed it in. Everyone in the newsroom was invested in making sure you got to the end.

After landing in the mishmash that is ministry, I understood why I'd had so much trouble the year I took off to have a second baby. Though I greatly admire stay-at-home

moms, it was excruciatingly hard for me. Because I'd work all day long and have nothing to show for it at the end of the day. No task completed.

That year, I ultimately painted the outside of our house while the children napped – even if I could only get to 10 linear feet in a day. That's how desperate I was for a completed task that I could point to.

Now believe me, I'm not suggesting this is any way to live. There's probably some serious psychosis involved. But it's the way I am wired.

So when I got to Triune, and the doorbell rang every 15 to 20 minutes interrupting me, it wore me down. We didn't have a receptionist in those days, so I had to run from my office on the second floor down to the door on the first floor to see what someone wanted. A bag of food, a coat, a blanket, a razor, a motel room, a bathroom, a bottle of water, shoes, a bus ticket.

I quickly recognized the inefficiency of such a set-up. Not to mention that I wasn't going to last long.

And so we set up parameters – groceries and toiletry kits would be given out on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Laundry would be done on Saturdays and Sundays.

But recognizing that interruptions were a part of living in crisis, we hired recovery case managers and social workers to handle all those interruptions that came to the door.

People who were trained to turn those interruptions into opportunities for personal transformation.

People who were wired very differently than me.

Our gospels show us a picture of Jesus's early ministry that was beset by interruptions. Someone sick or leprous or crippled or poor reaching out to him. Someone questioning his authority to speak. Someone constantly demanding his attention.

Often as he was trying to deal with one task, another intruded. That's the case with today's Scripture in the gospel of Mark.

Earlier this year, I talked about the Earl of Sandwich – inventor of that great bread and meat concoction. And I explained how Mark is the master of sandwiching one story into another. That is: he starts one story, then interrupts it to insert another story, then finishes the first one. He literally sandwiches one story inside another.

We see him do it when Jesus and the disciples are headed to Jerusalem for the crucifixion. Jesus passes a fig tree and curses it for not producing fruit. Then he drives the moneychangers out of the temple. The next morning, he passes by the fig tree again and finds it withered.

By combining these two stories in such an odd and distinctive way, Mark lets each comment on the other. Just as a non-producing fig tree is useless, so is a non-producing temple. It is Mark's way of saying that this new Kingdom of God that Jesus is ushering in will not be found in the courts of Jewish authority.

Our Scripture today is one of Mark's most distinctive sandwich stories. Please turn in your Bibles to **Mark 5: 21-43** and let's read together.

21 When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. 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 round 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 is in Jewish territory for these two healing miracles. Jairus is the leader in a Jewish synagogue. His daughter is 12 years old. The old woman has been sick for 12 years. Twelve is almost always a symbol for Judaism – think of the 12 sons of Jacob who became the 12 tribes of Israel. Think of the rows of 12 stones on the garments of the priests. Think of the 12 disciples.

Jesus has already drawn a large crowd by the lake, so presumably he planned to speak. But this Jewish leader Jairus interrupts him and begs him “**repeatedly**” to come to his home and heal his daughter.

Jesus starts out to do exactly that. But before he can get there, he is interrupted again by a hemorrhaging woman. And we, as readers, are interrupted by Mark.

Now this woman may or may not be Jewish. We don’t know. What we do know is she couldn’t get much lower in society.

First of all, she’s a woman. That’s bad enough. But she is hemorrhaging blood. Women who had their monthly cycles were separated and considered unclean, untouchable. Imagine the stigma attached to a woman who had bled for 12 years!

Now, she interrupts Jesus’ journey to heal the daughter of a respected Jewish leader. She touches his cloak. She risks making Jesus unclean!

Amazingly, Jesus feels that power has left him, and he whirls to see what has happened. “**Who touched my clothes?**” he asks.

