

Sunday, June 11, 2023
Psalm 33:1-12, Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26
The Time In Between
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

How many times have you sat down at your computer to finally work on that report (or this sermon in my case!), or put on your gardening gloves to begin your gardening, or get ready to write that thank you note - and your phone rings or the door bell rings or someone comes into your office with a question or your child tells you it's time to go to practice - and then your plan, your schedule, your time, is interrupted again and again. It can be so annoying!

Have you seen that U-Tube video called "Age Activated Attention Deficit Disorder"- it's me to a tee. It goes something like this - a woman realizes she needs to wash her car so she goes for her car keys and notices some bills left on the counter, so she decides to pay the bills but notices she only has one check left in her check book. On the way to her desk she sees a warm coke bottle left out and returns to the kitchen to place it in the refrigerator, when she sees her lost reading glasses on the counter, she goes to take them to her desk when she noticed under her desk is the lost TV remote on and on it goes. At the end of the day the car isn't washed, the bills aren't paid, there's a warm coke bottle left out and she still can't find her reading glasses or the TV remote. But for some reason she's really tired!

I can't believe that Jesus didn't ever get annoyed with all of the interruptions in his life! Just as he's trying to walk through a village, or sit down to a simple meal, or teach on a hillside, or preach in the synagogue - someone grabs his cloak, someone is lowered through the roof, someone runs and kneels in front of him, someone calls him to come. And yet, he is never annoyed, in fact, he almost seems pleased with these interruptions. Have you ever noticed that even though Jesus had very little time on earth to accomplish incredible things - he treated time as we know it, quite differently. He stops, calls, eats, heals, teaches, tells stories; all on his way to somewhere else. And he wasn't annoyed because he lived on God's time, not our time.

Henri Nouwen once wrote, "A few years ago I met an old professor at the University of Notre Dame, looking back on his long life of teaching, he said with a funny wrinkle in his eyes: 'I have always been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I slowly discovered that my interruptions were my work.'" That is the great conversion in our life", Nouwen states, "to recognize and believe that the many unexpected events are not just disturbing interruptions of our projects, but the way in which God molds our hearts and prepares us. When our good plans are interrupted by poor weather . . . our well-organized careers by illness or bad luck . . . our hope by a constant changing of the guards . . . we are tempted to give in to a paralyzing boredom or to strike back in bitterness. But when we believe that patience can make our expectations grow, then 'fate' can be converted into a vocation, wounds into a call for deeper understanding, and sadness into a birthplace for joy". (1) And interruptions are what make life interesting.

A perfect example of God's miraculous little interruptions of complete unpredictable time is when you have a child. Am I right? And it starts with their birth. My daughter Lee was born 4 ½ weeks early - I remember going to the doctors just a couple of days before she was born, and the doctor said "it looks like you're going to go right up to your due date" - but for some unknown reason, three days later - she decided to flip into the breach position, sending me

into labor! I remember thinking, "I can't be having this baby, I have a middle school lock-in and the senior high car wash this weekend" – I was a youth minister at the time – and I remember my husband saying, "you can't be in labor, I'm not finished painting the nursery!" And then we just started to laugh, what could we do? That is, until the contractions set in. Then it wasn't funny.

So the next time I became pregnant with my son Jacob, we thought we had it all figured out. My husband was in graduate school and the baby was due during his spring break, but each month I just got sicker and sicker. Well 5 ½ weeks before my due date the doctor said, "get to the hospital you're having that baby today". I remember sitting in the car terrified and Jeff was saying, "you can't have the baby now, I'm in midterms!" And that was just the beginning! Nothing, nothing in life gives you more interruptions, than children; the kind of interruptions though, you wouldn't trade for anything. Am I right?!

Today's scripture passage from Matthew's gospel combines several stories into one theme, to teach us about God's view of time and Jesus' view of discipleship. The call of Matthew to discipleship is a curious story. Matthew was a tax collector. You see, the Roman government set up a system to collect taxes as efficiently and as cheaply as possible. What they did was to auction the right to collect taxes in a certain area. A man would buy that right and was then responsible to the Roman government for an agreed sum; anything he could raise over and above that, he was allowed to keep as his commission. At a time in history before folks could figure out exactly what they should be paying in taxes, they were at the mercy of the tax-collector. And most tax collectors were greedy, selfish people who were just out to make a buck.

Jesus, strolling through Capernaum, sees Matthew sitting in his toll booth, collecting taxes. Jesus stops, interrupts Matthew and calls him to follow him. And in a rather sudden decision, with no questions asked or no explanations given, Matthew simply got up and followed. The first part of faith is to respond to Jesus' call to follow him, knowing that the call is only the beginning. "Follow me", Jesus said. The problem is, when we follow Jesus, we have to take his path, at his pace, on God's time, and it's different than our own.

And I think Jesus even liked those confrontations, those interruptions, constant interruptions from the Pharisees. To the Pharisees, Jesus was saying that he didn't come to invite people who were convinced they don't ever need anyone's help. He came to invite those who clearly knew they needed help, who followed because they wanted a new way of looking at things, a new way of living with one another.

He came to bring all to the table, especially those who think they are different, especially those who think they are unworthy, tax collectors and sinners alike. People like me. People like you. People like them, people who are different than us.

