



Sermon

Mark 5:21-43

The 4th Sunday after Pentecost / 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Historic St. George's United Methodist Church

Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Blessed Interruptions

Bishop Johnson paid a visit to St. George's this past week. Our new bishop, elected just a year ago, she's trying to get to know the 500 churches in the Eastern PA Conference. There's another 300 or so on her other circuit: the Peninsula Delaware Conference.

It was a good time and I'm pleased to say St. George's made a good impression.

Her visit reminded me of a time when, as District Superintendent, I took a new bishop on a 60 church, 3-day blitz through the Pennsylvania Anthracite region. In order to do this we held to a strict schedule: 7 am – 9 pm, 20 minutes per church. Interview questions were sent to pastors ahead of time so as to get right down to business with clergy, leaders and members assembled. At the fifteen minute mark I would give the bishop a cue prompting a quick prayer. Shake a few hands, move out the door, wave bye-bye and like Willie Nelson, it was "On the Road Again..."

I don't know what I would have done if the rookie bishop, traveling the desolate roads between Minersville and Miller's Crossroads with floating eye balls had said, "Fred, I really have to get to a rest room." Sorry, Bishop, it's not on the schedule.

I now realize we rode thru some of the most glorious and tragic Appalachian scenery in the entire state but only saw it buzzing by because to stop and take it in would have thrown us off task.

I understand how schedules and agendas become tedious, even oppressive. You do to. But to get to the place of recognizing interruptions as

blessings, bearers of the things of God – well that's more of a stretch.

I wonder if one of Jesus' disciples acted like as his administrative assistant or, a handler, like stars and politicians. I wonder if one of Jesus' inner circle kept him on track, on message, and on time.

Here's what I'm thinking. If Jesus did have a handler, pity the poor soul. He must have been frustrated about three hundred and fifty days a year.

I suspect today's gospel is fairly typical of time spent on the Jesus trail. Having calmed an angry sea (remember last week's furious storm) the master has a busy week ahead, a big preaching engagement in Nazareth. He needs some time to think about what he's going to say – hometown crowds can be brutal. To get to Nazareth the entourage will need to average about 3½ miles per hour, his assistant has it figured. They can make it by 6:15 or so.

Barely out of the boat, the leader of the local synagogue falls at Jesus' feet, begging for his daughter to be healed. Why does this always happen, his handler thinks? Darn. We've got to get going. He pulls Jesus by the arm to keep him moving along when out of nowhere a woman crawls through the crowd grabbing Jesus around the ankles. Where'd she come from? Double darn! Jesus assistant thinks. If he stops and helps this woman, then how can he not help the guy with the sick kid? Darn and double darn!

We'll never get out of here. And Nazareth can be a pain in the butt.

What to do? The guy with the sick kid is a community leader. Connections, pull, all that. The woman is a nobody. And worse, UNCLEAN as unclean can be. It was "her time of the month" except "the month" never ended, stretching into years of being held at arm's length, untouchable as a leper. She couldn't go near the synagogue. In her condition she wasn't supposed to be seen. It was miracle she was out and about at all.

She stalks Jesus. She crawls through the crowd with her head down. She grabs the hem of his robe.

"Who touched me?" Jesus says. His administrative assistant stiffens up. "We don't have time for this!" he says all sing-songy, struggling to smile, between clinched teeth, hoping no one will hear. The woman who has known only condemnation and scorn hears congratulations: "Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace, be healed."

Did you hear that, he called her "Daughter!"

"Let's get a move on," the handler says with the same smile, clenched teeth, now nodding, trying to get the other eleven to envelop Jesus, to move him on until some dreadful words stop them all in their tracks. "Forget about the little girl. She's dead."

Now Jesus' assistant is upset. So is the crowd gathered around all the goings on. Mr. Compassion has really blown it this time. He spent so much time with that sick-for-twelve-years complaining old nothing-of-a-woman that he's lost a twelve year old from one of the best families in town.

Another diversion. Jesus takes the father, mother, and three disciples to the little girl's house. They go inside. His poor handler is beside himself. Inside the mourners are wailing in agonized commotion. They laugh a cynical chuckle when Jesus says: "It's not too late. She's only sleeping.... "Little girl get up."

Jesus handler doesn't see any of it. His head is in his Blackberry looking for shortcuts on MapQuest. If we use the drive thru at Wendy's we can still make it to Nazareth before dark. When he hears Jesus say we're staying for dinner with the Jairus,' he loses it, "I can't take this anymore!" throws up his hands, jams the Blackberry in the holster and says, "I need to look for another job in this company. Managing Jesus is impossible!"

