

Turning

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples.

Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that moment.

When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread through all of that district.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Turning

Our kids had their first week of summer vacation this past week, which meant they were both home all day, every day, while Adam and I tried to work our full-time jobs. Monday morning, I woke up, worked out, helped Hannah sort through summer clothes, and was in the shower when I heard someone screaming so loudly that I could hear it over the water, over my audiobook, up the stairs, and through two closed doors. I ran downstairs to find Hannah still screaming because homemade slime had escaped its bounds, spilled onto the dining room table, and coated Hannah's hands and legs. It hadn't yet been fully "activated", which meant it was, essentially, extra-sticky glitter glue. After 45 minutes peeling it off Hannah and getting dressed, I made lunch for Hannah and myself, packed a dinner for later, and switched places with Adam, who came home from work so I could go to work.

There was staff meeting then a legislative meeting for School Board followed by a governance meeting that I ended up needing to chair at the last minute, followed by an Executive meeting, and then the regular Board Work session. I got home at 9:15 to find Hannah curled up asleep at the top of the stairs ... waiting for me.

There are days.

Days like the one Jesus had in our passage from this morning. He calls a tax collector named Matthew to be a disciple, and before the dust settles, he is sitting at dinner with Matthew and his friends—other tax collectors, people whose company respectable Jews didn't keep. While he's in the middle of responding to those who object, a leader of the synagogue named Jairus arrives. His daughter has died. Will Jesus come?

Jesus gets up and goes. On their way, a woman reaches out and touches the hem of Jesus's cloak—a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years, who has not been permitted to touch or be touched in all that time. And Jesus stops, turns toward her, sees her, speaks to her. And then he continues with Jairus, arriving at his house to find the mourners already gathered, the flute players already playing. After convincing them to move outside, Jesus takes the dead girl by the hand. It's only a few verses, but the structure and pace of the passage make it clear—it is one interruption after another after another. There is no conclusion to a conversation before the next one begins, no resolution to a story before someone else is in need.

There are days that arrive faster than we can meet them.

My response to days like that is to white-knuckle my way through them and then collapse and hope the next day will be better. I think it's safe to say that no one in my life gets my best self on days like that. With my children, I try to take deep breaths and be present, but it doesn't always work, and even when it does, it only makes me less composed to deal with the next person who needs something from me. I want to be present to the people in my life, but there are days when every interruption feels like one more thing standing between me and everything that still needs to get done.

Jesus, shockingly, handles it better.

He begins by calling Matthew, a tax collector, to follow him. Tax collectors, in Jesus' time, were not just disliked, they were seen as traitors—they were Jews who helped the Roman government impoverish the Jewish community with unreasonable and punitive taxes. To make such a person a disciple was to make a point—and a pointed one at that—about who will be included in God's kingdom. But Jesus doesn't call Matthew to make a point. He doesn't pull Matthew out of his life to be the token tax collector or to reform him in order to make him acceptable. He doesn't call Matthew and move on to the next task. He dines with Matthew and his friends. He gets to know Matthew's community, sits at table with them, treats them as equals. And when he overhears a derogatory comment about them, he takes the time not only to defend his own actions but to clarify God's priorities—not societal approval, not sacrificial purity, mercy. With his presence and his words, Jesus takes the time to see potential in someone who others have only looked past or scorned.

And while he is doing that, Jairus appears. A leader in the synagogue, Jairus's daughter has died and he has come to find Jesus. And Jesus gets up and follows him. There is no conversation, no questions asked, simply an awareness that this man needs Jesus, needs him to accompany him, to walk with him back toward the devastation that is a dead child.

But while they are on their way, a woman approaches and touches the edge of Jesus's cloak. And Jesus notices. He notices and he stops. The woman was healed when she touched Jesus's cloak. Jairus is distraught and waiting—his daughter is dead. Every moment Jesus spends is a moment he is not spending getting to Jairus's house. But Jesus still stops. He stops and he turns and he sees the woman. For twelve years she has been bleeding. For twelve years she has been untouchable. For twelve years she has lived on the outside of community. And Jesus notices. He stops, turns toward her, sees her, and says, "Take heart, daughter." Daughter. A reminder that she is still part of the family.

And then Jesus continues to Jairus's house where the mourners have already gathered, where the story has already been written: a beloved child dead, a community in mourning. But this time it is Jesus who interrupts. He sends the mourners outside, turns toward the girl, and takes her by the hand.

The author and priest, Henri Nouwen, tells of walking with a distinguished professor on the campus of Notre Dame while he lamented that, "my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work." It's a profound reflection—one often seen only in hindsight. Because in the moment there are meetings to get to, deadlines to meet, children who need lunch, emails unanswered. In the moment, interruptions rarely arrive looking important. More often they arrive looking like one more demand on our time and attention. Maybe it was easier for Jesus. He didn't have a staff meeting to get to or a school board meeting to prepare for. But even Jesus had expectations pressing on him—a dinner abandoned mid-conversation, questions left unanswered, Jairus waiting. And still. Jesus allows the interruptions to turn his attention to the people who need him.

Which, good for Jesus. But honestly, turning towards the interruptions in our days rather than managing them is exhausting. It's counterintuitive. It goes against every self-help book designed to make your days and your life productive. And, while we're being honest, it doesn't always feel worth it. I would much rather have eaten a calm lunch than spent 45 minutes cleaning up slime.

Because not all interruptions feel like God at work in our lives. Sometimes, they're just slime that needs to be cleaned up. But sometimes, I suspect they are God. In Bible Study, we've been reading the book of Acts and exploring how the Spirit moves in the world once Jesus is no longer on earth. And what we keep finding is that the Spirit is inconvenient. The Spirit upends people's expectations—it sends them places they'd rather not go. It flies in the face of convention and common sense. It drags the church and individual disciples in its wake, daring them to keep up. The Spirit almost always appears as an interruption, and rarely a welcome one.

But when people follow, when they allow the Spirit to interrupt their plans, their expectations, their beliefs, relationships are restored, community is created, lives are changed, and paths are made clear, even if only in hindsight.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "The truth is of course that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life—the life God is sending ... day by day."

It would be easier if God would just send a text or an email. Something we could plan for, manage accordingly. But scripture tells us again and again that this is rarely how God communicates. God is more often in the interruptions—in the neighbor who needs to talk, the family member who needs your attention, the opportunity that arrives unexpectedly. So, as you go back into the world this week, may you turn toward the interruptions. May you turn toward the people God has placed in your path. And may you, in time, see the ways in which God has been calling you, one interruption at a time.