

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
June 10, 2018, Proper 4B  
Psalm 30; Mark 5:21-43  
Interruptions?

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There's an old story about a man who dies and finds himself in a shimmering, beautiful place – he thinks to himself, I guess I was better than I thought! An angel meets him and takes him into a wondrous banquet hall with many other people. The dining table is laden with food – he sits down and is ready to eat. Just as he picks up his fork, the angel comes to him and straps a thin board to the back of his arms so he can't bend his elbows. He can pick up the food but he can't get it to his mouth. He looks around and sees that everyone has the same problem – everyone is grunting and groaning as they try to feed themselves – but they can't.

So the man turns to the angel and says, "This must be hell"

The angel nods – it is.

The man asks, "what about heaven?"

So the angel takes him into another banquet hall – there's another food laden table. The man smiles, "This is more like it." So he sits down and is about to fill his plate again when the angel comes up behind him and ties a board to his arms – once again, he can't bend his elbows to feed himself. He starts to think – this is the same maddening situation as hell – but he looks around and notices that there is something different happening.

There are lots of people here too – but instead of people desperately trying to help themselves, each person is holding his or her arm out straight

and feeding the person on the other side. Each person is feeding their neighbor and everyone in the room is completely satisfied.

“So this is heaven” – the man finally realizes.

The angel nods, “It is.”

The gospel lesson today is a story about two women – one is rich, the other poor. Jesus is in the midst of a great crowd, preaching and teaching, when a synagogue leader approaches him – Jairus’ daughter is terribly ill – on the brink of death. Would he come and heal her? And Jesus agrees to go.

On the way, though, he’s interrupted by another woman who’s in need of help. Jesus delays responding to the first request – stops his journey to deal with the woman who’s determined to get his attention.

The daughter of Jairus is a girl of privilege – she’s just twelve years old – she’s lived in the comfort of affluence. Her father is a ruler of the synagogue – one of the rich and powerful. Her father is her advocate – and he approaches Jesus within the bounds of social propriety.

In contrast, the second woman does not even have a name. She has been suffering for 12 years – and she risks terrible social consequences if she approaches and then touches Jesus. She was unclean – and conventional wisdom said that anyone she touched would become unclean too – her very presence in the crowd and then her deliberate touching of this famous rabbi could have brought upon her the legally – even perhaps lethally – justifiable wrath of the crowd.

Will Jesus allow himself to be bothered by this face in the crowd while on an important errand on behalf of the rich and famous and powerful? Well, not only does he notice her, he also attends to her. And furthermore, he singles her out for her faith and perseverance.

Some very powerful truths in these stories: some very profound teachings for us in these stories. And I think some important implications for us as a community of faith and for us as individuals.

We are called to do more than make pronouncements about justice, about equality. We are called to act justly to the persons sitting right next to us. We're called to notice them. We're called to make time for them. We're called to care for them. We're called to love them. Jesus noticed the nameless woman in a crowd – can't you see his eyes meeting hers? Can you imagine how she felt? Can you imagine not being touched for 12 years? Can you imagine how it would feel to have this famous rabbi notice you in all your uncleanness and then pronounce you healed?

Every one of us wants to be noticed. Every one of us wants to matter. Jesus shows us over and over again how no concern was too small for him. No person was unimportant – these stories do challenge us, don't they. When as the church, we are called upon, are we quickest to respond to the requests of those who have status or clout, be it inside the church or in the wider society? How is it that we set our priorities, our attentions? There's a reality that there's limits to our time, to our resources – that first things must come first. But how do we identify those first things? As a church? As individuals?

These stories confront the church, confront us, not only with the needs of those whose names we know, and those whose worth is apparent to us. They also confront us with those who reach out for help from the crowd – the so-called nameless, unclean. Like Jesus' awareness of the power going out of him, these countless requests can drain us. There is only so much time, there are only so many resources. But Jesus doesn't show any

partiality, does he. He responds to faith, to desperation, however they manifest themselves. How can we do less?

The man in the first story found out what hell was like – people all around grumbling, starving – but nobody reached out to anyone else at all. Maybe heaven is just as he discovered – nobody is hungry, thirsty, or alone – the difference was others notice and respond. How can we do less?

Something else: Jesus allowed his “routine” if you will, to be interrupted by a variety of intruders. And, I don’t know about you – but I need to hear this lesson about the value of interruptions. We’re all familiar with list-making, with schedules, with plans – and I know I can get so focused on “accomplishing something” that I’m sure I miss some opportunities. Don’t you?

A parish minister writes, “I used to despise interruptions to my ministry until it dawned on me that the interruptions were his ministry! When someone stops at the church in search of a meal for his family as I am trying to get out the door to a hospital visit, I need to slow down and be open to the situation. When my day reserved for sermon preparation gets interrupted by a request to visit someone in a nursing home who is lonely – I need to hear what is being said.”

Interruptions are the stuff of ministry. Interruptions are also the stuff of life! They are the stuff of being a person.

