

United Church in the Valley: March 10, 2019

Minister: Matthew Heesing

Making Space for the Struggle

“...of interruptions”

Scripture Reading:

This morning's reading takes place in the middle of Jesus' three years of ministry.

This particular story is recorded in two of the four biographies of Jesus' life:

the Gospel according to Matthew, and the Gospel according to Mark.

Our version this morning is primarily taken from Matthew's account, with a few details incorporated from Mark's version of events.

Matthew 15:21-28:

Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

He entered a house and did not want *anyone* to know about it; yet, he could not keep his presence a secret.

In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a *Canaanite* woman from that region came to Jesus, crying out,

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!

My daughter is suffering terribly from a troubled spirit.”

But Jesus did not say a word.

He did not answer her at all.

But the woman kept following after him and shouting, so his disciples came up and asked him to send her away.

Finally, Jesus answered,

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

But the woman came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”

He answered, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table.”

Then Jesus answered,

“Lady, you have great faith!

Let it be done as you wish.”

And at that very moment, her daughter was healed.

Sermon:

I want to start this morning's sermon with a question,
 though I'm not sure how relatable this question is to everyone—
 bear with me—
 how many of us have ever experienced
 ...an interruption?

[Everyone raises their hand.]

All of you?

I'm kidding, of course—
 obviously, we've all experienced an interruption,
 probably even multiple times a day,
 in one way or another—
 whether it's a toddler
 tugging on your pant leg while you're on the phone,
 or a sales call right in the middle of supper,
 or someone else's urgent problem
 adding onto your personal to-do list,
 or maybe even a certain student minister
 that *keeps asking you questions*
 in the middle of trying to calculate the offering—
 isn't that right, Carol?

We've all been interrupted.
 And I'm not even talking about the big interruptions of life,
 like an emergency, or a brand new job—
 I'm just talking about the little interruptions,
 the minor disruptions that happen every day,
 but in a way that easily can irritate us,
 grate on us like sandpaper,
 accumulating over time,
 until suddenly, we just can't take it anymore,
 and then we snap and completely overreact
 to whoever just happened
 to interrupt us at the moment.

Or is that just me?

I'll admit,
 I sometimes really struggle with interruptions.
 Maybe you do too.

But if that's the case, we have company,
 because Jesus wrestled with interruptions as well.

Multiple times over the course of his ministry,
 Jesus attempts to find some peace and quiet,
 a moment to recharge, to spend some time in prayer,
 but everywhere he goes, people get there before him,
 pouncing on him for his help and his healing,
 one day, feeling especially exhausted,
 in an effort to escape the crowds,
 Jesus goes off in a boat with his disciples,
 and absolutely worn out,
 he takes a nap at the back,
 but a storm blows in, and waves attack
 and the disciples in a panic
 interrupt Jesus' one chance at sleep—
 people *keep on* interrupting him,
 until finally, Jesus leaves the familiar region of Galilee,
 and goes to the land of Tyre and Sidon.

And as we heard in the reading,
Jesus withdrew to this area.
He entered a house and did not want anyone to know about it;
yet he could not keep his presence a secret.
In fact, as soon as she heard about him,
a Canaanite woman from that region,
a non-Jew, an outsider, came to Jesus, crying out,
“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!
My daughter is suffering terribly from a troubled spirit.”

In essence, she is interrupting Jesus—
 the latest in a *long line* of interruptions.
 And Jesus doesn't respond.

“*Jesus did not say a word,*” says our reading.
 “*He did not answer her at all.*”

How many of us have ever tried
 to ignore a potential interruption?
 How many of us are guilty of not giving someone
 our attention in the hopes that they might eventually move on?

That's what Jesus does:
 he initially does not acknowledge this woman,
 hoping she will get the hint.

But she kept following after him and shouting,
so the disciples came up and asked him to send her away.
Finally, Jesus answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.’

In other words, Jesus says, “Can’t you see I’m busy?
Don’t bother me! I have more important things to do.”

