

Life's Interruptions: Moments of Grace

Mark 5:21-43
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Today's Gospel reading is a tale of two healings. It involves a story within a story, a common literary device used by the gospel writer, Mark. One story begins but is then interrupted to tell another, followed by the conclusion of the first story. The author intends the stories to be taken together instead of separately. We are meant to compare similarities and differences, using each story to guide our interpretation of the other. Let's recap.

We are introduced to Jairus, one of the respected leaders of the local synagogue, a Jewish place of worship. Jairus falls at Jesus' feet and begs him to come and lay hands on his daughter, who is near death, so that she may be made well. Jesus consents. Any parent, of course, can identify with his pain and panic at the prospect of losing a child.

While on their way, a large crowd follows them. This is when we are introduced to a woman who has been hemorrhaging (bleeding) for twelve years. According to Jewish law, this made her ritually unclean. Thus, she suffered not only physically but socially as well. She has seen many physicians over the years. But after spending all of her financial resources her condition only grew worse. Believing she could be made well if she but touches Jesus' clothes, she comes up behind Jesus she touches his cloak. She is healed immediately. Again, this would have entailed not only a physical healing, but a restoration to her religious and social community, thus an emotional as spiritual healing, as well.

Jesus then stops to engage the woman in conversation, spending time to listen to her story. But they are interrupted when some people from Jairus' house come and report, "Your daughter is dead." When they finally arrive at the home, Jesus tells the mourners that the child is not dead but sleeping. Jesus takes the hand of the twelve-year-old girl and says "Little girl, get up!" She immediately gets up and begins to walk about.

Now, as far as interpreting the meaning of these stories and applying them to our own lives, let me begin with a warning. The point is *not* that if we have enough faith then we can be cured of anything and everything that ails and afflicts us. What we miss in the English is that the Greek word translated as 'made well' comes from the same root word as 'to save.' **Theologically, there is a world of difference between being 'saved,' or 'made well,' or even 'healed,' and being 'cured,' which unfortunately is how many people interpret this passage.**

When I pray for the healing and wholeness of someone in need, I mean to incorporate emotional and spiritual well-being, knowing that a medical physical cure may or may not be possible. While some cures are indeed miraculous, I find it unwise, and often spiritually unhealthy, for us to put hope in 'miracle' cures. Why? Because when there isn't a cure, which is often the case, we tend to blame ourselves for not having *enough* faith. **Being made well and healed of what ails us physically, emotionally, and spiritually, most**

often has more to do with acceptance and perseverance than it does will a complete alleviation of that ailment. I learned this years ago when praying for my father, who eventually passed away from melanoma cancer, and my mother, who eventually passed away from complications due to Alzheimer's. There was no miracle cure. **Insisting, therefore, that having enough faith will lead to a medical physical cure is theological nonsense – it is oppressive theology from which we need to be freed.** So, let's take a different approach.

It is crucial that we notice the contrast between the main characters in these two stories. Jairus, as a male and a leader of the synagogue, was a respected religious official. He was a person of privilege and honor. The woman, on the other hand, is a person on the extreme margins of society – a poor nameless woman who is ritually unclean because of her bleeding, and thereby vulnerable, ostracized, isolated, and alienated from the synagogue and her own community. Upon comparison, we recognize there are social justice issues involved. And yes, **Jesus attends to both.** Blogger and poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes, on his website unfoldinglight.net, reflects the comparison in his poem entitled, **Daughter.**

*A ruler, privileged, Jairus by name,
requests of Jesus healing for his daughter
by honor's protocol and a father's care.*

*A woman—a woman—poor, without name,
powerless, isolated by disease
and impoverished by quacks,
does not ask but steals up behind Jesus.*

*Her improper, unworthy larceny he honors,
as generously as the proper.
He tends, as the privileged waits.
He relates, where disdain has failed her,
and in a gift perhaps greater than cure,
claims her, cares for her as his daughter.*

*There is no rule he won't break to heal her,
no ranking, first or last,
he won't subvert to include her.*

*Check the lie that you are unworthy.
Your inadequate plea opens his heart.
He claims you. More than flesh is healed.*

*Who is she, where do you see her,
hidden in the crowd?
Who will plead for her?*

Who are those outcasts at the fringes of our society that we might serve as agents of Jesus' healing and wholeness, those who long to be made well? Perhaps the author of this gospel is trying to reveal to us that **the needs of the marginalized and vulnerable are as important to address, if not more so, than the needs of the privileged and powerful.** That was one of the reasons why about a dozen of us College Hill folks attended a rally

yesterday at the David L. Moss Criminal Justice Center (the Tulsa County jail). It was sponsored by Dream Act of Oklahoma (DAOK). **Over 300 people gathered to protest the separation of families at our southern border, and that our jail, with the support of our local government, is allowing ICE to house and detain, for a profit, over 200 individuals recently separated at the border. We, as a community should not be contributing to this immoral policy!** One sign read, "Who Would Jesus Separate?" and another, "What would Mr. Roger's Do?"

There's one more point that I want to make about this story within a story. Jesus' disciples, and probably Jairus, the sick girl's father, saw Jesus' intentional delay to stop and help the hemorrhaging woman as an **interruption** to Jesus' *primary* agenda, which was to heal the sick young girl. We can imagine the desperate impatience of the father when Jesus stopped to see who had touched him. Should not have Jesus, if sensitive to the father's anguish, simply pressed on? Should not have Jesus been content with the knowledge that the woman was healed, instead of taking valuable time to initiate a personal connection, a conversation, and an affirming relationship?

The issue of what to do with interruptions while already engaged in pressing matters offers food for thought to busy people like you and me. How often do we interpret interruptions in our daily life and routines in a less than positive and joyous way, as something that keeps us from accomplishing *our* agenda? I think we have something to learn from Jesus' approach in how to deal with life's interruptions. A wise university professor once remarked, "You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that **my interruptions were my work**" (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, p. 36). That teacher was Catholic priest Henri Nouwen, a former Notre Dame and Harvard University professor, and a prolific writer in the area of Christian spirituality. I first read this statement by Nouwen back when I was in seminary and have taken it to heart in my own approach to ministry. **To this day when someone drops by my study here at the church, or calls me on the phone, and begins with "sorry to interrupt you," I recall Nouwen's words and remind myself, "interruptions are my work."**

Sure, for all of us stuff needs to get done, but ultimately, stuff is not more important than people! That's being **mindful** of what's happening in our life at that very moment, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Perhaps this bit of wisdom can be helpful to you when your daily routine is interrupted – whether it be by a fellow worker, a neighbor, a friend, or a church member. The interruption may come by way of one of your children, or by one of your parents, for that matter. An interruption in our daily living may even come by way of a complete stranger. That's often the case for me when someone rings the church doorbell. **In the long run, we may even find that the interruption itself becomes of greater consequence than what we were doing in the first place.**

Jesus, who is repeatedly interrupted, reminds us that sometimes we have to step back from the big picture, and our own busyness, and focus on the individual. And remember, like the woman whom Jesus stopped and healed, **no one, including you or me, is an 'interruption' to God.** May that be our approach to others, as well. **For perhaps the interruption itself is the work that God would have you and me attend to at that very moment. That interruption can indeed become a moment of grace.**

Amen.