
Interruptions

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Nativity of John the Baptist
Mark 5:21-24, 35b-43

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. - Mark 5.24

Take a close look at the gospel lesson for today.

You heard the story, or at least I hope you did. A leader of the synagogue, Jairus by name, appears before Jesus and beseeches Jesus to heal his daughter. Jesus sets out to do so, a great crowd follows him and presses in on him, and then someone comes up to say to Jairus, "Don't trouble Jesus any more. It's too late. It's over. Your daughter is dead."

Jesus overhears the remark, and says "Do not fear, only believe." What great words those are! They are the words of faith in every day and age, "Do not fear! Only believe!" Jesus takes with him Peter, James, and John. He enters the young girl's room and says "Talitha cum;" little girl, get up! She does, and the daughter is raised from the dead.

A great story, right?

But something is missing from the story we heard today. Something is missing! Look closely at your bulletins. Look at the chapter and verses of the gospel. The story we have just heard is described as Mark, chapter five, verses 22 through 24. Then it skips over to verse 35.

What happened to verses in between? What happened to verses 25 through 34?

Well, we missed them. We have missed the middle of the story. This is one element of our present biblical lectionary, that is our schedule of Sunday readings that I despise. We have cut out the middle of the story. We have cut out part of the story; somebody thought that section had nothing to do with the healing of Jairus's daughter.

So, today, I want to preach on that missing section.

It so happened that just after Jesus set out to follow Jairus, in order to heal Jairus's daughter, it so happened that Jesus was interrupted. He had just started his task, when he was interrupted.

Have you ever been interrupted? I have. I have, and for good reason. Just this week, I was all set to celebrate the Tuesday Eucharist at 12:15. I had what I considered a great sermon prepared. Then I got word that our dear friend and colleague, Judson Child, had been rushed back to the hospital. He was bleeding again. So I, too, left what I was doing, and I went to see him in the emergency room at St. Joseph's. Unlike Jesus, I did not heal his bleeding, but his good spirits actually encouraged me. It was an interruption. It was an interruption to what I had planned that day, but it was an important interruption, one that gave me grace.

My tendency is to not like interruptions. I get impatient, because I know -in the back of my mind-- that I have something else to do. And, it's true, sometimes the interruptions are not important. The Cathedral had a special visitor on Wednesday, a rabbi from one of our neighboring synagogues. He spoke during Wednesday lunch on how we are commanded, commanded, to keep the Sabbath rest. One of our questions was especially apt. One of the women in our parish asked, "What if you have an emergency? For example, what if something so simple as the hem on my dress comes out, and I have to fix it?"

The young rabbi reminded us that what we often think is an emergency is not one at all. 99% of what we think are emergencies are not emergencies. We do not have to jump at every interruption. His remark reminded me of a little sign that one of my assistants, years ago, kept on her office desk. She was one of my best assistants. The sign said, "Lack of preparation on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part."

What some of us think of as an emergency, or interruption, is not a crisis at all. Often, our decision should be simply to stay the course.

But the full gospel for today says that Jesus did not stay the course. We are missing from the gospel the middle part of Mark, chapter five. We are missing the interruption. In fact, just as Jesus set out to heal the synagogue leader's daughter, he was interrupted. This interruption, I believe, is the whole point of Mark chapter five, and we didn't even read it as the gospel!

So I am going to read it.

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages [bleeding] for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch the hem of his garment, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." (Mark 5.25-34)

That's the interruption! Then the story of Jesus healing Jairus' daughter resumes, as if nothing had occurred. We read the story earlier today as if this interruption had not occurred!

But it did occur. In fact, the same interruption occurs when Luke tells this story, and when Matthew tells this story. This story of Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus from the dead always includes the interruption, the healing of the woman who was bleeding, and who touched the hem of Jesus's garment! Ah! Sometimes touching the hem of a garment is indeed an emergency. Sometimes, when a person is bleeding, it is indeed an emergency.

This interruption is critical to Jesus' ministry. All of us are interrupted in life. Maybe it is a funeral. Maybe it's the funeral for a great mayor of Atlanta that takes up an entire Saturday when we planned to do something else. Maybe it's a parade. Maybe it's a parade that celebrates gay identity and stops traffic for a while. But the way we deal with interruptions in our lives is exactly what defines us. What about joining the interruption? "Life is what happens when you've made other plans." I forgot who said that; maybe John Lennon said it. "Life is what happens when you've made other plans."

Jesus was interrupted, and he took time to heal a bleeding woman. In fact, let me say that another way. He took time to let a bleeding woman touch him. A ritually unclean woman touched Jesus. Jesus, in turn, spoke words of healing and peace to her; "daughter, your faith has made you well." Jesus made time for the interruption, and he graced it.

Wonderful! Was everyone happy?

No.

No. While Jesus was interrupted, something terrible happened. As Jesus took extra time to care for the bleeding woman, the daughter of Jairus died.

Jesus took too long, didn't he? If he hadn't delayed, maybe he could have reached the daughter of Jairus earlier, right? He clearly had a task! He was off on his way to heal the sick daughter of Jairus! But he was interrupted by another pressing daughter, and he stopped for her instead. Then, as he continued on his way, there came from the ruler's house a group who said, "Do not trouble the Teacher any further. Your daughter is dead."

Imagine what Jairus must have felt. If Jesus had not stopped for that other person, maybe he would have reached my daughter in time! I came so close! I had the Teacher's attention and time, and then someone else stole it from me!

We have felt this way before, too, haven't we? I had it all planned out, and then someone interrupted me, took my time away, took my teacher away. Someone took my lord away, claimed from him something he was supposed to give to me!

I think there is a reason for Jesus' delay. There is a reason that Jesus continues to be interrupted in our lives. How long, O Lord, how long? Why doesn't healing happen when it is supposed to? Why doesn't Jesus show up when he promised he would? Jesus delays. Why does he let the press of the crowd interrupt him? We grow impatient, even angry.

Then, after all is lost Jesus shows up. It is when it looks as if our daughter has died, that Jesus shows up. Jesus shows up, not before we need him, but after we need him, after we've been interrupted, after death itself has interrupted life.

This story is about resurrection, and about a particular feature of resurrection. The resurrection overturns death. The resurrection overturns time. The resurrection reverses time. The resurrection acts as if time does not matter at all. In the life of Jesus, it does not matter who comes first, or who is healed before someone else is healed. The life of resurrection occurs outside time, and the resurrection gives us an identity that transcends time.

Time does not matter in the life of Jesus, and if time does not matter, then interruptions do not matter. Interruptions do not matter, in the time scheme of Jesus. There is no such thing as an interruption in Jesus' ministry. There is only the moment: the funeral when we weep and love, the parade when the crowd presses in, the moment of healing, the moment of glory, the moment of life.

It is the moment when we dare ask Jesus to heal. It is the moment that we dare to touch the hem of his garment. It is the moment when we dare to stop bleeding. It is the moment when we dare to let Jesus enter our room. It is the moment when Jesus touches a sleeping daughter. It is the moment when Jesus says, "Go in peace," and we dare to go out into the world.

None of this is an interruption. It is all the moment, the moment of healing, glory, and new life, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

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