This same minister writes, “Recently I found myself in the midst of a terrible day. It had been a terrible week, a disastrous month. I kept telling myself that things couldn’t get worse but every day seemed to add a new problem that kept adding another wave of stress to my life. I had been forced to terminate the man who had been working as the church custodian – aside from the unpleasantness of that, I had to now spend time making

alternate arrangements for getting the building cleaned. I called a friend who runs a cleaning service – some years ago our church had resettled Tanya and her family and she had established this business and many of her employees are current refugees from the former Soviet Union. So Tanya and I met to go over what needed to be done and she asked, “Could you pray with Mila for a few minutes?”

This minister goes on – praying with Mila was absolutely the last thing I wanted to do at that moment – my agenda was to get this meeting done so I could get back to my desk to figure out what I was going to preach about this coming Sunday. I glanced over at a young woman who was holding a mop and who looked like she’d been crying for a long time. I tried not to show any irritation as I asked, “What’s going on with Mila?”

Tanya said, “Her father died in Moldavia yesterday and she can’t go back. She couldn’t be with him and she can’t be with her mother and sisters.”

They prayed together for a few moments. Then the minister says, “I went back to my desk and came up with a sermon – not as hard as it had seemed a few minutes before. And my day and week and month didn’t seem quite as awful as they had seemed earlier.”

Interruptions can do that to you – they can throw you off track or put you back on-track.

The gospel tells us that we’re to be willing to lay down our life for our neighbors – maybe that shouldn’t be restricted to a willingness to die. Maybe it also means we’re called to lay our lives aside – put away our priorities and preoccupations for the sake of another person, for the sake of God calling us to something new and different – maybe even a bit frightening.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to use our time wisely or to focus on some work or assignment – but it is to recognize that we have a remarkable capacity to be self-absorbed. And I think that sneaks up on us as we spend our days. One of our greatest needs, one of our greatest joys, may well be able to get out of our own lives for a while. We just might learn something about what's really important when we do that.

Broughton House is a transitional housing agency in Newark that provides a safe and secure environment for men and women living with HIV or AIDS. There are dormitory style rooms, residents are provided with 3 meals a day – and they are encouraged to participate in substance abuse treatment programs and they have the benefit of in-house health and mental health services. The Glen Ridge church for many years had provided a dinner once a month in a rotation with other churches. I won't forget my first time there - it had been an extremely busy week – meetings every night, I had stuff to do at home – just like everyone else I have laundry, grocery shopping, a checkbook to balance – you know what the list is. I'd penciled in the date for Broughton House and when I got home Wednesday night I looked at the calendar and groaned. I just can't do another thing this week! I'm tired, I have company coming for a week on Sunday – enough already.

Just as I was deciding that I wasn't going to go, my phone rang – it was one of our faithful volunteers asking if there was any chance I could go with her. It was summer and the folks usually available to go with her couldn't go this week. And she barely had enough food to share with the 30 folks there. Talk about an interruption to what I thought would be a productive night at home for me.

Well, when I came home for lunch on Thursday I made a big bowl of pasta salad so it could get cold before we'd go into Newark later that

afternoon. We served dinner to about 30 folks, had some wonderful conversation, and were home by 8:30 that night. There was still time for me to put in a couple loads of laundry - I came home changed and energized and glad I'd let that interruption happen. I can't help but think of that woman in our passage this morning - she was unclean - untouched, alone, left to her own devices, but desperate to survive. She reached out and was healed.

The folks at Broughton House are among the unclean of today - all HIV positive, all turned away from much of society. But they are desperate to survive too - and the Broughton House ministry is there for them. The women from Integrity House in the Bread for the Journey sessions - they too are the unclean of this world - all addicts in various stages of recovery, some former prisoners convicted of even violent crime. But they are reaching out too - do we see them? Really see them? Hear them?

And our hungry neighbors who come here to the Food Bank - some might consider them "other" too - but I wouldn't give up my time there for anything, even if sometimes it feels like an interruption. Last week there was a young mother who came to get food for her family of 5 - she had her 7 month old baby with her. In a few minutes it was clear that she didn't have enough hands to gather food and hold the baby - so the great joy of my week was taking him, having him look into my eye and smile, and then nuzzle into my shoulder. A few precious minutes that grounded me in ways I can't describe - a real gift.

Interruptions can knock you off track or they can put you back on track. Interruptions can make us realize what's really important, what's really of value in our lives

I'm convinced that interruptions are gifts from God that open new doors for each and every one of us - a telephone call, a visit in the middle of

a crazy day, or the chance to hold a baby – anything that crops up in our life that changes us – they are all gifts from God. And they may well be opportunities for us to be gift bearers from God to each other.

So in your daily living look for the interruptions – and welcome them! Wake up every morning knowing that this day is a gift from God and be open for new and exciting ways to serve God. Expect the unexpected – may we walk with Jesus down new and wonderful roads – as individuals and as church. Amen!

Let us pray: You have given us dominion over all the earth, O God but we have misunderstood, thinking that the power placed in our care has meant we are the ones in charge. We have thought that your interruptions into our lives are obstacles to our progress, instead of seeing them for what they are – your hands at work and your design behind all things. Continue to come among us, disrupting and unsettling our plans, that we may know in the heart of every day that you indeed are God! In the name of your Son, our friend and teacher, Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.