The company we keep says a great deal about who we are, who we break bread with, who is welcome in our community. If I was to look at your calendar, what does that say about your time – who or what occupies most of it and what does that say about you as a disciple of Christ? For just when we think we have this path all figured out, just when we think we are comfortable with our friends and community, just when we think we have our day scheduled correctly, we are interrupted by someone or something which reminds us, we are on God's time. What we may view as interruptions, which are sometimes annoying, sometimes even scary, God views as the time in between, the time between where you have been and God is

leading, where healing and transformation can take place. The time in between. Hmm, kind of like this congregation, right now.

And just as Jesus is trying to explain to the disciples and Pharisees, who he eats with and why, he is interrupted not once but twice, by two incredibly desperate people. The first is a leader in the synagogue, Jairus, a man of great power and influence. And in all humility Jairus kneels before Jesus, begging for his help. It is incredible that this faithful member of the Sanhedrin, believes, knows, that Jesus can cure his daughter. And again, with no questions asked, with no explanations given, Jesus got up and followed him.

With the crowd now pressing in on him from all sides, he is interrupted again by a woman who touches the hem of his cloak. First of all, what in the world was this woman even doing there! This was a woman who at one time was probably quite prominent, with a family, a home, a place within her community and enough wealth to visit many different doctors to find a cure for her illness. But in 12 years of struggle, she had lost it all, because back then, if you were sick like she was sick, you were unclean. And you were unclean because you had probably done something wrong, something sinful in the eyes of God. And being unclean meant - she was not allowed to go into the marketplace to buy food, she was not allowed to worship in the temple, she was not allowed to be in her own home with her family. The only way she could go into public at all was if she put her hands across her lips and shouted "unclean, unclean" so that all could scatter. For 12 years she had been suffering. To say this woman was desperate would be putting it mildly. To say this woman was determined would be putting it mildly. Just think of all the social and religious taboos she breaks by just being in that crowd! And then she has the gall to touch Jesus' garment but really, it's not like she could approach him and ask to be cured - she was no daughter of a prominent leader. And Jesus is interrupted again!

Jesus came to bring all to the table, especially those who think they are unworthy, the outcast, the unclean, the tax collectors. People like you, people like me. This was Jesus' moment to model the inclusive nature of God. This woman was not an outcast, she was not unclean, she was a daughter of God.

This woman truly believed that by just being close to Jesus, just touching his garment she could be made whole, a miracle could happen to her. And Jesus knew that God worked through him to bring about healing - but here we find out that this happened at times without even a touch of his hand! Now Jesus could have just paused for a moment, noticed someone must have been cured or something had happened, and simply kept going - but he stops. He stops to make a point and to add that personal touch. For to God, no one is ever lost in the crowd, to Jesus, time is irrelevant. Now the woman could have slipped away into the crowd and went away to celebrate she was finally cured, but she stays as he turns to her and tells her that it is her faith that made her well.

Can you imagine for a moment the reaction of the crowd pressing in on Jesus - standing very close to this woman - when she reveals who she is; they must have jumped back! She was a woman who went against all social constraints and purity laws but had such great faith that she was made well; and "made well" here means a complete healing of her body and soul, a complete restoration back into her home and her community. And Jesus calls her daughter, a daughter who had been suffering for 12 years, and then he goes and heals a daughter who has been alive for 12 years. And both move from certain death into new life.

By the time we reach Jairus' home, the professional mourners have moved in, flute players and all, and they are making quite a commotion. Jesus tells them all to go away because the little girl is only asleep not dead, and they laugh at him. Laugh! It has been said, "laugh if you must, but get out of the way. He is the resurrection and the life." (2) Jesus, enters what is considered an unclean house of the dead little girl and touches her hand and gives her new life.

As busy as Jesus must have been, he took his time, he stopped, he spoke with; he got to know his people. He listened, answered questions, and then blessed them. Maybe *that is* when we meet God, when we are interrupted, when we follow God's time, not our own. When we allow ourselves to be interrupted by others, allow ourselves to be challenged by people who are very different than us. When we allow ourselves to be open to God's intrusion in our lives.

It was in the evening and the hospital was nearly deserted, several years ago while I was serving in another congregation. I was making my way up to the ICU to visit a member of the congregation, when a woman came into my vision. I recognized her but for a moment I couldn't place from where I knew her. With tears in her eyes she said, "oh, Rev. Priest" and then I remembered that I had conducted the memorial service of her mother several months before.

We stood speaking for awhile, her husband was in the emergency room, he was going to be okay, but she was scared and tired. I took a moment to sit and pray with her. When we finished speaking, I nearly forgot where I had been headed. Interruptions happen all the time when we allow God to intrude in our lives, when we allow **people** to intrude in our lives. Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring which can have the power to change a perspective, change a life, and bring people closer to God.

It has been said, "You aren't likely to be sent out under the will of God to do startling, impossible things. You are likely to be sent out to do the quiet, unspectacular things that matter, precisely where you are and with what you have." (Paul Scherer) So, perhaps in this time in between, why not consider every event, every ministry here, every interruption in your life, every encounter with another as an opportunity to show God's love to another. Why not pace yourselves to be God's vessel. Why not try to let God's time become our time. May it be so, Amen.

- 1) Nouwen, The Rev. Henri J. *Out of Solitude*.
- 2) Brown, The Rev. Rosemary. "Standing up from a Kneeling Position".