The disciples are incredulous. “**You see the crowd pressing in on you,**” they say, probably exasperated. “**How can you say, ‘Who touched me?’** ”

But Jesus pauses to perform an act of ministry here, as well as healing. He wants to talk to this frightened, trembling woman who has dared to touch him, has dared to believe that such a touch might heal her.

“Daughter,” Jesus tells her, **“your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”**

So far, this story follows a traditional Sunday school lesson. We see Jesus’ kindness. We see his compassion. If he was irritated by the interruptions, we don’t see it.

We also see strong faith on the part of the woman. We see all the things you have learned in Sunday school over the years about this story.

But there’s something else. In this woman, Mark is clearly telling the people of the first century that Jesus is not simply here to save the Jews and the males and the people whom human society has deemed important. He is here to save the lowest, the most unclean, the most forgotten, miserable members of humankind.

Jesus allows himself to be interrupted from attending to the needs of the synagogue leader to help this lowly, unclean woman.

Now the interruption is over. But it has taken long enough that Jairus’ daughter has died. People come to tell Jairus that his daughter is dead and he need not trouble Jesus any longer.

But Jesus has the same kindness, the same compassion for Jairus, as he had for the bleeding woman. **“Do not fear,”** he tells the father. **“Only believe.”**

He goes to Jairus’ house. But now, instead of healing the young girl, he raises her from the dead.

I've heard people say that Jesus let himself be interrupted in this story in order to perform the more dazzling miracle of resurrection rather than a simple healing. But in Matthew's version, Jairus tells Jesus from the very beginning that his daughter has died.

As Matthew tells it, Jesus never had a chance to heal the sick girl. She was already dead when her father first approached Jesus.

Now remember: Mark was the original gospel writer. Matthew and Luke followed his lead in telling the story in sandwich-style – Jairus pleads with Jesus; Jesus is interrupted by the bleeding woman; Jesus raises Jairus' daughter.

So I would argue that the interruption, not the resurrection, is the point of the story.

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When interruptions at our side door were driving me insane, our recovery case manager David Gay spoke up. God, he told me, is in the interruptions.

One typical Saturday in those early days, a man with two children interrupted our serving routine. His wife and children had been evicted from their Myrtle Beach home while he was in prison. Now they were stranded, and hoping to start a new life in Simpsonville.

We set them up with clothes, linens, dishes and food, and the father went off to look for work. He interrupted me again a week later – to tell me he'd found a job in maintenance at a nearby golf course.

I will never get to the point that I am as gracious as Jesus – or even as David Gay – about interruptions. But we have set up most of Triune's staff to deal with them.

That's what David and Kreg do. That's what Robin and Rhonda and MiGina do.

That's what Morgan and starting tomorrow, Andrew, will do.

We encourage setting up appointments because that gives our staff time to prepare, have their calendar cleared, to go deeper. But in the kind of ministry we are, that will never be all that we do. We will always be interrupted.

I first preached this Scripture passage at our partner church, Buncombe Street UMC, in 2006. Triune had dissolved as a United Methodist Church, and at the request of the district superintendent, Buncombe Street had taken it on as a mission church.

Buncombe Street had scores of its own ministries. Triune was a hot mess of needs and wants and questions and problems. And to make it worse, I was an ordained Baptist plopped down in their middle of all those Methodists.

Triune was one gigantic interruption.

But Buncombe Street reacted with the compassion that Jesus showed the hemorrhaging woman. They welcomed me and they gave money and they served meals and they hosted art shows. Ten years later, they handed over all this property and all these buildings as a gift to us. The interruption, they said, was of God.

As the gospel writer Mark shows us, an interruption can be a telling thing.

It can be the moment that sheds light, gives meaning, to the task that was interrupted.

Mark uses two stories – one interrupting the other – to contrast the kinds of people who will be welcome in the kingdom of God. Clean and unclean. Well born and despised. Insider and outcast.

Perhaps God used two congregations – Triune interrupting Buncombe Street – to make a similar comment upon the kinds of people who will be welcome in the kingdom of God. I believe each church is richer for the interruption.

Let us take care to show the same compassion to the interruptions in our lives.

Amen.