

“The Ministry of Interruptions”

Mark 5:21-43

Les Longden

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What we have just read in Mark’s Gospel
is a case-study in the ministry of Jesus;
it shows us how he went about serving others.

Not only does it describe the Lord’s own words and example
for us to follow, it gives us instruction in the frustrating,
mundane, daily realities of ministry to others as Jesus did.

At first glance, Mark’s account is full of exciting transitions
and a dramatic ending, but overall, the impression is that
Jesus’ ministry encounters a flurry of interruptions.

The interruptions are relentless.

Jesus, on his way to preach in his hometown,
no sooner gets out of the boat than a crowd surrounds him.

As he begins to teach, a synagogue leader comes
with an urgent request—his daughter is dying!,
and off Jesus goes...

But no sooner does the surging, jostling crowd get moving
than someone grabs Jesus’ robe and he stops to ask:
“who touched me?”

As he tries to find the needy person who reached out, the disciples,
who, like us, are often clueless about the Master’s purposes,
interrupt his search for the source of that suffering touch,
and try to convince him it’s nothing important, just
the distracting press of the crowd.

Jesus insists..., finds the woman in the crowd, and proceeds to
minister to her, but “while he [is] still speaking”
messengers come with the dreaded announcement that the girl is dead!

The father’s hopes are crushed, but Jesus himself now interrupts:
He tells the father to “keep on believing”;
He takes him and three of his disciples and continues forward.

But when they reach the home of Jairus, their purpose is interrupted
by the weeping & wailing of the professional mourners,
who laugh at his intentions.

Jesus has now had enough: he puts them all out, except the parents and 3 disciples, and
he proceeds to interrupt death itself!

You may be thinking, “well there are days like that in ministry.”
But just read the previous chapters in Mark’s gospel and
You’ll see that every day is like this for Jesus, The Minister of the Gospel.

Jesus’ life seems to be one of constant interruption.
If you just look at the preceding chapters in Mark’s Gospel:
When he goes off early in the morning to pray, the disciples
“hunt for him” and interrupt his devotions with the news
that “everyone is searching for you!”

He pleads with his disciples to “have a boat ready for him”
because of the press of the crowds,
but when the boat gets to the other side of the sea
he is immediately confronted by a man tormented by demons.

Jesus sends the man’s demons into a herd of pigs...,
But, in return, the people of the town tell him to go back where he came from.

So, back he goes to the other side,
only to meet another crowd and Jairus which is where we started this sermon.

“Jesus’ [ministry] is one of constant interruption.” It is the life
the Father asks Jesus to live. It is ordered not so much by the plans he makes,
but by the people he encounters, and for whom he goes to the Cross.ⁱ

This story in Mark 5, like the whole of Jesus’ ministry
is a story of interruptions; for Jesus & those around him;
a story of the frustration,
of every hoped-for forward movement;
it is filled with momentary disappointments,
near despair, hoping against hope, and desperation.

Yet, in the end, all the suspense, all the surprises,
come to their fulfillment in Jesus,
the One who stands at the center of the story,
calm and clear-eyed, Good News in the flesh,
the very Presence in Person of salvation and healing.

Jesus shows us that in the eye of the storm,
In the midst of every desperate situation,
In the face of every anxiety-ridden interruption of our hopes,
there moves One who listens,
who looks for our face
even in our most secretive and tentative gropings after him,
who says "Fear not," when those around us say it's hopeless.

All this is good to know, for us, called to be his disciples,
here in this congregation, in this time and place.

It's good for us to know this because, while we may think that
we know who we are and where we are going as disciples;
while we may have settled habits as church-people
with our likes and dislikes, our needs and desires
for religious fulfillment, our good sense of
how our life together should progress--

But, if we are truly the disciples of Jesus, we need to know,
as the Gospel shows us over and over again, we are
heading toward innumerable interruptions in our lives.

We need to know now, and on the authority of the Word of God
and the ministry of Jesus himself,
that we are called to a ministry of taking interruptions seriously,
and that this is the way of discipleship,
the way of the cross, the way of Jesus.

This becomes much clearer as we look more closely at this story:

By the third chapter of Mark, the Pharisees and the Herodians
are already plotting how to get rid of Jesus;
the ministry plans of Jesus to announce the Kingdom
are already being constantly interrupted and called into question.
So, when that big day comes on the seashore,
when a Synagogue Leader falls on his knees before Jesus,
in front of that great crowd, you can imagine the tension,
the excitement and the whispering...

