

“They Laughed at Him”
Mark 5:21-43
5th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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This morning I was going to preach about faith.
What it means to have faith, what faith looks like in times of trial and distress.

The MOVING pictures of the woman’s persistence and determination in our story, and the desperation of Jairus, begging Jesus for help in our story...

I was going to preach on faith, not just because of those two people, but because of two verses, two responses that Jesus makes in our text for today:

To the woman who touches his cloak, he says:
“Daughter, your faith has made you well...”

To Jairus, he says: “Do not fear, only believe.”
It sounds like a text about faith.

But then, quite frankly, I got irritated with this text and what it seems to imply about faith. Did you know that preachers sometimes get irritated with the Bible?

Sometimes we get irritated with the Bible.
And the reason I was irritated with this particular text is that all of us know it’s not that easy.

After all, most people in this room have been in the position of praying, at one time or another, for healing in a loved one’s life. And sometimes the person you pray for gets well, and sometimes they don’t get well.

Does that mean you did not have enough faith?
Of course not.

So why does Jesus seem to imply in our story—
it's actually a story within a story—

that Jairus' faith led to his daughter being raised,
and the woman's faith led to her body being healed?

I have no answers to those questions.
It makes me irritated with this text.

So if you don't mind,
I'm going to interrupt my original train of thought,
and change direction with this sermon.

In fact, what I just said is what I want to talk with you about right
now.

Not interrupting my train of thought.
But interruptions—did you notice all the interruptions in this text?

Jesus has returned from the Gerasenes when our story begins.

He just got done healing a demoniac, and being booted out of town
for healing that man.

Who knows what Jesus was planning to do at this moment?
Maybe he needs to get a bite to eat.
Maybe he needs to get some rest.

But then Jairus appears.

A leader of the synagogue, a man with power and status, but today, he's a desperate man.

A helpless man.

And he pleads with Jesus to come with him to his home, to lay hands on his daughter, so that she will be well.

Whatever it was Jesus was planning to do when he returned from the Gerasenes—those plans go out the window and Jesus decides to follow Jairus to his home.

That's interruption number one.

Interruption number TWO comes when the crowd follows Jesus. And a woman in the crowd who has been suffering for 12 years with an ailment that physicians cannot heal—she gets close to Jesus, and she touches his cloak—and SNAP...

Just like that, Mark says: "Immediately her hemorrhage stopped."
Jesus asks: "Who touched my clothes?"

His disciples respond:

How can you say who touched me? Look at this crowd!

In other words, keep your focus, Jesus.

Don't get distracted, Jesus.

We've got to get to Jairus' house—no delays, Jesus!

But Jesus stopped his journey.

And he looked around to see who it was that touched him.

And he encounters the woman. And he speaks with the woman.

He pays attention to this woman—who, in contrast to Jairus, would have been at the bottom of the social status because of her disease and because she was a woman.

All that...is interruption NUMBER TWO.

Interruption NUMBER THREE occurs when some people from Jairus' house show up to tell Jairus the terrible news:

“Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?”

So...no need to continue, Jesus.

You can go back to your original plans now, Jesus.

Get something to eat, Jesus.

Go get some sleep, Jesus.

The girl has died, it's a hopeless situation, Jesus.

That's interruption number three.

I hope you're keeping track here.

Jesus was going to do this, then he pivots to do that, then something happens on his way that causes him to stop, then he receives news that he doesn't need to keep going on this journey...

I'm not sure any of this is accidental in how Mark tells the story.

Because by inserting the story of the woman in the midst of the story about Jairus and his daughter, Mark is actually interrupting one story with another story.

His technique matches his topic.

What's the topic?

Interruptions.

How are you with interruptions?

I recall the time years ago, in another church, when I went into worship with my cell phone in my pocket...and I didn't realize my cell phone was in my pocket. You can see where this is going, right?

Actually, thank God it didn't go there.

Right before I was going to preach, I realized my phone was in my pocket and I managed to turn it off, so fortunate I didn't get a random call that morning...

How are you with interruptions?

When you've got something planned, when you've got an agenda, when you're on a schedule...how do you respond when you're interrupted?

It is something you hope for when you wake up?
Are interruptions your favorite part of your day?

Craig Barnes is the president of Princeton Seminary, but before he was a seminary president, he was a pastor, most recently in Pittsburgh. And Barnes tells of the time when he was heading from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, where he used to teach, to the church in Pittsburgh that he used to serve. He was late for a staff meeting, driving to the church...when he noticed an elderly man walking his dog.

He had seen the man plenty of times before. He used to see the man walking with an elderly woman, but he no longer saw the woman. He had wondered for a number of months what happened to the woman.

Barnes had never introduced himself,
and yet as Barnes parked his car,
the man and his dog happened to be straight in his path to the doors of the church.

On the one hand, late for staff meeting.

On the other hand, here is this neighbor who used to walk with a woman...and she's no longer there...

“Now I had a choice,” Barnes writes.

“I could rush into the important meeting or I could stop, turn around, introduce [myself] and ask this man about his missing wife. I chose to keep moving.”

“Hi, how ya doing?” Barnes said as he rushed past the man.

But once he was at his meeting, Barnes says:

“I felt horrible. Here we were talking about ministry, and I had just refused an opportunity to minister when it was handed to me on a tarnished platter.”¹

Has that kind of thing ever happened to you?

Have you ever just plowed ahead, because you couldn't be bothered with, didn't want to be interrupted by whomever it was who was crossing your path?

