

## The Gift of Interruptions

Mark 5:21-43

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
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### I

When you get in the car to go on vacation,  
why is there always one person who is the compulsive clock-watcher?

Why is there always someone whose sole purpose in life is to keep everyone  
on schedule?

It might be the husband...  
it might be the wife...  
or it might be one of the kids.

If you leave at 6:00 am and your destination is, say, 500 miles away, then if  
you average 60 miles an hour you will be traveling exactly 8.33 hours.

In order to average 60 miles an hour,  
every meal must be a drive-through.

Gas station stops must be no more than nine minutes.

This schedule will get you to your destination by 2:30 p.m.—  
give or take a few minutes.

But an unscheduled bathroom stop will put you five to seven minutes behind  
schedule.

You know you are the clock-watcher in your car if someone asks,  
“Could we stop and look at the beautiful view?”  
and your response is  
“We don’t have time.”

People whose lives are dominated by schedules and agendas find nothing  
more threatening than an interruption.

It must be hard for them to think of an interruption as a gift of God.

## II

Today I imagine one of the disciples we seldom hear about, like Bartholomew, is in charge of Jesus' schedule.

Bartholomew was frustrated every day for three years.

His job is to keep Jesus on track—but Jesus won't be confined by clocks, agendas, schedules.

Not even Bill Clinton's schedule maker has it this bad.

On the occasion of today's gospel lesson, Jesus is tired.

He has just calmed an angry sea and delivered a poor soul of a host of demons.

He also has a busy week ahead, beginning with a preaching engagement in his hometown of Nazareth.

When they get off the boat, Bartholomew looks at his watch and feels confident.

They have more than enough time to get to Nazareth.

They need to average about three and a half miles an hour.

Bartholomew figures they will get there at 6:15—  
give or take a minute or two.

But no sooner has Jesus set foot on land than the pastor of a local congregation falls at Jesus' feet and begs him to come and heal his daughter.

Bartholomew looks at his watch again.

Why does this always happen?

Jesus is always willing to be distracted.

Jesus no sooner gives in to this interruption,  
when a woman pushes through the crowd and grabs Jesus' coat.

Everyone can see how busy Jesus is.

If he stops to help this pushy woman,  
it will not only set a bad precedent,  
but it may endanger Jairus' daughter.

Jesus needs to hurry; the little girl may die.

Some people in the crowd think:

“At least Jairus is a minister. That gives him some justification for interrupting, but this woman...she's a nobody.”

### III

Can we not sympathize both with the man whose 12-year-old daughter is deathly ill **and** with the woman who has suffered in isolation for 12 years?

Any parent who has ever sat up all night with a sick child knows the fear this father must have felt.

And who can not feel compassion for a woman victimized by a health-care system that puts profits over people?

Mark says that she has endured much under many physicians.

Doctors keep taking her money for unsuccessful remedies.

She lives on a roller coaster of renewed hope and crushing disappointment as the specialists keep writing new prescriptions.

The Jewish Talmud describes eleven different cures for this woman's disease.

Some were tonics that may have actually worked;  
others were superstitious remedies.

One was to drink a goblet of wine containing a powder made up of rubber, alum, and garden crocuses.

Another was to carry the ashes of an ostrich egg in a linen bag through the summer.

Even with these creative remedies, she did not get better.

With the doctors' help, she got worse.

It's not surprising that when Luke, a physician, tells this same story he chooses not to mention the role of the medical profession.

From the Jewish point of view, no disease could have been more humiliating than a constant menstrual flow.

According to the Hebrew book of Leviticus,  
this woman is permanently unclean.

The Jewish historian Josephus reports that the outer court was open to all persons, foreigners included;  
only women during their impurity were refused entrance.

Not only is this woman unclean,  
but everyone with whom she comes in contact is also unclean.

She should not have been in the crowd.

She is as untouchable as a leper.

**But she is desperate.**

Millions of dollars are spent each year on quack medical cures.

One hundred fifteen years ago the snake-oil salesmen went from town to town selling their miracle concoctions out of the backs of wagons.

Now they go on Dr. Oz.

The rumor of some new experimental drug,  
herbal remedy,  
or dietary supplement  
spreads like wild fire through the ranks of frightened people.

This desperate woman has heard rumors about a prophet who heals the hurting.

She quietly, but urgently, stalks Jesus through the crowd,  
pressing her way through the throngs of admirers.

She reaches out and grasps the hem of his robe.

Jesus asks, “Who touched me?”

To the disciples, it’s a foolish question, since Jesus is being mobbed by a large crowd of people.

But Jesus can discern the touch of faith amidst the jostling of the crowd.

The woman comes before Jesus, and she is terrified.

She wishes she had stayed at home in bed.