Jesus begins to walk with Jairus, everyone follows,
The crowd is jostling around him; there's a sense of
expectation, of forward movement, of Wonder at what might happen.

You can imagine the disciples, those students in Jesus' little travelling seminary, nudging each other and saying, "Now they'll see. Now He's going to be recognized. Now he's going to have the influence and respectability He deserves, and maybe even the financial support! We've just got to get there in time!"

But then, there it is again: the interruption of what we expect. Jesus stops and asks who touched him. The disciples can't imagine what he means. In the press of the crowd everyone is getting touched.

The text doesn't say, but we can imagine that the disciples tried to get Jesus back on schedule with hints about not keeping an important man waiting....

But Jesus just keeps looking around for someone. And then, an outcast appears at the edge of the crowd. She falls down before Jesus and starts to pour out her whole life story: the doctors she's been to, her health problems, her rejection from synagogue...

Jesus just stands there, listening to her, encouraging her, as if he holds in his hands all the time in the world!

What Jesus teaches us in the ministry of interruptions is that he is willing to resist the push of the crowd, the momentum of the crisis situation, the exasperation of the hurried disciples; he stops, **he interrupts** even an urgent mission to care for the neglected person on the edge of the crowd; he won't be hurried by the claims of the most powerful or influential or important.

Sometimes a congregation may act like a "crowd." It can become very impatient with the little, 'unimportant' people in its midst or on its margins, because the crowd is hurrying toward its own important goal or urgent crisis.

Like the disciples, a congregation can think Jesus' questions are impractical; Or like the mourners, it can laugh at Jesus' diagnosis

of events as foolish or unrealistic.

What Jesus models for the congregation here, is that the woman who wants to be healed must also be heard: The pastor who is moving with the congregation and its urgent concern, must always be alert for those in the shadows who reach out cautiously, who may fear the reaction of the congregation, who reach out for the hem of your garment, not yet sure how to articulate their need yet hoping for some kind of healing grace.

We, like the disciples, tend to confuse interruptions with distractions.

Distractions are things that catch us, seduce us, that we turn to in order to forget. . . .

But **interruptions** call us to attention in the moment.

They call for us to see someone, to hear a cry for help, to listen. Interruptions are what turn us toward each other.

Contemporary disciples may have doubts about Mark's vision of the ministry of interruption, after the manner of Jesus: we prefer to think in terms of missional strategies; we urge the streamlining of organizational structures; in the face of disagreements, we recommend conflict-resolution methods; we lobby for new techniques of engaging the culture and attracting the unchurched.

There is a place for strategies and prioritizing,
But I wonder if our impatience with interruptions is really our fear (or refusal) to lose control of a situation.
Someone else's need has called me away from my desire/goal.

When Disciples read the first few chapters of Mark's gospel, They are tempted to think: [as Will Willimon put it]

How is the Teacher ever going to get to teach if he has all these untimely interruptions? How is Mark ever to move Jesus to the real point if he allows these hysterical fathers and pushy women to keep elbowing their way into the plot?ⁱ

But this, you see, is what Mark is trying to teach us.

The frightened parent, the chronically ill woman,

the sick child whose future seems lost—
they are the real point.

They are the very ones for whom the recovery, release,
And freedom of the Kingdom has now come in person to them.

They are not to be seen as mere incidents or obstacles on Jesus' Way
to a larger, more important Messianic Ministry Plan.

Mark is not trying to present us a picture of Jesus'
flawless ministry strategy, by which he moves
from one ministry success to another.

Yes, Jesus has a plan and a goal:

He sets his face steadfastly toward Jerusalem and the cross;
but along the way he gives himself to everyone he meets.

All the interruptions demonstrate Jesus fully present in the moment.

According to Mark's Gospel, indeed, the whole NT:

Jesus himself is the greatest, most unexpected interruption of all.ⁱⁱ

Jesus, the Word made Flesh, is God's great interruption
Of our Fall, our Flight, our Flurry of distraction.
He makes his home among us,
And teaches us that every moment, every interruption,
can be a divinely appointed in-breaking of the Kingdom,
because the Word is near at hand.

What does it mean to be called to ministry, to be a disciple?
Isn't it, first of all, God's interruption of all our plans?

We may have reached out to touch the hem of his garment,
thinking to leave with a blessing,
but he turns and looks at us,
wants us to know him,

And so, we follow along behind him,
Ready, for his sake, to be interrupted.

ⁱ This is a quotation from Will Willimon's witty meditation on this text. See "Ready for Interruptions" in *The Christian Century* (May 29-June 5, 1991): 587.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.