We know what it's like to use *To-Do* lists to navigate our days, on paper or in our minds. We have expectations for accomplishing this and that. This is not a bad thing, until these lists and expectations are based on an iffy assumption – *IF* nothing or no one gets in the way ... *IF* circumstances don't intervene ...

Yet, here's a bit of HOLY scripture that says we're blessed when we're interrupted. More than that: the interruptions ARE the ministry of Jesus, off-course IS where the ministry Jesus happens like with a dying daughter and a woman sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Here's a quote for your computer screen, bathroom mirror, refrigerator door or wherever you post things to remember. "You know my whole life, I've been complaining that my work was constantly being interrupted, until I realized the interruptions were my work," says Jesuit priest, teacher and devotional writer Henri Nouwen. (Reaching Out, pg.36)

To a person like me who sees the Almighty in perfect grids cut in lawns, who thinks a clean desk is necessary for proper concentration and believes "a place for everything and everything in its place" ought to be the 11th commandment, Nouwen echoes Jesus.

Oft times the most important things that happen in life come by way of interruptions. We can act as if God is in the plans more than the breakdowns but the opposite is more likely true.

Parents learn this: When they have the least time is exactly when their children will need them most. Likewise, parents learn it's their day-off, when they have time to play, their daughters or

sons are most likely to say: "Not know." Children refuse to allow parenting to be scheduled. God's children refuse the Lord just the same. So God makes interruptions blessed events.

Some of the most important experiences in friendships, memorable and cherished times of feeling love and support, come by way of unwelcome intrusion. What matters most is being there for each other in impossible to plan tragedies and joys. Teachers, social workers, counselors, helping professionals look back and don't remember days that went smoothly as much as the miracle of working through the messes.

I get blessed every time I read about Doctors Without Borders, how people with successful practices let their hearts be tugged like Jesus' hem; who interrupt careers to bring the grace of caring to immigrant children along some remote border, or to people dying of AIDs in Africa (like Dan), who take up residence in disaster areas for months working out of tin-roofed clinics. Or people like us who join Volunteers in Mission groups, allowing lives and comfort zones to be interrupted by glaring needs continents away.

The gospel today says God's touch is in the interruptions as often as the best laid plans and well programmed Blackberries. The gospel today says healing and awakening is in our DIS ease, doubt, diversion and obstruction as much if not more than rote repetition of sound doctrine. The journey is just as important as the destination!

On one of the stops on the Bishop's Blitz through the Anthracite District mentioned earlier, we came to a tiny church in a coal patch town. The front door was locked. It looked like no one was there. Darn, I thought, hoping the bishop wouldn't think his efficient superintendent had dropped the ball. We knocked. No one answered. Heck, we had a whole 20 minutes according to the schedule. Let's walk around and see what we find.

We went around back finding an open door leading through a dark, dank boiler room. We went in and wound our way to the kitchen where

some of the faithful were busy as work. They were startled and quite agitated by our appearance. "Who are you and how'd you get in here? (Bishop Weaver rarely wore a clerical collar.)

The church is closed." they said.

"Hi! I'm Pete Weaver, the new Bishop come to meet you."

They warmed up a bit.

At 15 minutes, the closing prayer, handshakes, waves and "On the Road Again," we looked back and saw the church sign in the rearview mirror. I won't name the church, but I will tell you what it said under the name. "The Friendly Congregation. *A Welcoming Church Family.*"

Except when interrupted, that is.

A woman sick and tired of being sick and tired, a child given up for dead, a fickle crowd, scheduled stops and one poor handler trying to keep everything on schedule. The gospel says the bridge over which grace travels is built of interference and interruption. When we lose sight of this we'll merely do that which we think is important, reliable, organized and punctual – but deep down isn't that at all.

God chuckles at the order we impose and is troubled to downright ticked-off when our agendas, time, and actions won't give way to hurting friends, broken homes, needy strangers, outcasts and untouchables.

Walk with Jesus and believe this: Little will go as planned.

Some days you just have to put your To-Do List aside or Blackberry in the holster and say: "Lord, when I got up this morning I said: 'This is the day the Lord has made. Let me rejoice and be glad in it!' This day is yours. Help me hold to that. Use me. Bless me. Especially when things get off track."

■■■ Amen ■■■