But instead of condemnation she hears congratulations:

*“Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”*

#### IV

Poor Bartholomew: he just wants Jesus to get a move on.

How are they ever going to get back on schedule if Jesus gives in to every interruption?

If they let one more hysterical father or pushy woman elbow their way in, they will never get to Nazareth on time.

The crowd might have been impressed with Jesus for his willingness to be interrupted by this pathetic woman...

were it not that, in doing so, Jesus loses Jairus’ daughter.

The servants don't mince any words,  
 "Don't bother coming now. The girl's dead."

Something about the way they announce the death makes you think they almost said it with perverted glee:

*"See? Your daughter is dead. Mr. Compassion really blew it this time. Jesus spent so much time with that poor, sick-for-twelve years complaining woman that he lost this twelve-year-old girl from a prominent family."*

Henry Nouwen once said that when pastors lose sight of the utterly essential, they will merely do that which is very important.

What Nouwen says applies to all Christians.

It is good for us to make time to help people,  
 to lay aside our schedules to spend an hour with a troubled teenager,  
 or an afternoon visiting a nursing home resident.

Think of the good that we do.

But think of all the bad that we do as well—  
 the people we neglect  
 and the needs that go unmet  
 through our unwillingness to be interrupted.

When they finally get to Jairus' house, mourners are crying loudly.

When Jesus approaches, they crank it up a notch.

They laugh at the idea of Jesus doing anything to make a difference.

Jesus puts all the mourners out of the house and takes the father, mother and three of his disciples inside.

Taking the girl by the hand, he says, "Get up, little girl."

Immediately the girl rises from her death bed.

Mark uses the same Greek word that he will later use of Jesus rising from the dead.

Bartholomew is outside thinking,

“If we leave in five minutes and go through Wendy’s drive-through,  
we can still make it to Nazareth.”

Jesus announces, “We’re staying for dinner.”

Bartholomew takes off his watch and puts it in his pocket.

## V

Friends, we all have agendas and we all have schedules to keep.

Some of us wouldn’t know how to get through the day without a list of things to do.

We know what we will accomplish if no one gets in our way.

And yet, if we are at all fortunate, people keep interrupting.

You’ve heard the saying: “Life happens when you’re making plans.”

Every day you and I have to decide if our time will be spent  
on the plans we have made,  
or on the interruptions that threaten those plans.

Before you say, “I don’t have time for that,”  
slow down enough to make sure  
that you don’t turn down chances to do good  
for that which is less worthy.

We plan our lives so carefully and interruptions can be so disconcerting.

But if we are going to serve God,  
we have to be willing to be interrupted.

The disciples may have wondered... “How is the Teacher ever going to teach us anything if he gives in to every interruption?”

**But a fear-stricken father  
and a long-suffering woman  
are the teachings of Jesus.**

**Interruptions are the ministry of Christ  
and of everyone who follows Christ.**

Opportunities to serve seldom come at the most opportune moments.

Interruptions,  
interference,  
intrusions...  
these are the stuff of Christian discipleship.

You and I have a choice:

We can refuse to give in to the inconveniences of broken schedules.

We can decide that we won't be interrupted.

We can stick to our list of things to do until we no longer notice that people have stopped asking for our help.

Or...we can follow the example of Jesus,  
who was willing to be interrupted  
to bring hope and healing  
to a pair of desperate souls.

We can embrace the gift of interruptions by recognizing that  
most of the time the most fruitful,  
productive,  
and grace-filled moments in our lives  
are the ones we didn't plan on.

When teachers look back on their careers,  
they don't remember days when everything went smoothly.

They remember the interruption of a frustrated student, asking for help, and then challenging and inspiring that student to work through the problem.



## VI

Brett Younger writes, *the bridge over which grace passes is often a bridge built out of an interruption.*

When we lose sight of the utterly essential,  
we will merely do that which is important.

It is important to earn a living,  
to be reliable,  
organized  
and punctual.

But it is essential that when crucial moments appear,  
we comfort the hurting,  
listen to the lonely,  
and speak words of hope to the despairing.

If you want an organized, orderly life, you can surely have it.

You can act as if God is in your plans and never in your interruptions,  
even though...the opposite is more likely to be true.

God doesn't seem to care much for our attempts to impose order on our lives.

God does seem to think that it's more important that we see that along our journey there are hurting friends,  
broken homes,  
and needy strangers  
for whom we must not be too busy.

**If we walk with Jesus, things will never go as planned.**

**Some days we'll just have to put our watches in our pockets and follow him!**

Amen.

Sources: Dennis Smith and Michael Williams, *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible*, Vol. 9, p. 95.

William Willimon, "Ready for Interruptions," *The Christian Century*, May 29-June 5, 1991, p. 587.

Brett Younger, sermon in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. XX, No. 4, June-July 2009, pp. 34-36, 28.