

Sermons at St Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

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In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've been thinking a lot about interruptions this week, because I was constantly interrupted, and I probably interrupted several people, too. We do that to each other, don't we?

The interruptions into what we think is our desired life are constant, and it all depends how we look at them. I don't carry a cell phone with me all the time because its ringing/rattling drives me nuts. But my nephew, who was visiting us, regards it as reassurance that his friends and family love him and want to stay connected 24/7. I regard the sounds of birds in the morning as a source of pleasure – a kind of morning hymn. He complained that they woke him up at dawn and he had to shut the window because they were so loud. (Of course, when you go to bed at three am you probably do regard the birds as an unwelcome interruption, but...)

I've also been reading a book called Follow Me to Freedom: Leading and Following as an Ordinary Radical by Shane Claiborne and John Perkins. They comment that the Bible is full of stories of God interrupting people: Abraham and Moses are two good examples. God interrupts Abraham and Sarah's life in their old age by telling them that they will have a son, Isaac, who will be the father of a nation. God interrupts Moses by speaking out of a burning bush, telling him that he will lead his people to freedom. And then they mention Mary interrupting Jesus at the marriage feast at Cana. The woman who touched the hem of his cloak for healing was interrupting him, too.

In fact, if you want to, you can read the gospels as a continuous series of interruptions. Jesus gets interrupted by people who want to be healed and fed. He interrupts people himself, all the time. He looks at two fishermen who are cleaning their nets, and says: "Follow Me!

Our lessons today are about interruptions. In the Old Testament lesson, the Prophet Elijah interrupts the death of the widow's son, and returns him to life by praying to God. In the Epistle, Paul recalls how God interrupted him on the road to Damascus to give him a revelation about Jesus, and let him learn the Good News. And in our Gospel reading today, Luke tells us how Jesus had compassion on the widow of Nain, and interrupted the funeral procession. He then interrupted the man's death, and told him to sit up. To the stunned horror of everyone present, the man did just that, and began to speak. Talk about interruptions!

Were these welcome interruptions? It all depends how we look at things. Perhaps the two sons of the two widows preferred their peaceful deaths. Perhaps Paul would have continued to rise in the ranks of authority in Jerusalem. He might even have been elected to the Sanhedrin, the ruling counsel, in due course. Instead, the two young

men now faced lives of toil, supporting their widowed mothers. Paul was beaten, stoned and whipped, before finally being executed by the Roman authorities. Perhaps they would rather not have been interrupted.

We have all read or heard stories of people who have had “near death” experiences, and how that death was interrupted by their return to life. I wonder if anyone has ever said how much they regretted the interruption? It’s possible, isn’t it?

The stories of the saints are full of interruptions, too. God has intervened in their lives in astonishing ways. God interrupted Mother Theresa’s vocation as a sister to call her to a more radical life serving the poorest of the poor, the dying street people of Calcutta. God interrupted Mohandas Ghandi’s life, and Desmond Tutu’s life, and Martin Luther King’s life.

And God has interrupted your life and mine --perhaps in big ways and perhaps in small ways. I know that my father’s death interrupted where I was headed in my fund-raising career, and as I look back, I can only be profoundly grateful. Wonderful experiences and opportunities for learning new things have been offered me. I doubt I would ever have had the extraordinary privilege of standing here speaking to you this morning, if my dear father’s death had not been a wake-up call.

My husband lost his very prestigious job as a corporate Vice President in 1993. While he licked his wounds, he also studied for his Charter Boat Captain’s license. Captain Sheppard will tell you that no matter how much that experience hurt, it also changed his life in wonderful ways that have been deeply fulfilling. Today he is taking a family offshore so that they can scatter the ashes of five family members at sea: two sets of parents and a son. He will lead them in a simple service and they will pray, and we hope they find a new sense of peace in God.

You can probably tell *me* stories like this about yourselves and your own families and friends: about interruptions that changed who you thought you were, that opened new doors, or showed you God’s grace in very unexpected ways. I am pretty sure that when God interrupts us, there are more opportunities for love involved than we can easily imagine.

Now I am not trying to pretend that every interruption is good, or Godly. Some are just plain –interruptions. But I am suggesting that perhaps we need to be a little less quick to assume that every interruption of our plans or intentions is a reason for anger or impatience.

What if, just possibly, even every tenth interruption is a call to prayer, to patience and consideration about our real values? Would we be quite so fast to snap, “Don’t bother me!” or “Not now!” if we thought it was Jesus speaking?

A bit later in their book, John Perkins describes what happened when his granddaughter, Varah, interrupted him one day as he was about to talk with some important people who had come to Jackson, Mississippi to meet with him. Varah said: “Grandpa, will you fix my bike?” He looked. It had two flats. He had taught her how to ride that bike. “I thought about it a few seconds, looked into her eyes...and then said: “Sure. The people here to meet with me can wait.”

It only took me a few minutes, he explained. “You know you’re the most important person in my life right now?” he asked her. “With her little smile, she said: “I knew it, but I wouldn’t say it.”

He was stunned. “Oh, man! She *knew* it. What if I had blown that chance to affirm her? Children (and grandchildren) need to know they are important. Varah knew it, and Moses knew it...”

What did John Perkins do? He reached into his heart and checked his core values to get his priorities straight. What did Jesus do when the parents brought their children and babies to him, and the disciples rebuked them? Jesus interrupted what he was doing, and said “Let the little children come to me.” Again and again, in the gospels, moments of interruption turn into moments of grace,

How much and how often must God interrupt us to get our attention?

Perhaps the sight of another’s need is enough to move us beyond our self-focus and into the way of love. Other times, it may take a phone call, or e-mail urgently asking us to respond quickly to a problem or need that makes us rapidly reorganize our day – or night.

The kind of interruption I am talking about almost always involves a quick check-in with your conscience. What are my priorities? What is the path of love? Am I being asked to set aside my own plans because there is real need here?

Sometimes, in all honesty, the answer is no. Whatever it is really can wait, is not really necessary. A quick word of reassurance and love may be all that is called for.

But other times, there is a larger invitation. Sometimes we are being asked to stop what we are doing, and the path we are on, and to listen. What are our core values? What do we believe? Are we being given – no matter how painful – time to reflect about the way of love?

I can tell you from my own experience that if you wait until you are going way down the wrong path, it will hurt. Your ego and self-esteem will be chewed up. But it is worth it to be interrupted!

Interruptions are a strange and blessed gift. You might just hear the voice of God.

Amen.