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5th Sunday of Epiphany

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Interrupted”

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Mark 1:29-39

They As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Interrupted

In 2009, Taylor Swift won her first MTV Video Music Award. During her acceptance speech, Kanye West grabbed the microphone out of her hand. “I’m really happy for you,” he said to Swift, “and Imma let you finish, but” – and then he went on to claim that the one who actually deserved the award was Beyoncé. Everyone was stunned. Beyoncé shook her head in disbelief and disapproval. Many in the audience booed and then gave Swift a standing ovation when West gave her back the microphone and she meekly thanked her fans and MTV for the award before going backstage where she reportedly sobbed in her mother’s arms.

As monumental as that interruption was, no one could have predicted what it became – a turning point, not only for Taylor Swift, but for Kanye as well. He was so maligned that, for a time, he left the country and stopped making music. They both appeared on numerous talk shows to rehash the incident, and many say the music they are making now contains veiled and not-so-veiled – references to what happened that night and the drama that followed. As recently as 2016, seven years after the original incident, when Swift won the Grammy for album of the year, she took yet another shot at Kanye in her acceptance speech.

Not all interruptions in life are as literal or as public as that one, but we all know something about being interrupted. If we have siblings, we learned about interruption at an early age, as we competed to share our side of a story or defend our position to our parents. As we get older, we discover some interruptions are life-changing, like falling in love or getting divorced, becoming a parent, getting a job or losing a job, receiving a diagnosis that changes everything.

In today’s passage, we witness some of these life-changing interruptions. A woman who has been bed-ridden with a fever and fevers in the ancient world were often deadly – is healed and can immediately get up and tend to her work.

As word of Jesus’s healing powers spreads through the town, people of all sorts stop what they are doing to get themselves and anyone they know who is suffering to Jesus so that they can be made well. Wherever Jesus goes, big, life-changing interruptions follow.

But just like a couple of weeks ago when we heard the story of Jesus calling the first disciples, who dropped everything and everyone to follow him, these life-altering stories may not have much in common with our experiences of following Jesus. Few of us dropped everything to follow him or experienced a miraculous healing.

In this passage, what probably feels more familiar to us is **what happens to Jesus**. Jesus has had a very long day, a day that began with the story we heard last week, when Jesus and his disciples went to a synagogue on the Sabbath and Jesus taught everyone and then healed a man suffering from “an unclean spirit.”

Sounds like a successful day, but it’s not over yet. Jesus goes straight from the synagogue to the home of two of his disciples, where he heals a woman, eats a meal, and then discovers the whole city gathered at the door, begging him to heal whatever ails them.

It shouldn’t surprise any of us that after a day like *that*, Jesus goes looking for a place where he can get away from it all...but while he was in this deserted place praying, the disciples “hunted for him.”

The author doesn’t use the Greek word that means “to look for” or “to search.” The word used here is most often used to describe the pursuit of an enemy – “they stalked him” might be the most accurate translation.¹And they don’t come to check on him, to make sure he’s holding up okay, or to see if he needs something to eat.

“Everyone is searching for you,” they say. At the beginning of his ministry, with everything and everyone coming at him from all directions, with all kinds of needs, Jesus is trying to figure out how on earth to deal with it all – and how not to lose himself or his purpose along the way.

A friend recently sent me part of an essay written for *Time* magazine by a writer named Brigid Schulte. This is how it begins:

“One evening when my kids were young, I was outside weeding my infernal gravel yard that, if left untended, begins to look like a furry Chia Pet. They were bouncing with sheer delight on the trampoline. “Mommy, come jump with us!” they cried. “In a minute,” I kept saying. “Just let me finish weeding.” It was a time in my life when I used to routinely ask myself, “What do I need to do before I can feel O.K.?” And then I’d run through a never-ending mental list. That evening, with a familiar sense of vague panic rising, I felt compelled to finish at least one thing — the weeding — on that long, long list. Lost in my churning thoughts, I didn’t notice the sun go down. Or hear my kids go inside. When I looked up again, the sky was dark, the yard still covered in weeds, and I was alone.” Schulte continues, “... this is how it felt to live my life most days: scattered, fragmented and exhausting. I was always doing more than one thing at a time and felt I never did any one particularly well. I was always behind and always late, with one more thing and one more thing and one more thing to do before rushing out the door. Entire hours evaporated while I did stuff that “needed to

¹ D. Mark Davis, <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/02/the-holy-one-in-unholy-places.html>

get done.” But once I’d done it, I couldn’t tell you what it was I had done or why it seemed so important.”²

What Schulte describes is the nature of most of our lives: too much to do and not enough time to do it in. Even if we are no longer working or don’t have children at home, the sheer volume of information and opportunities available to us through modern technology makes us feel like we can never get to the end of the to-do list.

