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“Interruptions”

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2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

No one likes to be interrupted. By definition, “to interrupt” means “to break off in the middle of something.” To be interrupted is to be doing something and to have it stopped—halted temporarily or maybe permanently. It is frustrating. One of the things we teach our children is not to interrupt us. But interruptions happen, don’t they? Some interruptions are more important than others. Some interruptions are very nerve-wracking, like the telephone call that comes just as you sit down to eat dinner, and you think it might be a relative who’s been trying to call you if you don’t have caller identification. You pick up the phone, and it’s someone trying to raise money for some cause or get you to buy something you don’t need.

But there are other interruptions that are more poignant, those dramatic interruptions. Like the day that Walter Cronkite said, “There’s been a report from Dallas that President John F. Kennedy was killed today. He died at 1:00 pm Central Standard Time.” And that was the way it was. That interruption changed our lives.

There were others. “We interrupt this program for a special news report: A commercial airliner has just crashed into the World Trade Center.” Or you get a call that someone you know and love dearly has died suddenly and unexpectedly. Interruptions! You will not be able to return to business as usual.

I bring this up this morning because this has been a week of interruptions. In the life of this church, a call came in on Tuesday that our plans to build a Habitat House for Robert Daye were being interrupted. It felt a little like David when he was going to build a temple to the Lord, and God said, “Wait a minute. Those were your plans; I’ve got different plans for you.” We are adjusting to that interruption and in the long run, we believe that building a new house will be a better thing, and

many of you who have worked on the house have expressed doubts that we were not going in the right direction.

Later in the week, I got a call; I was sitting at home working on my sermon. The call came from Phyllis Jones, Bert Jones' daughter, to tell me that her mother had taken a turn for the worse, and asked if I could come over to Duke Hospital. Bert was in the ICU on the eighth floor. It had been a tough week for her. The chances of her having any sort of recovery were not good. So I got to the hospital and had the privilege of spending the last hours of her life with Bert and her daughter, Phyllis. What a sacred experience to share the end of Bert's almost ninety-five-year life. This remarkable woman spoke Spanish fluently; in fact, she was communicating in Spanish with the workers in the Emergency Room at Duke two days before she died. She knitted caps for babies in this church, and for babies in other parts of the world. She loved God, and she served God through the life and ministry of this church. Her death was a painful, but sacred interruption.

Interruptions happen. Each of us gets interrupted. It is a human experience. I was fascinated by a statement Henry Nouwen made. He was a Roman Catholic priest and theologian whose writings and teachings, and indeed, his life had been an inspiration to many of us in the Christian community. In one of his books, he wrote, "My whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered my interruptions were my work."

I believe Henry Nouwen is onto something. I would go a step further to suggest that meaning and purpose and even the presence of God can be found in our interruptions. I did not say that God *causes* these interruptions, particularly the more poignant and painful ones. Meaning and purpose and God's presence *can be found* in our interruptions.

I make this suggestion because it seems to be the case with Jesus, particularly when you read the account of Jesus' life in the Gospel of Mark. In the first chapter of Mark, Jesus goes out to a lonely place to pray. He is there praying by himself, and Peter comes up and says, "Jesus, everyone is searching for you. What are you doing out here?"

Jesus leaves the solitude and says to Peter and the others, "Let us go on to the villages to proclaim the Gospel." It keeps happening over and over again. Jesus is interrupted by someone who reaches for his garment, or someone who comes and asks him to be present with their daughter. In today's lesson, it sounds like Jesus was getting ready to take a vacation, to take a few days off.

He says to the disciples, “Come, let us go to a deserted place together and have some time.” It sounds like a good interruption. Jesus said, “Come away to a deserted place and rest.” But as you noticed in the story, it did not work out for Jesus. The crowd sees where they’re going, and goes on ahead of him and the disciples. And then there is that poignant verse which says, “Jesus looked on the crowd with compassion.” Not with anger: “Why did you interrupt my vacation?” but with compassion. The text says, “They were like sheep without a Shepherd.” He had sympathy for them because they were going to and fro wandering aimlessly and anxiously, without God or a vision for their lives.

Does this sound familiar? We’re busy with many things, but not sure exactly where we’re going. We’re worried about job, family, the economy, the environment. Jesus had compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And then the disciples come to Jesus and say, “It’s late in the evening, and here we are at this deserted place, and there’s nothing to eat. Let’s send them away,” and Jesus says, “No, have them sit down in the green grass.” Why does Mark tell us that the grass is green? He never tells us about the color of anything else. He doesn’t tell what color the sky is. But he tells them to sit down in the “green grass,” because he was reminding them of a poem about a Good Shepherd, who said, “I am the Good Shepherd. I will be with you, even when your life is wrought with difficult times, and I will lead you to lie down in green pastures.” He was calling up the memory that there is a resource there for them, and then he fed them.