*But the woman came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”
And Jesus answered, “It is not fair,
to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”*

At this point, Jesus has tried the strategy of a cold shoulder,
he’s tried the direct communication approach—
now he’s getting downright dismissive,
even some might say, insulting—
he’s essentially saying,
“Lady, you are *wasting*
my time and energy.
These people deserve my attention—you don’t.”
But without missing a beat, the Canaanite woman
cleverly responds, “*Yes, Lord,
yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table.*”

*In the end, Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith!
Let it be done as you wish.”
And at that very moment, her daughter was healed.*

It probably won’t come as a surprise
that a lot of people find this story of Jesus uncomfortable.
If Jesus truly is the holy found in human form, God-with-us,
well, why does he treat this woman with such initial disrespect?
Why is he not more welcoming and gracious? Why is he so rude?

Traditional interpretations try to explain this away,
they say that Jesus was testing the woman,
or trying to prove a point to his disciples.
Myself, I’m not so sure.

Because even though Jesus
was the fullest reflection of the divine that we have,
nonetheless, he was still fully human—
and as a human, I think it is perfectly okay to say
that Jesus had a day where he struggled with interruptions,
loses his patience, gets annoyed,
but in the process, *learns*,
that rather than an inconvenience to avoid,
interruptions can be an opportunity to serve.
*In the end, Jesus answers, “Woman, you have great faith!
Let it be done as you wish.”
And at that very moment, her daughter was healed.*

Through this struggle, Jesus learns that rather than viewing interruptions as an inconvenience to avoid, interruptions can be an opportunity to serve. -----

When I was younger, around the age of ten to twelve,
I had a truly influential mentor in my life:
a minister named Rev. Ken DeMan.
He passed away from cancer when I was in my early teens,
but one of the things that I remember about Rev. Ken
was how he'd often say that his day
involved a "ministry of interruptions."
His day involved a "ministry of interruptions."

I never really understood what that meant,
until I became an adult, myself.
It's incredible, how so many little interruptions
can add up all throughout the day,
where it feels like they have taken away
from what—I think—is most important.
All of us, I'm sure, can relate to the state of feeling interrupted,
and wondering when our own personal priorities
will ever be accomplished.
We've all be interrupted, haven't we?

But, Rev. Ken, he taught me something important:
a particular way to make space for the struggle,
a certain way to face and be a source of grace,
whenever I am interrupted:
he taught me how to see and understand
interruptions as an unplanned
chance to be in ministry—
not an inconvenience to avoid,
but an opportunity to serve and share God's love.

For him, a "ministry of interruptions"
had nothing to do with being a minister,
but everything to do with being in ministry—
embodying what *all* of us are called to do
every day, as disciples of Jesus.

In theory, that sounds easy.
In reality—I'm working on it.

And I'm relieved that even Jesus
struggled with it too.

Now, over the next few weeks of Lent,
we'll be looking at a number of different struggles,
things in our life we'd rather not wrestle with,
aspects of living we might not want to look at closely—
but overall, Lent, itself, is a lot like an interruption,
a disruption into our comfortable even complacent existence:
a time of intentional, even difficult reflection,
all the while knowing resurrection lies in store.

And we're starting by making space
for the struggle *of* interruptions:
looking at all the little disruptions in our day,
learning to see them, the same way as Jesus did,
not as *inconveniences to avoid*,
but as opportunities to love and serve.

And as we practice that, it's true:
our schedules may have to be adjusted.
Our plans may have to change—a bit.
Perhaps we won't accomplish
quite all the tasks we wanted.

But let's be aware
of the invitation that is there
to share God's love with all we meet,
to be the hands and feet of Christ,
if we greet an interruption as an opportunity to serve,
we will be surprised by what we might observe:
In the end, Jesus answered,
"Woman, you have great faith!
Let it be done as you wish."
And at that very moment, her daughter was healed.

May it also be with us.

Thanks be to God.