

Pardon (for) the Interruption(s)

After being all but run off by the frightened Gerasenes, Jesus and the disciples head back across the lake into familiar territory. In the course of two verses, he and they go from crowds that cannot get enough distance from Jesus to crowds who cannot seem to get close enough to him. [Mark 5:21-43]

This text includes two of the gospels' most well-known stories told with a narrative device known officially as intercalation and more informally as a sandwich. In other words, Mark begins with one story which is almost immediately interrupted by another. As we meet back up with Jesus, he is minding his own business, determined to teach and preach in as many towns as he can to as many people as he can. After all that is exactly what Jesus told us he came out to do.¹ That's his agenda. That's what's on his Google calendar and in his Day-Timer. That's his plan and his purpose. And then come the interruptions, the intrusions. And those interruptions do not seem to bother him a bit. This not being bothered, this embrace of the interruptions that come his way have inspired many faithful ones to try and emulate Jesus and his welcome of interruptions. This includes the wise theologian and writer Henri Nouwen who writes about how his perception of interruptions was changed in a conversation with a friend and mentor:

While visiting the University of Notre Dame, where I had been a teacher for a few years, I met an older experienced professor who had spent most of his life there. And while we strolled over the beautiful campus, he said with a certain melancholy in his voice, 'You

¹ Mark 1:38

know . . . my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.’

[Nouwen later wrote,] It has been the interruptions to my everyday life that have most revealed to me the divine mystery of which I am a part . . . All of these interruptions presented themselves as opportunities . . . [and] invited me to look in a new way at my identity before God. Each interruption took something away from me; each interruption offered something new.²

Nouwen is absolutely right. There is something about seeing interruptions as integral to our life and our life’s work. Jesus shows us that, but as I blurted out during bible study on Wednesday, “We ain’t Jesus.”

Growing up, I loved school plays, even though I never got the role I would have chosen for myself. In second grade, I played the role of the mirror in *Snow White*, meaning I did not even get a costume, just a few lines spoken from behind the pegboard that held the mirror. In seventh grade I was Princess Pinkie, the way-too-sweet and boring princess, while my friend Ashley was Princess Peagreen, the deliciously fun and sharp-tongued and not-boring-at-all princess (which she played beautifully and with great joy).

I am tempted to think I can play Jesus in this drama, that I could be the one doing the helping and the healing, that I could be the one with and in control. I like to believe that I could find a way to welcome the pressing in crowds, to exhibit extreme patience with the bumbling disciples, to smile at and bless the woman who tugs at my hem, to reassure a distraught father,

² <https://faithandleadership.com/jenny-williams-our-interruptions-are-our-work>

and toss out the loudmouth cynics all in the span of an hour, or maybe even 30 minutes. But I can't and I don't. I'm not Jesus. So that means I am cast in another role.

Some days I am a disciple, doing all I can to keep pace with Jesus and make sense of him while being exasperated with him when he asks me who touched him in the middle of the throng. At this point in Mark's gospel, the disciples have traveled with Jesus back and forth across the sea of Galilee. They have witnessed his power in calming the stormy sea, in freeing people from forces that possess them, and in healing those no one else could. And these same disciples still struggle—and will continue to struggle—to understand fully who Jesus is.

On other days I am the woman, desperate to be made whole and trying my very best just to get close enough without really bothering Jesus with my problems. She has spent twelve years, twelve LONG years with an ailment that renders her ritually unclean and—perhaps more significantly—visibly and obviously not well. Over the course of twelve years, she has spent significant resources on physicians hoping against hope that they could fix her. She has learned all too well what a wise person recently pointed out: money cannot buy health. Perhaps the woman is ashamed that she hasn't found a way to fix herself, convinced that others have it so much worse and that she doesn't want to be a bother and a burden, even to Jesus.

There are days when I am among the scoffing mourners, laughing at the ridiculous, too-good-to-be-true promises Jesus makes and keeps making. Some days, I play the role of Jairus, a leader with power and authority in the community brought to my knees because there are people and problems my power and my authority cannot begin to cure. And today and every day I am that girl, that child, the one who can only be saved and raised to new life by Jesus.

Dear ones, we're not Jesus, and we were never meant to be. There is only one Jesus, only one Savior, only one Son of God, and we are not he, never have been, never will be. We will never deal perfectly with life's interruptions the way he does. Yes, it is good to take the long view and the high road when we can. AND. **AND** it is high time we recognize that his is not the role we are called to play. We are not Jesus. We are instead, quite simply the ones who need Jesus. We cannot think our way to wholeness, we cannot buy our way to salvation, we cannot plan or will or manage our way—as individuals, as a church community, as a nation, or as an entire human family—to new life. This is not a call to pummel others into faith. No, instead I believe that this story serves to remind us of our place, our calling, and our role. We are called to follow, to fall on our knees in humility and ask for healing and wholeness, recognizing that we are needy, admitting that we need Jesus.

And neediness—as the saying goes, is not a bug but a feature of our humanity. Human beings are exquisite creations who do great things and who mess up, who get things wrong, who break down and fumble and lose our way. Notice that I am not pointing out there to say *they* need Jesus, whoever *they* may be. Yes, I believe Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world and I trust him to pull that off. But the crucial first step, the one I struggle with on a daily basis, is to recognize that *I* need Jesus, that *we* need Jesus. Need. There's that pesky word again. Need.

Mark's message is initially written for and within a fledgling church, a community of frightened disciples who have been utterly changed by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. They live under the shadow of real threats from an empire. This empire insists that Caesar is the son of God and that Caesar's lust for infinite control and conquest is the only thing that matters. Mark's community knows they need Jesus, so he is the one they follow, he is the one they trust

and keep trying to trust even as they stare down all sorts of reasons to be afraid. And Mark and his community seem to see and celebrate that in the thick of a disrupted and disturbing world, Jesus is himself the holiest and most welcome of interruptions. Jesus interrupts the empire's plans by wielding a different sort of power. In Jesus Christ, God disrupts the normal course of events by revealing what true power looks like. In Jesus Christ, they and we witness how God's power conquers death not with a bludgeon or a bullhorn but with love and grace and mercy and humility and self-sacrifice and death on the empire's cross and, yes, resurrection. Resurrection, life disrupting death, the most stunning interruption of all.

It is good to be gracious with one another in the midst of disruptions and interruptions. However, in the end it is not our primary calling to smile beatifically and welcome every interruption in a Zen-like state. No, the fact is that whether we are disciples who bumble and bluster, a woman at the end of her rope, a father who is out of options, a child hanging by a thread, a face in the crowd unsure of what exactly she is seeing, or a cynic who laughs at too-good-to-be-true news, we need Jesus, probably more than we can even begin to grasp. And because we need him, we find ourselves among the cast of interrupters; we ourselves are the interruptions. And by the infinite and amazing grace of God, Jesus pardons our interruptions and us, each and every one.

Thanks be to God. Amen.