**First United Methodist Church**

**618 Eighth Street**

**Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles**

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“Holy Interruptions”

Text: Mark 5:21-43

When I arrived at church the snow was beginning to fall and there were predictions of heavy snow to follow. Before the day was over, the city would be blanketed in about twelve inches of snow. As I prepared for worship that morning, I wondered whether we would have even twenty-five people at church. Despite the miserable weather, we had about 75 in attendance. One of those was a troubled woman who came in from the snow and cold. Her coat looked inadequate for the cold and her hair was dripping with melted snow. Throughout the course of the service, she would get up as if to leave, but then find a new pew, sit down once again, and continue to worship. She did this several times in the course of the hour-long service. Though I had never met her, I was glad she had joined us.

After the service, I found her in the Fellowship Hall. Her name was Maggie. We had a nice conversation, and she enjoyed a hot cup of coffee and some cookies. Before she left, we were able to find her more adequate gloves and a hat for the cold weather.

Maggie returned the next Sunday. This time she sat in the front row of the church. As everyone was awaiting the beginning of the service, the organist played the prelude and the congregation prepared themselves for worship. Maggie, however, stood during this time and began to wave her arms as if directing the beautiful music we were hearing. At points she turned to the congregation, a broad smile beaming bright, and invited them to stand as well. The poor Methodists didn’t know what they were to do. Should they stand and dance for the prelude or remain seated? Methodists tend to be a quiet, stoic group, but Maggie was inviting them out of their comfort zone. Watching Maggie and the confused congregation, one of the ushers turned to me before I entered the sanctuary and asked, “What are you going to do?” I didn’t know.

Life is full of unplanned interruptions to our otherwise well-organized and well-planned day. As if we had been handed an agenda, we often enter the day knowing what to expect. We have been anticipating and planning for the events ahead. And then the phone rings. Or someone drops in. There is a random encounter with a friend or neighbor that requires your immediate attention. A crisis emerges and you need to set aside that expected agenda and deal with this new interruption.

That seems to be what happened in today’s gospel lesson. It seems appropriate to say that this is not a story of a single interruption, but two interruptions. Neither of the things that happen in this story seem to be what Jesus had expected or intended.

Just prior to our reading this morning, Jesus has healed a man who had been living in the local cemetery. It is a sign that he has been ostracized from the community. The living don’t know what to do with him and so his only refuge is the cemetery. Jesus heals this man creating the opportunity for his return to the community.

One might expect this to be met with great rejoicing, but it wasn’t. The people there beg Jesus to leave. We can come back to the possible reasons for this in another sermon, but Jesus and his disciples pack their bags, get into a boat and head to the opposite shore.

There, people are already awaiting his arrival. One of those in the crowd is a leader of the synagogue. His daughter is dying, and he pleads with Jesus to come and heal his daughter. This is the first interruption. It isn’t likely that Jesus got in the boat saying, “We’re going to the other side to heal a young girl.” Whatever his plan or agenda might have been, this need took precedent. And so, he began walking to the man’s home.

The large crowd that had been on hand to meet him joined with him on the way to the man’s home. Maybe it was curiosity? Maybe it was hope? They wanted to see what would happen.

But in that large crowd, there was an unnamed woman. While the leader of the synagogue was known and seen and named, this woman was just a face in the crowd. She too had a need. And perhaps thinking herself not as important as the leader of the synagogue, she didn’t seem comfortable asking for the help she needed. Who was she, compared to this powerful man in the community.

Unwilling to call attention to herself, she thought to herself, “If I can just touch the hem of his garment, it will be enough to bring healing.” She wouldn’t have to draw attention to herself. She wouldn’t face the possibility of being rejected or ignored. Just get close enough to touch him and maybe that would be enough.

Amid that crowd of people, she maneuvered her way closer and closer to Jesus. I wonder if there were times she was close and tried to reach out to touch him, only to miss and have to keep trying. She had come this far; she wasn’t going to give up. Finally, she was right there by him. Close enough to touch him. She took the chance, extended her hand and was able to touch his outer cloak. And in that moment, the Bible says she felt throughout her body a healing and knew that she was made whole. It had worked.

But something else occurred. Amid all the crowd around him, Jesus knew that something had happened. He stopped and called out, “Who touched my clothes?” The crowd was incredulous. In such a crowd, there were bound to be many people reaching out, touching him, bumping into him. Something had happened.

I wonder what was going through this woman’s mind at that moment. Jesus knew something had happened. Is he going to take away this healing that she had wanted so badly? Was he angry? Had she done something wrong? All those emotions running through her mind.

The Bible says she came in fear and trembling, fell down before Jesus, and told him what she had done and what had happened. Instead of taking away this holy gift, he praised her. Instead of being angry or disappointed he shared in her delight.

Before we continue with this story, I wanted to pause to reflect on a couple of things. The first is that these two stories, folded together are a reminder that Jesus did not play favorites. He had compassion for the leader of the synagogue, someone you would presume to be a very important community leader. But he also had compassion for this unnamed woman. She was equally important. And that has important implications for us today.

