

Sermon on Mark 5:21-43
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 28, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

From time to time, I am reminded of how important life's interruptions are. For we go, along day to day, sometimes sailing along just fine and sometimes we're just in a rut. Everything is going along according to schedule, just as we planned – or not! Then something happens that totally interrupts our chain of thought, which maybe startles us, grabs our attention and takes us away from what we are doing. The telephone rings. A baby cries. Thunder crashes amidst a quiet rainfall. A shot rings out. Sound familiar? Whatever you were thinking or doing is lost, and your attention is totally on something else. It could be a relief, but more likely it's very annoying.

I was in a pastor's leadership workshop once many years ago where the presenter (an African American pastor from Brooklyn, New York) told us about all the interruptions to his plans and ministries to grow his congregation, from people coming in off the street to ask for the pastor, to the phone call from the church member who "just wanted to talk", to the person who urgently needed help. How could he get anything done with all these interruptions, he wondered. But then it came to him, and once he realized the truth, he told us to our faces: "*My brother and sister pastors – your interruptions ARE your ministry!!!*" Ain't it the truth! And it's the same for you, as well as me (not just pastors – this is true for any follower of Christ!) Whatever plans you have made, whatever agenda or schedule of appointments you have made, the interruptions that come to us through real human beings, and how we respond to them, that is our ministry, that is our witness, as we respond with irritation, with anger, with impatience, or with grace and love to the person, to the crisis, or the urgent need that is now before us. For the surprises offer us an opportunity to respond naturally, without a plan, and they reveal so much about our character, whether we like it or not! Sometimes we don't do so well – maybe we snap! But sometimes we shine, and may make God smile!

Soon the presidential campaign season will be upon us again (I know YOU are so looking forward to it!). There are always schedules and plans that the handlers and campaign managers make for the candidates, and usually they follow the script. But sometimes somebody gets in the room – a heckler, perhaps – and shouts out a challenge to the candidate. We can see how badly some candidates react, arguing with the heckler, or sometimes they engage respectfully with the interrupter, disarming them and the crowd with graciousness. Often President Obama has shined in such moments, showing great patience, letting a heckler say their peace, and then moving on. It's really an art, to do that well. Last week the

President was addressing a crowd in the White House, at a reception for Pride Month, when a woman shouted out for LGBTQ immigrants to be released from detention centers. The crowd shouted at her to be quiet, and President Obama also told her to stop talking, or she'd be removed. No one in the Pride Month reception crowd wanted to hear her, so she was removed from the room.

This was probably not the proper place for her to make a speech – in the White House, interrupting the President of the United States. She shouldn't have interrupted the President like that. But the next day the woman was interviewed, and she told the story of how many transgender immigrants are detained or deported, when they have committed no crime, and the terrible things (such as rape) which happens to transgender prisoners in detention. I was personally unaware of the magnitude of the problem, which I never would have known if this transgender woman hadn't interrupted the President of the United States. Sad, but true.

It reminds me of a story in the Bible, when Jesus was walking along the road and a woman called out to him, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" She was not of the same faith as Jesus – she was a Syro-Phoenician woman – so it was very out of place for her to speak to him or her to him, but still, Jesus stopped what he was doing to talk with her. So, EVEN JESUS was interrupted – all the time!!!

Last week we heard how Jesus crossed the sea in a boat with his disciples – when a storm interrupted the journey, scaring the disciples to death! They awoke the sleeping Jesus (interrupting his sleep!), so he stood up and commanded the wind and waves to be still. When the storm ceased, he asked them, "*Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*" But no sooner had Jesus passed over to the other side and stepped out of the boat, than a man who was possessed by thousands of demons interrupted his plans by running up and kneeling before him, asking "What have you to do with me? Have you come to torment me?" So Jesus commanded the unclean spirits to come out of the man, and he sent them into a herd of swine, who immediately stampeded into the sea to their deaths. The demoniac was cured and sitting calmly, but the people of the town were afraid, and asked Jesus to go back home. So Jesus got back into the boat and left. We skipped that story in our lectionary – we won't be hearing about it today!

Today in the gospel lesson we hear of two persons who interrupted Jesus with their urgent requests. So we pick up Jesus' journey as he came back across the sea and landed again, and a great crowd gathered. But before he was able to say anything, the leader of the local synagogue, named Jairus, came up to Jesus and knelt before him. He was desperate. His little daughter was very ill, and on her death bed. Would Jesus come to lay his hands on her, and save her from death? Of course he would, so Jesus went with him to his house.