I recall something that the Catholic priest Henri Nouwen once wrote:

**“My whole life I have complained
that my work was constantly interrupted,
until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.”**

¹ M. Craig Barnes, “A Delayed Meeting,” *The Christian Century*, March 16, 2011, found at [A delayed meeting | The Christian Century](#).

Which sounds pretty close to how Jesus worked.

Jesus did not approach his faith with a strategic plan or with seven steps to live his best life now! Jesus approached his life and his faith as if he was always willing—to be interrupted.

When Jesus arrives at Jairus' house, “he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.”

To which Jesus says: “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.”

And how do all those people respond?
Mark writes: “...they laughed at him...”

In other words, you may be a wise man, Jesus.
A gifted teacher and preacher, Jesus.
You may even be able to order demons around, Jesus.

But in the end, some things cannot be changed.
There's no more hope for Jairus' daughter, Jesus.

And what does Jesus do?

Jesus overturns their assumptions about life and death.
He brings Jairus' daughter back from death.

This, I think, is the FOURTH interruption in this story.

An interruption of God's grace and love, in a way that astonishes, and stuns, and catches everyone off guard.

So maybe I wasn't so far off course when I said this was going to be a sermon about faith. What if interruptions aren't just incidental to our faith, or footnotes to our faith, but are one of God's primary ways of helping us GROW in our faith....

Michael Lindvall once wrote a series of stories, imaginary stories, about a Presbyterian pastor and the church he served. I say imaginary, but each of the stories has a ring of truth.

For example, Lindvall writes about the time that there was a proposal for the youth to hold a dance at the church. The pastor was in favor of the proposal. It came to the Session as a motion from the Christian Education committee, that the "young people" be permitted to have a dance in the fellowship hall.

But the Session of this particular congregation had concerns.

What kind of dancing?

What kind of music?

And the Session ended up voting no, which really irritated the pastor.

So this pastor decided that "dancing" would be the topic of the sermon that Sunday.

He titled his sermon "The Lord of the Dance."

He preached that "in the heart of God there is a profound, vibrant, dancing joy."

In the prayers of intercession, he prayed that his own congregation might "dance as David danced before the Ark."

And in the silent prayer that followed, he even asked that God might touch him "with the spirit of dance."

“They say that you should be careful about what you pray for,” Lindvall writes, “because you’re liable to get it.”

What happened next was this:

The pastor went to get the offering from the ushers, as the doxology was sung. In this church, the pastor would take the offering from the ushers, and place the plates on the communion table.

As he turned with the plates and started to walk back up the steps of the chancel, toward the table, the hem of his robe at the bottom came loose, and his toe got caught in it.

Instead of backing down, “years of liturgical habit” kept him aimed onward and upward.

With the next step, he was further inside his garment.

By the third step, the pastor realized he was literally walking up the inside of his robe, which was caught in his foot.

So...instead of stopping to undo himself, the pastor kept plowing forward. And as the pastor straightened up with all his might, the robe itself gave way, ripping right at the bottom.

The sudden movement shot the minister’s arms in the air.

While he maintained his grip on the offering plates—

the contents of those plates—
envelopes and five dollar bills,
nickels, dimes, quarters—

all of it rained down on the heads of four stunned

ushers.

At this point he says he should have turned around and given a big theatrical bow. Laughed at himself, let the congregation applaud, extend him some grace.

But he didn't do it.

The worst part was not that he tore his robe, or spilled the offering. The worst part was that he tried to pretend like nothing had happened. He tried to pretend like he did not need grace to enter his life at that moment.²

Have you ever done that before?
I don't mean spilling the offering.

I mean pretending that you didn't need God's grace or someone else's grace at some particular moment?

That you were strong enough, capable enough, to make your plans, to manage your life on your own?

Getting back to Craig Barnes for a moment.

Barnes goes on to say that a few weeks later, he bumped into the old guy with the dog again. This time, Barnes apologized for running by him a few weeks earlier.

The man waved it off, and said, "I know how busy you folks are..."

² Michael Lindvall, *Good News from North Haven: A Year in the Life of a Small Town*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2002.

Ignoring the man's grace, Barnes apologized that he didn't know the guy's name. Then he apologized for being a bad neighbor. Then he apologized a few more times.

Finally the old man smiled and said, "Who's the priest here, you or me?"

The man told him yes, it was his wife he used to walk with, she had died a while back.

Then he said this:

"I've never been a churchgoing kind of guy...It seems hypocritical to start now...Still, it's a comfort knowing that I live near people [like you].

"I lean a lot these days . . . if you know what I mean."³

I wonder if this is what Mark would like us to see.

That ALL OF US, no matter our age or stage in life—we lean...a lot!

We are all in need of God's grace to INTERRUPT our lives when we're desperate, when we cannot manage things on our own.

And because we need it—that unexpected person to show up, to bring us God's grace in our helpless moments, we also need to be willing to do the same.

³ Barnes, "A Delayed Meeting," *The Christian Century*.

**“My whole life I have complained
that my work was constantly interrupted,
until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.”**

What was Henri Nouwen’s work?
It wasn’t writing a bunch of books.
It wasn’t even being a priest.

It was embodying grace, offering grace, responding with grace,
accepting God’s grace, and sharing God’s grace at every opportunity.

Not just Henri Nouwen, right?

It’s true for anyone who follows Jesus.

I don’t know what plans you have for today, for your week...
Is it ok if I say to you:

I hope, at some point, you find those plans interrupted?

Amen.