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Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 29, 2003

“A Holy Interruption”

Mark 5: 21-43

It was one of the coldest days of the winter, a few years ago.
We were living in the small town of Churchville, Virginia, where I was served as a pastor.
It was nearly 9 o'clock in the morning as I headed for the car
which meant I was already late in leaving the house.
My schedule for the day was full, and all of the work I had to do was important work.
It was, after all, God's work that I was doing –
and I needed to get moving!

Of course, it had been one of those morning when nothing went as planned.
To top off a hundred little inconveniences,
I had just dumped a fresh cup of coffee in the floorboard of my car,
hitting the lid of my travel mug just right so that it came off
and coffee went everywhere.
So having cleaned that up, and just poured a new cup, I was about to get back into the car.

Then I see the pick-up truck.
Coming down the hill on the little road just across the main highway,
it slows down in front of Bear Funeral Home across from our house
and rolls to a stop.
A woman and a man sit for a few moments in the cab.
The driver gets out, walks around to the front of the truck and pops the hood.
He's wearing a light jacket, like you might put on in late September on a cool evening.
But it's mid-winter and the wind-chill is easily sub-zero.
I looked around, and see that no one else is driving by.
This one is obviously meant for me.

“O.K., Lord,” I prayed, “I'm already late, and you know all I have to do today.
Things you've called me to do. (...still no one driving by...)
But apparently you have other plans for me at the moment.”
So I get in my car, drive down and ask the man if he needs a lift, or a phone, or a jump start.

It turned out to be just a dead battery from the cold weather,
and I had jumper cables in my car.
In about 10 minutes, which seemed like an hour in the cold,
we had the man's truck running, the heater inside was turned on,
and he and the woman were soon on their way.

Now, it's funny the things you remember as the years go by.
I don't remember what else I had to do that day.
All that important stuff I was so eager to get done has been lost to my memory.
But I do remember that brief interruption, the cold of the air,

the relief on their faces – and probably mine, too! – when the engine started again.
It was a small moment,
but at the same time, a holy interruption,
in which God put before me a work of compassion.

This is not an uncommon story in our lives.
Most of us have those moments from time to time
when we are called away from our usual routine to help another person:
to lend a hand, to offer a sympathetic ear, to be a supportive friend in a distressing time.
A time when we put aside our plans, and do the thing God has put before us.

Yet I wonder how often we miss these times, these would-be interruptions.
I wonder how often we clutch to our own agenda,
keep going our own way and leave God's work for us untended.

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That would have been easy for Jesus to do in the gospel story today.
The woman who touches his robe almost slips away unnoticed.
If it had been up to the disciples, she would have.
They were ready to move on and do the important work that lay ahead.

Jesus and his followers are on the way to Jairus' house;
Jairus is a leader in the synagogue.
But even this great man is susceptible to the pain of loss; his daughter is at home, very ill.
So the disciples are in a hurry.
An impressive miracle at the house of such a prestigious person
would certainly improve Jesus' status in the religious world.
It is important work.

The woman, on the other hand, comes into the story without even a name.
She is powerless, and without status.
She is ritually unclean, unacceptable in the community
because of the hemorrhage she's had for years.
On top of that, she is poor, having paid all she had in doctor bills.
And unlike Jairus' daughter, the woman has no one to go and speak on her behalf to Jesus.

So this woman has to take a great risk.
She crosses all sorts of social and religious boundaries, and makes a last ditch effort.
She reaches out and touches Jesus' robe.
And Jesus' plans are interrupted.

It is good for the woman that Jesus' is attentive to those around him.
He notices power go out of him.
He knows that something significant has happened.
So he stops and looks to see who touched him.
Jesus seeks more than just an impersonal transaction of power,
but rather he insists on knowing the person

who was healed by touching his garment.
The person matters to him, enough for him to stop, to interrupt his important plans,
and find out “who”.
“Who touched me?”

And so they meet. Power and powerlessness.
The truth is shared. They gain a mutual knowledge of each other.
A new relationship is forged. And Jesus offers the woman a new status.
Jesus gives her power when he calls her “Daughter.”
And in the course of this brief exchange,
the woman’s health is restored, her body is healed.
She is made well. She is saved.

It was a holy interruption.
And Jesus was alert and open to recognize it as holy,
as a moment ordained by God in which the work of God was to be done;
a moment for God’s love to break into the world through him.

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Our life with God is full of these holy interruptions.
Times when God calls us away from the thing we think is important
– and which may well be important –
to do some work God has chosen especially for us to do.
Or perhaps it is not always a work.
Perhaps there is something for us to learn.
Something for us to understand about ourselves, or about the world.
But whatever it is, it is a moment ordained and set apart as holy.
And it is a moment that we might miss,
if we are not listening, and looking, and paying attention
to see how God is at work in the world.

God knows we need help paying attention,
and there are ways that God teaches us
to listen and look and be open to those holy interruptions.
God has designed a special way for us to learn to be attentive to God’s work.
We’re doing it now. It is called the Sabbath.
The Sabbath is God’s recurring holy interruption in our lives.
The Sabbath is a time when we break away from the rush of important work
so that we may be filled with the power of God.
A time when we wait for God to show us what to do.
A time when we encounter Jesus, who calls us by name, and says,
“Be healed. Your faith has made you well. Go in peace.”
A time when we pour out water on the head of a child
to bear witness to God’s life-giving work in her life.
A time when we break bread, and drink from a cup
and participate in the mystery of the God who enters into our lives,
into our suffering, and touches us so that we may be made well.

A time when we bring our gifts to the altar of God
when we choose to interrupt our profit-making and accumulation
to give generously, and to acknowledge our debt to God.

But God also sends us from our Sabbath interruption
back out into the world.
back out to continue in the other important work.
as Jesus resumes his walk to house of the synagogue leader.

But as he goes to tend to Jairus' daughter,
he learns that the girl has died.

What's more, her death is probably a consequence of the interruption.
Interruptions have consequences, but God has a greater plan
a plan that encompasses interruptions.

And Jesus, in his wisdom, relies on that plan.

The interruption leads to Jesus doing an even greater miracle!
God's power is revealed when Jairus' daughter is raised from death,
and restored to life.

The holy interruption
leads more deeply into the holy mystery of God's purposes.

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So you and I are invited by this story to pay attention to our lives,
to look and listen and be ready for those holy interruptions
those unexpected moments that place a new task before us,
a task that has been ordained by God for us to do,
whether it involves a set of jumper cables,
a can of soup,
or just a compassionate word.

And you and I are invited to observe a weekly interruption,
to rest and worship together, to sit at the table of our Lord,
to offer our gifts and our lives,
to partake of the holiness that interrupts our week
so that we may be ready to see what God is doing in the world.