Don’t Miss Your Chance to Dance

Turning interruptions into moments of grace.

*Mark 5:21-43 Rev. Todd B. Freeman*

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Our lives, especially our daily routines, will most likely never be quite the same as they were before the COVID-19 pandemic disoriented us over the past 15 months. **Life as we knew it, to put it most simply, was interrupted.** In response, many of us had to put into place or learn new coping mechanism skills in order to effectively deal with all those interruptions, and with varying degrees of success. So many things had changed, especially because of necessary isolation and the extra-close proximity with those within our own protective bubble. The theme of today’s sermon, whose title I would like to rename, “Don’t Miss Your Chance to Dance”, (which I will explain later) addresses **how we react and adjust to interruptions in our lives**.

Most of us were raised to concentrate on being well-organized, to plan out our days in order to make the most effective use of our time. I would venture to guess most of us have a planning calendar of some kind. I sure do, and I often find myself penciling in times to not plan anything. But just how often do our days unfold *not* according to our well-planned out schedule? While often approaching interruptions from either as a bit annoying to a much more dramatic internal and external reaction, those **detours and unexpected demands hold the potential to become the most rewarding and perhaps transformative moments of our day**.

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 field of Christian spirituality. I first read this statement by Nouwen back when I was in seminary, 30 years ago, and have taken it to heart in my own approach to ministry. To this day when someone rings the church doorbell, or 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.”

Yes, **sometimes what renders our days most effective is our ability to see the hand of God, God’s Sacred Presence, in the unscheduled needs of other people**. And many of us have learned, often out of necessity, to be a bit more flexible over the past year when it comes to trying to stick to our scheduled plans. **Those interruptions, therefore, often become sources of blessings and grace – for both ourselves and others**.

This understanding is expressed in and through today’s Gospel reading, which is actually a tale of two healings. It involves a story within a story, a common literary devise used by the gospel writer, Mark. Some call it a “Markan Sandwich.” 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 12 year old 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 – the entire life span of the young girl. According to Jewish law, this made her ritually unclean. Thus, she suffered not only physically but also as a social outcast. 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 and touches his cloak. She is healed immediately. Again, this would have entailed not only a physical healing, but also a restoration to her religious and social communities, thus an emotional as spiritual healing, as well.

Interestingly, however, 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 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, *sozo*, translated as ‘made well’ comes from the same root word as ‘to save,’ or ‘rescue.’ Theologically, there is a world of difference between being ‘saved,’ or ‘made well,’ or “rescued,’ 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 may indeed seem 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.** That was the case for many before the COVID vaccines were developed. **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 with a complete alleviation of that ailment.**

So, let’s take a different approach. It is crucial that we notice the contrast between the main characters in these two stories. Jairus, who is named in this story, and 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 – she is unnamed, a poor woman who is ritually unclean because of her bleeding, and thereby vulnerable, ostracized, isolated, and alienated from both her religious and social communities.

Upon comparison, we recognize **there are social justice issues involved**. And yes, Jesus, being Jesus, attends to both. As always, we need to ask and reflect upon those who are considered outcasts at the fringes of our society, those that we might serve as agents of Jesus’ healing and wholeness, those who long to be made well? Those of us who participated in the Tulsa PRIDE Parade yesterday recognized many, many who experienced healing and wholeness in and through that inclusive, affirming, and loving event.

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. Jesus’ disciples however, and certainly 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. Sure, our stuff needs to get done, but ultimately, **that problem to solve is often not more important than people to be loved**! That’s being mindful of what’s happening in our life at that and every moment: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Perhaps this bit of wisdom can be helpful to you when your daily routine is interrupted.

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**.

To put an exclamation point on all of this, I want to read a post from blogger, author, and activist John Pavlovitz, who was our Harold E. Hill Lecture Series speaker here in this sanctuary a few years ago. Entitled, *Dancing With My Daughter*, he posted this three years ago, back on March 15, 2018.

**Dancing With My Daughter**

[MARCH 15, 2018 /](https://johnpavlovitz.com/2018/03/15/dancing-with-my-daughter/)[JOHN PAVLOVITZ](https://johnpavlovitz.com/author/johndpav/)

I was really busy last night.

As usual, I’d piled far too much on my plate and found myself at the end of another day; hovering over a screen and keyboard, feverishly typing, furrowing my brow—and feeling annoyed at the seemingly insurmountable, important things still unfinished.

My 8-year old came bounding into the room (which in itself felt like an interruption at first). I answered her succession of rapid fire questions abruptly without looking up—hoping she’d get the hint that I was preoccupied and stop asking.

She didn’t.

Then she said that she’d set up a light show in her room and asked if I’d have a dance party with her.

For a split second I considered declining and excusing myself; telling her how much work I had to do and how tired I was, and promising her we could do it another time.

Then it occurred to me that she didn’t want to dance another time. She wanted to dance with me *now.*

I realized that there are a finite number of times I’ll get such an invitation—and I’d never again get *this* one.

I knew I’d never be face to face with this specific version of my daughter; at this precise age, in this exact moment, offering this once-in-History chance to dance with her.

And boy, did we dance.

There in the rainbow strobe lights of her room we twirled and giggled and spun; each taking turns prompting the other to follow. We banged on drums and tossed stuffed animals and jumped off the bed. I felt my brow unfurrow and my jaw soften and my anxiety subside in the presence of this undeniable joy.

I looked into my daughter’s eyes as she bounced wildly in front of me, her face beaming. I could see that this was all she wanted in the world right now; to dance with her Daddy—and I was grateful that I stopped the world so that I was there with her. I was glad I didn’t get fooled into believing there was anything else more pressing, more urgent, more important than that moment. I’m glad I didn’t miss this chance to dance.

This morning my daughter is different. She is a day older today, imperceptibly changed.

There’s no guarantee she’ll ever ask me to dance again. This is how the last times with our kids are (the last tuck-ins, the last fort builds, the last dance parties, the last throw and catch.) You only realize they were the *lasts,* as you look back and miss them and wish you had one more chance to say yes.

I really hope my daughter asks me to dance again, but even if she doesn’t—I said yes this time.

Parents, our days with our kids are rainbow strobe light flashes: blink and they’re gone. They are beautiful dance parties that we get one chance to show up for.

Each moment is a singular gift, so do your best not to waste it. Build every fort, read every story, throw every ball, accept every dance party invitation. You’ll never regret such things.

There is nothing more pressing or urgent or important than being with the version of your child that you’ll never get to be with again.

I was really busy last tonight.

I’m glad I wasn’t too busy to say yes to my daughter.

Don’t miss your chance to dance.

To John Pavlovitz’s moving story, I think the same can be said about dancing, metaphorically, not only with our children (whether a boy, girl, questioning, or transgender) but also with our parents and grandparents, and yes with our friends, while there are still opportunities to do so.

Now at 11 years old, I wondered if John’s daughter still asks him to dance. Well, I emailed him yesterday to ask, and he immediately responded back, in part, with this message:

“Yes, at 11½ Selah still asks me to dance and to tuck her in every night, though I know those days won’t last forever so I’m enjoying each one.”

That should make all of our hearts sing! Reflect upon the dance-like interruption moments of grace you’ve experienced over the past 15 months. Remain open to approaching interruptions as moments of grace each and every day.

Amen.