Often, it is in interruptions that we find the meaning and purpose of God’s presence among us. It happened for me one day early in my ministry. I was a pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Tallahassee, FL. I was in my study, working on a sermon. I thought it was going to be one of the best sermons I’ve ever preached on the love of God. I was really going at it. It was coming to me. There was a knock on my door by the church secretary, who said, “There’s a woman here who needs to see a pastor; she has three children, and she’s out of food, she’s out of gas, she needs some help.” I said, “I’m working on my sermon on the love of God. What is this all about; can she come back later?” The secretary goes away, comes back again, and says, “No, she’s really desperate. She needs to see you, like now.” So I reluctantly put down my pen, and the woman came in, and she told me her story, and it was a very compelling story. So I began to try to find ways that I could get some help for this woman. I’m sitting there, going through the phone book, getting ready to call a couple of agencies and seeing what I can do, and she’s watching me. She had picked up that I wasn’t a happy camper about leaving my sermon. So she says, not defiantly, but rather matter-of-factly, “You

don't have a choice, do you?" I said, "I'm sorry, what did you say?" And she says, "You don't have a choice whether or not to help me this morning." And I said, "Well, I sure do. I have a lot of choices; what do you mean by that?" She said, "Well, I know you have choices, but I just know that Jesus took care of those who are hungry, and he told his followers to feed his sheep, and I was just thinking that you probably don't have a choice." Her interruption focused for me what the love of God was really all about. It's about reaching out in the name of Christ to those in need. Interruptions can be our main work.

Well, another day, soon after I came to this congregation, a respected member of this community came by to see me. I thought it was a courtesy call, and I was enjoying the conversation until the person got rather direct and personal with me, and said, "You're the new pastor of a downtown church, and you know, this community is divided over race, economics, and even religious divisions. What are you going to do about it?" And I thought, "What am I going to do about it? I've got a congregation here to take care of. I've got work to do." But once again, I could remember thinking about that passage in Ephesians 2:11–22: the story of the commentator by Paul that he is our peace; he's made us both one and broken down the dividing walls of hostility. This is not an easy message; this was an interruption for Paul, for he had been a Jew of the Jews; that these pesky Gentiles wanted to get a part of the action, wanted to be a part of the community. And finally, it was revealed to him that the God who had come in Jesus Christ is a God who held out his arms to all God's people. This one who began as a Pharisee, proud of his exclusive ethnic and religious identity, who knew about the walls of traditions, and rules and laws and rituals that protect us from those others who are not like us. And now, he was convicted that this Christ, who was their peace, had broken down the dividing walls of hostility.

Let me tell you how he said it. "In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ ... He is our peace ... he has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

Friends, some of the biggest dividing walls in the world are religious and ethnic. Not only Jews and Gentiles, but Christians and Jews and Muslims. There are race and class and sexual orientation walls. There are all these walls that we live in and that we work to keep sturdy. Then to be interrupted with the Good News of the Gospel, that the Christ we love and serve who came to redeem this world is someone who doesn't like those walls. He wants them down, not to destroy our Jewishness or our Christianity or our Muslim faith, but to show us a still more excellent way to build and create a new humanity. My friends, that interruption by

that friend in this community has opened my eyes to what I think is the essence of the challenge of the mission of the church. In a world that is divided and a world where people kill each other over differences, what do we have to say to the world if we don't have something different to offer, if we don't have a Christ who is our peace, who is continually breaking down the dividing walls of hostility?

That's why we're here. Desmond Tutu, from South Africa, was right: in the midst of the struggle to tear down the wall of racism in his country—he said, “We are called upon to be a *word visible*—“an audiovisual for the world,” he calls the church ... the place where the walls come down, and people are accepted and included and loved—in Christ, for who they are.

We all live behind some wall or another I suspect: pride, prejudice, walls of gender or race or nation, walls built on sexual identity, or class, or religion. Walls we have built carefully and lovingly over the years for protection and security. And for some of us, I suspect, the dividing wall has been imposed on us, for whatever reason, we feel that we've been walled in or walled out. Being too liberal, too conservative, too bright, too white, because of something we've done, or something we can't believe, or who we are, or who we aren't. And the invitation, the interruption into our wall-building and wall-maintaining come from Christ himself. And the invitation is to tear it down and to stand up and live in the freedom of God's love in Jesus Christ.

For we serve the Lord, who does not love a wall, who wants them down.

Listen, my friends, to the interruptions, because in the interruptions, God is often speaking to us, calling us, challenging us to be this new creation that God in Christ is continuing to create among us and around this world. That's the way it was for Jesus. And I don't know why we should expect it to be any different from us. As Henry Nouwen put it, “Often, it's in the interruptions that we find our real worth.” Let it be so among us.

Amen.