Then Jesus is interrupted AGAIN – as he walks to Jairus's house, followed by the crowd who had come to meet him, and as the crowd pressed in on him, a

woman touched him. She had been suffering from excessive bleeding – which hadn't stopped for twelve years. None of her physicians had found a way to help her – and now she was out of money and desperate (I think this is an all-too common experience for too many in this world!). The woman thought if she could only touch Jesus' robe, perhaps she would be healed. So she did. Immediately her bleeding stopped! But Jesus felt the power come out from him. *"Who touched me?"* Jesus asked. Nobody knew – but the woman fell down on her knees before Jesus and said, "It was I who touched you." Jesus didn't scold her. He said, *"Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace, and be healed of your disease."*

Then Jesus was interrupted as yet AGAIN by the people who came from Jairus' house with the bad news, that Jairus' daughter had died. It was too late, they said. But Jesus said, "Do not fear, but believe!" When they got to the house, they found people in turmoil, grieving that the girl was dead. Still Jesus said, "She's not dead, but only sleeping!" And the people laughed at him. But when Jesus went up to the girl's bedroom, he took her head in his hands and told her to get up. And the little girl awoke, to the amazement of everyone.

You see, people interrupted Jesus all the time, and look what happened! Miracles occurred! Lives were changed – and saved! Not that we can do miracles every time we are interrupted (that's not my point)! The point is that miracles can and do happen when we respond to the interruptions in our own lives with faith, seeking to follow Jesus in what we say and do. We don't tell crying babies who interrupt the quiet of church to be quiet (even though we try) – we let their parents care for them, or if needed, ask what we can do to help! There are many more examples of more urgent interruptions in life, when we must put down what we are doing and respond. When we do so with love and grace, it is a witness to God!

So, how are you doing with the interruptions in YOUR life? Are they always an irritation, setting you "off course"? Or are they sometimes an opportunity for your witness of faith? I hope you can see them as possible opportunities for ministry!

Last week there was a terrible interruption to the prayer service at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. While the rest of us were going about our lives, and the church was in prayer, a young man entered the church looking for the pastor, who welcomed him into their bible study. Suddenly the young man stood up, shot the pastor and killed nine people in that church. It was a terrible shock to our whole nation, that a young white man would be so filled with hatred that he would enter an African American church and kill the people inside at prayer. It was so traumatic that it makes the world stop and look.

So how do we respond to such an interruption? The families of several of the victims have responded with great and awesome grace, not returning the

shooter's hatred with hate, but with forgiveness and love – even in their grief. The rest of us have been forced to look deeper into ourselves, to wonder where such hatred comes from, and why it is that our nation has been afflicted with the evil of racism and the injustice, violence, and poverty that are its consequences. The race war that the shooter deluded himself into thinking he could start, hasn't happened. Instead there has been forgiveness and faith expressed in black churches, and a whole lot of repentance and introspection happening in white churches, and in all kinds of churches and houses of worship in other faiths, people are praying to ask God for guidance, and talking to each other. We are seeing the battle flags of the Confederacy coming down – those symbols of racist violence in the South – and who knows? This may even restart a serious conversation about gun violence in this country – starting in faith communities and houses of worship – resulting in actions which will lessen the carnage from guns that is an epidemic in the U.S. If we are serious, we may actually come together and reconcile over our differences about guns and race in America – all because we have been interrupted – shocked out of our complacency – by this senseless, violent act that happened in a small but beloved AME church in Charleston! Wouldn't THAT be an amazing turn!

Perhaps some people will laugh at such hopes for racial reconciliation and an end to gun violence. Maybe it is impossible – but not by faith! People laughed at Jesus when he said that little girl wasn't dead, she was only sleeping! Maybe Jesus could say the same about us! We're not a violent, racist people – we have only been asleep in our faith regarding such things, and we can wake up from this! All we need is sufficient interruption, and the strength of our faith in God! Maybe this interruption will do it – or at least give grace a start! A movement in Civil Rights was once started by one woman who refused to move from her seat in the front of a bus, so I think a movement can be built from the death of nine faithful Christians in their church – when people have faith, hope, and love – for God, and for each other. Faith leaders from around the country were gathered last Friday in Charleston to honor the memory of Pastor Clementa Pinckney and to pray for healing and for faith. Let us pray that this terrible tragedy – this violent interruption to so many people's lives – will turn our attention toward God, and pray for the power of faith to heal the wounds and differences between us, so that we may all have life – together – in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Let us pray... We pray to you, almighty God, in this time of conflict and sorrow. You are our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Do not let us fail in the face of these events. Uphold us with your love, and give us the strength we need. Help us in our confusion, and guide our action. Heal the hurt, console the bereaved and afflicted, protect the innocent and helpless, and deliver any who are still in peril, for the sake of your great mercy in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.