

“Interruptions”

Mark 5: 21-43

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Pastor Peter Hanson

Christ the King Lutheran Church

June 28, 2015

John Lennon is credited with saying “Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans.” Actually, it was someone else who said it first, cartoonist Allen Saunders, the creator of Mary Worth, Steve Roper and Mike Nomad. But no matter—John Lennon did say it, too, and made it much more famously well-known. “Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans.”

Have you found that to be true? Or how about this one—adapted from Robert Burns: “the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” We make our plans, make our lists, plan out our days, plot out our steps only to have something through a monkey wrench into it. All that planning soon goes awry. All that busy planning, and then life just interrupts us mid-plan and just... happens.

My favorite episode of the Simpsons is from one of the first seasons, probably twenty years ago now. Homer thinks he’s dying, having eaten the poison part of a blowfish at a sushi bar. So he makes a list of things to do—an emergency bucket list for his last day on earth. He’s got this whole list of things to get done in the 24 hours he’s been given to live. “Actually, 22 hours,” says the doctor, “sorry to keep you waiting so long. I love that the first thing on his check list is “make to do list,” which he quickly checks off. He had things on there like make a video tape for baby Maggie and teach Bart how to shave and other things he’ll need to know to be a man. One last beer at Moe’s, one last chance to tell off his boss, that kind of thing. But mid-way through the list, he gets to the item “make peace with dad,” and he goes to visit his father at the nursing home. His dad is so happy to see him, he begs him to stay around longer. And Homer can’t resist. Even though it’s interrupting his bucket list for his last day on earth, he spends hours with his dad, fishing, playing catch, building forts, wrestling in the mud, And we, the viewers, realize, as Homer does too, that some of the best things in our well-planned out life are its interruptions.

Well I can tell you, too, that some of the best ministry happens by interruptions. Those unexpected knocks at my open door, the phone calls or emails that interrupt the day I had set aside for writing a sermon. In fact, even Jesus was interrupted in the middle of some of his best ministry, and these interruptions led to even more good ministry opportunities for him.

Like in today’s gospel story: Jesus is summoned by Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. My daughter is ill, Jesus, near unto death. Come and see her, I know you can heal her, you can save her, you can make her well. The realities of life happen to Jairus and his family in spite of any and all plans he may have made for them. And so they set off towards Jairus’ house for him to do just that, the whole crowd tagging along, pushing and jostling him.

Now, in that crowd was a woman who had suffered a condition of hemorrhaging for twelve years. She had seen one doctor after another, each one treating her badly, taking all her money and leaving her worse off than before. But she, like Jairus, had heard about Jesus and wanted to see if he could heal her. So she squeezes her way in behind him, thinking, “if I can just get even one finger on his robe, I will get better.”

And guess what? It works! The moment she touches his robe, the flow of blood dries up. She feels the change and knows her plague was over. But—and here’s the weird, part, Jesus feels it too. Jesus feels the power going out from him. It’s weird, both because I can picture it like a static shock you get from dragging your feet on the carpet in the winter time, but also weird because this is not how we usually see Jesus healing people—with actual power, like electricity discharging from his finger tips or eyeballs from the hem of his robe. But he turns around and asks, “Who touched my robe?” To which his disciples—who always seem just a little clueless to what Jesus is talking about—say, “What are you talking about, Jesus? Everybody in this crowd is pushing and jostling you. Everybody is touching you!”

So the woman comes clean. Hmm. Let that turn of phrase sink in a bit. She comes clean, ‘fesses up to what she had done, that she had touched him, and kneeling before him in fear and trembling, she tells him her whole story.

Jesus says to her, “Daughter (He would have used the Aramaic word “talitha”) Daughter, you took a risk of faith, and now you’re healed and whole. Live well, be blessed, my daughter!” Ministry by interruption. Life not just happening, but he life being restored to its fullness while Jairus and Jesus and his disciples and the crowd were busy making other plans.

Of course, there is the down side to interruptions, too. Because having followed this detour, having taken the time to heal this woman, some folks come to Jairus and tell him his daughter has now died. “No need to trouble the teacher anymore,” they say.

But Jesus says, “Don’t listen to them; just trust me.” He is the king of ministry by interruption, after all. And so he ditches the crowd, he goes to the house, pushing their way through the gossips and busybodies, along with the well-meaning neighbors already bringing over their hotdishes.

Then Jesus again says something weird: “she isn’t dead; she’s just sleeping.” And so he sends them all out, and goes into her room with just her parent and his three followers. He takes the girl’s hand and says, “Talitha koum,” “Daughter, get up.” And she does. She starts walking around. And did I mention, this girl was twelve—she had been alive as long as the other woman had been sick. Now they’re both healed. Now they’re both restored. Now they’re both made whole. One healing interrupting the other, the two healings forever linked to one another as they are told and retold over time.

I have a friend named Faith, a classmate in seminary, who had had her call to ministry interrupted so many times already when I met her, and again after I got to know her. Faith's initial call to ministry was interrupted first by the unthinkable notion that women can't be pastors. Today it sounds so funny even saying it out loud, doesn't it? But when she was in High School in the 50s, even as the daughter of a Lutheran Pastor, it was a completely foreign concept. Whatever she felt as a call to be a pastor must have been something else, so she pursued other things. By 1970, when Lutherans started ordaining women, when her call suddenly didn't seem so weird, it was interrupted again, kept on hold by the fact that she was now busy raising a family—her own children as well as the children of her sister who had died tragically at far too young an age. She liked to tell me that she grew up with her kids—barely into her twenties herself suddenly raising teenagers in the 60s and 70s in San Francisco. Even when she found herself as an empty nester at a relatively young age, she suddenly had to care for her older husband in what turned out to be his terminal illness. When she finally got back to responding to the call that had been interrupted so many times, it was the fall of 1990—and we sat next to each other in our very first New Testament class, she the oldest in the class, and I among the youngest. In fact, she was only six months younger than my mom, although she had kids much older than I.

The first year or so of seminary were great for Faith—she thrived, was always near the top of the class, sang in the choir, was active in student government, was a star of the annual talent show, you get the idea. And the second year, too, went pretty well for her. But then, another interruption. Some things going on in the community around us, plus some new financial resources that became available to her began to tug her in a new direction. She felt called to honor her sister's memory by reaching out to women experiencing domestic abuse, and like that, she had put seminary on hold and founded a shelter and transitional home called Hope's Place. While the rest of her class went off to internship, then came back for a final year of classes, she spent this time getting this ministry up and running. Once it had found its feet and could function on its own, she returned to PLTS, to an internship in New York City, and finally to graduation and ordination, about three years behind most of the rest of us—becoming a pastor finally at 58. That was almost twenty years ago—and though she official retired at 75, she has not stopped. She's active as a chaplain, an advocate for women and children, an activist for gun control, a vocal ally for LGBTQ folks, a stirring preacher. Each of her many interruptions provided opportunities for rich, fulfilling ministries. Each of her detours brought her back stronger to what and who God in Christ Jesus was calling her to be. No surprise her name is Faith.

So pay attention to the interruptions. To the distractions. To the detours. To the way that God snaps us out of our well-laid plans and makes life happen. Makes ministry happen. Pay attention to them. They just might end up being life-giving, life-changing, life-saving interruptions. Thanks be to God. Amen.