Today’s passage suggests that this is not a modern phenomenon just the result of ubiquitous access to the internet. In his very first full day of ministry, Jesus himself experiences the overwhelming sense that there is more to do than he can get done, more people in need than even the Son of God could ever fully attend to.

When I started my work as your pastor three and a half years ago, I noticed after a few months that I had gotten into a pattern. I would come to work each day with a list of things to get done. (I love a good to-do list.) But when the time came to go home, no matter how hard I had worked, there would be all these unfinished items on the list. I finally realized it was because I kept getting interrupted. Sometimes by a staff member with a question, sometimes by a phone call or an email, or sometimes when someone stopped by my office to talk.

When I complained about this to a friend, she asked me a question: is it people who are keeping you from your to-do list or your to-do list that’s keeping you from people? What she was really doing, of course, was gently nudging me to reconsider what matters most.

When the disciples disturb Jesus’s moment of quiet, notice what happens. Jesus responds by clarifying his purpose, and theirs. “No,” he tells them, “we are not going back. We’re going to keep moving. We’re going to go interrupt some other people’s lives. We’re going to keep sharing the gospel and telling the story of God’s love so that as many people as possible will get to hear it. Because that is what I’m here to do.”

That moment at the 2009 VMA awards when Kanye West interrupted Taylor Swift and she left the stage in tears, well, that wasn’t the last time Swift would take the stage that night. *Five minutes later*, she was back out there, performing live in front of millions of people. West’s interruption may have rattled her for a moment, but it did not detract from her clarity of purpose, from remembering what she was there to do.

It is always tempting to read stories about Jesus and think his capacity for knowledge and compassion and spirituality is far beyond anything we could hope to achieve. He was, after all, God incarnate, the divine in human flesh. But when we get too focused on Jesus’s divinity, we miss the opportunity to let him teach us

² Brigid Schulte, “I’ll Finish the Dishes When I’m Dead.” *Time*, April 4, 2014. <http://time.com/48975/overwhelmed-time-management-ill-finish-the-dishes-when-im-dead/>

what it means to be fully *human*. And to be human means that from time to time, trying attend to do all the things God has called us to do: tending our relationships, fulfilling our calling, accomplishing all the tasks of daily life and work, sometimes it will be totally overwhelming.

And when we are overwhelmed, interruptions, whether they come from a person or a circumstance, can leave us feeling frustrated and angry. But for Jesus, the disciples so rudely interrupting his moment of solitude becomes an opportunity, a chance to clarify what he is doing and why he is doing it. It becomes a chance to change direction.

Changing direction is the heart of the message Jesus came to deliver. His first sermon and summation of the whole gospel is “repent, believe the good news.” Repent – this word in Greek means, literally, *turn around*. But sometimes, to turn around, we first have to slow down, to stop moving so fast in one direction.

Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopalian priest who has spent much of her forty-year career teaching and writing about contemplative practices. In a recent interview, she recalled a question someone asked her: “How am I supposed to meditate when my one-year-old and four-year-old are bouncing around me and come flying into my lap?” She responded, “What if God loves you so much and so wants to send you God’s love that God has sent your children flying into your lap?”³

We spend so much time trying to figure out how to do it all and to do it all right, which tends to lead to that frenzied litany of one more thing and one more thing and one more thing. But God does not seem so worried about getting it right – whatever “it” is – and as for **doing it all**, well, even Jesus knew that was an impossible goal. After all, Jesus figured out after just one day that he was never going to be able to do it all, to heal every person who needed it, to explain all the nuances of the scripture and the law, to change the minds of all who doubted him. So when the disciples interrupted his solitude, he chose to attend to the people right in front of him and recommit to the work that God had called him to do.

We may not think of what we’re doing right now – of worship – as an interruption; in some way, it is the opposite – we come to worship like Jesus went to that deserted place, looking for a few moments of respite and a sense of God’s peace, a break from the inbox or the Twitter feed or the relentless news cycle.

But worship is also a kind of chosen interruption; I know you’re not here because you don’t have anything else to do. Coming here is a way of slowing down, reorienting to what matters, even changing direction. Today, in the midst of the interruption that is worship, God interrupts us yet one more time, at this table, with this meal. Here, God’s love for us becomes tangible in bread and cup and the

³ <https://thomasjbushlack.com/new-podcast-contemplate-interview-cynthia-bourgeault/>

reminder that no matter how well we have managed all the things on our lists, God meets us, God feed us, God nourishes us.

In this interruption of our usual routine, may we receive God's overwhelming love as it comes flying our way, in these most unassuming elements. May it stop us in our tracks, remind us what matters most, and strengthen us for every step of the journey.

Amen.