First, it is a reminder that we are all important in God’s eyes. It doesn’t matter whether you are a world leader, an Olympic athlete, a famous performer or just a face in the crowd. You are important. I don’t want us to miss that message in these two stories.

Secondly, it is a reminder of how we are to treat those around us. Everyone we meet is a child of God, worthy of our love and respect. We show this care and compassion not because of what they might be able to do for us in return, but simply because it is the right thing to do.

As you know, the reading is not done. While Jesus is praising this woman, messengers come from the synagogue leader’s home. It is too late. The child has passed away. But Jesus persists. He tells the synagogue leader and all the crowd present not to give up home. He continues on his journey to the home.

At home, he is met with grief and mourning. He bypasses this and goes directly to the girl and takes her by the hand. In ways that neither the Bible nor I can explain or understand, he heals her. She is soon up and about, playing and doing the things one would expect from a young child.

Rather than trying to explain the things I cannot explain, I want to focus instead on the things we can do. And with that I return to the notion that both of these events were unintended events, interruptions to what Jesus might have thought he was going to do that day. And that is nothing new. Once while he was doing some important things, people brought young children to him. His own disciples thought he was too busy for children. They were just an interruption to his already full agenda. But Jesus chose to view them differently. He welcomed the children. They were not interruptions, but an important part of his day.

In the dedication to his book, “Jesus’ Strategy for Social Transformation,” United Methodist Bishop Emerito Nacpil thanked his grandchildren for adding joy to his life. He called them, “welcome and holy interruptions” to his writing.

We often look at interruptions with an air of frustration. This is not what we need now. But sometimes interruptions call us to remember the things that are truly important. We can go through the day completing tasks on our to-do list, but never taking the time for what may give meaning and purpose to that day. We may assume that what is most important is getting everything checked off our list, but along the way we miss the chance to connect with people and build new relationships. We might even assume that some people are more important than others, but Jessus reminds us that this is never the case. Interruptions yes. Holy opportunities, definitely.

John Claypool was fond of telling about an interesting experiment in which fifteen seminary students were given the same task. They were all asked to deliver a document to another professor across campus. Five of those students were told that this was of utmost importance, and they had to get the document there immediately, with no delay. The second group was told that the delivery was important, but as long as it arrived within forty-five minutes that would be fine. The last group of students were told that they needed to get the document there anytime before the end of the day.

What the students didn’t know was that the professor had arranged for a group of drama students to be waiting along the route. These students pretended to be in some form of distress or to exhibit some form of need.

At the end of the experiment, the five students who were told that the delivery of these documents was of utmost importance failed to stop to help the people in need. Of those who were told that there was only minor urgency, two of the five stopped to offer help to the people in need. And for those who had been given instructions to have the documents there by the end of the day, all five of them stopped to offer help. Reflecting on this experiment, Claypool wrote, “No matter how lofty our idealism, when our date book is filled to the hilt, it shapes what we are moved to do.”

As unwelcome as they may be, interruptions are like that. They pull us from the trance-like state of what we are doing and invite us to view things with fresh eyes. To hear the voices of those calling from the fringes of our community…the broken, the struggling, the lonely. To see the faces of those who are often overlooked…the children, the poor, the elderly. These interruptions stretch our compassion to new levels and help grow our love and generosity toward others.

On that snowy Sunday, Maggie was standing in front of the congregation, directing the organ prelude. Her arms swaying broadly with great enthusiasm. And the usher asked me what I was going to do about this unexpected interruption. My first task was to pray for wisdom.

Early in the service, I stepped out of the pulpit and walked to where Maggie was seated. The first thing I noticed was that her hands and arms were covered with ink from her pen. She had been writing on herself. When I came to her, Maggie explained that she had a lot of people she wanted me to pray for. I asked her to write them all down on the registration pad and assured her that I would pray for her and for all those she listed.

And then I asked her to do me a favor. I told her that I was tired. It had been a busy week, and I didn’t feel like I was as prepared for Sunday worship as I wanted to be. What would help me was for her to pray for me. She assured me that she would do this.

The congregation had seen this conversation, but without being privy to what was spoken. I returned to the pulpit and Maggie sat in the front pew. And for the rest of the service, her eyes were laser-focused on me. She was praying with deep intensity. She remained seated in that front pew, her eyes never leaving mine, quietly preparing for the unprepared pastor.

After the service, members of the congregation wanted to know what I had said to her. I told them of our conversation and Maggie’s much-appreciated kindness toward me. Again in the Fellowship Hall, she was welcomed with hot coffee and cookies and even grater warmth of a community of love. A beloved child of God had found a place of welcome and hospitality.

To the outsider, Maggie was an interruption, perhaps even a disruption to the orderly worship we had come to know and expect5. But there was something much more important that day. Something holy. Something that borders on the miraculous. A beloved child, whose soul was filled with struggles that I did not fully know or understand, who is often on the fringes of society, found a place of welcome and a touch of healing. We couldn’t take away the illness she faces, but we could give her a safe place where she was loved and included. And that is no less a miracle than what happened that day for Jesus and the crowd gathered around him.

May the interruptions we face this week be tinged with the holy, calling us to a new vision of faithfulness together.