

“PARDON THE INTERRUPTION”

Isaiah 43:18-25; Mark 2:1-12

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It is 6:25 p.m. The vegetables for the salad have finally been dug out of the recesses of the vegetable crisper and washed, chopped, peeled—or been otherwise prepared, and they are now in salad condition. The oven timer has begun to blare its insistent tone in a pattern that only a beginning “chopsticks” player could find loveable. Grace has set the table in the perfect, yet quite random, configuration that she is famous for around our house. And just then the phone rings. And so, even with an unspeakably hot dish burning through that well-known weak spot in our potholder, for some reason I still pick up the phone. And then I hear it: that short lag that signals that the computer on the other end is feeding my information to the person calling so that I can hear one more offer for the latest deal on phone services—even though Shaun works for our long distance provider, even though I said “no thank you” just last week—didn’t I?

Interruptions: they are everywhere, at the most inconvenient of times, always annoying us when we would rather just follow along on the path we have chosen for ourselves. Now I’m not necessarily talking about grand plans for the rest of our lives, because I am pretty much convinced that those become outdated practically as soon as they are discussed or written down. I’m talking about things like a nice dinner, a year for the perfect garden, a winter of perfectly groomed trails for skiing, or a perfect on-time, beautiful weather vacation. But then it happens. A phone call or a table in not quite the right place, a late frost, a huge pile of snow on the way to the slopes, or a delayed flight that leaves one contemplating the possibility of spending a whole vacation at Gate 17. However it happens, no matter how often it happens, it seems that we are never quite prepared for the interruptions that come our way. How is it that although life’s plans never seem to end up going off without a hitch, we still find ourselves surprised and, yes, annoyed when those surprises happen? How is it that even though these interruptions are so commonplace, we still find ourselves surprised when they happen?

My questions about interruptions really have their genesis in our readings of the gospel of Mark over the past few weeks. Mark’s gospel, believed by scholars to be the first gospel written—in part, because of its brevity—often contains precious few details. Yet, if we look at the healing stories that are the centerpieces of Mark’s depictions of the early ministry of Jesus, we might notice quickly that most of these miracle healings come at rather inconvenient moments for Jesus. Most of them aren’t exactly planned. Think back to Jesus healing Simon’s mother-in-law, and then attempting to spend the early morning hours that followed that event in prayer, only to have his disciples track him down because “everyone is looking for him.” Remember the leper, interrupting Jesus and telling everyone he met of his healing, although Jesus told him to tell no one? Mark notes that “people came from every quarter” to see Jesus. Now in this week’s text, we find Jesus at home. And what happens here? A knock on the door and, before long, a huge crowd stands outside of his home, waiting to hear him speak, waiting to witness him heal someone so they can witness it all. Again, Jesus is confronted by the fact that his life is not his own as his house becomes public space; and then, perhaps, the greatest violation of Jesus’ space

occurs. Due to the large crowd size, four people who wanted their friend's paralysis healed found their way to the rooftop and began to dig through it so they could lower their friend to Jesus. In reading for this week, I saw something new in this passage. Although I remember learning this story in my childhood Sunday school classes, I did not remember that it was the roof on Jesus' home that was dug through and opened up so that the paralytic could be healed. This is an interruption that even the most egregious marketing campaign wouldn't dream of attempting; but Jesus seemingly handles it in stride.

Confronted by the paralyzed man, Jesus is not annoyed by the intrusion but, instead, sees this act as the faithful ministrations of the four friends. And so, he forgives the paralyzed man of his sins. Now this seems like a wonderful thing to do, but I suspect for anyone other than the legalistically inclined scribes, any outrage that came in that moment was due to Jesus seemingly missing the point. While the scribes quibbled over how Jesus could possibly have the authority to offer forgiveness, I imagine the crowd was growing restless wondering why Jesus had not healed the paralyzed man. What about the leper? What about all the demons he had cast out? What about the healing he had offered to Simon's mother-in-law? Who cares about sins when that man is still paralyzed?

And so, I think we have a moment of tension right in the middle of this passage. The scribes want to know about "authority" while the crowd probably whispered words of wonder about how Jesus could turn his back on the paralyzed man. And, in this moment, I so wish Mark had the benefit of the lectionary, because our lectionary this week provides us with a reminder of where Jesus might have had his authority. The concluding verse of our reading from Isaiah is this: "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." These words of comfort and promise are written in response to Israel's repeated failure to remember the Lord their God and their repeated failure to follow the rules of sacrifice and devotion. So I wonder how the scribes forgot about the grace-filled moments offered in their own tradition. The scribes' questions about authority were most likely derived from wondering what the paralyzed man had done to deserve forgiveness. In perfectly consistent fashion, and perhaps making a point by offering forgiveness based on the actions of the friends, Jesus offered forgiveness to the paralyzed man before he did anything else. This is a moment when Jesus adds grace into the equation, even though it had been there all along. For those of us who sometimes rigidly think of God in terms of Old Testament vs. New Testament and, thus, divide our history into one of a harsh God who was transformed and then one known anew in the person of Jesus, this passage from Isaiah tells us of the unchanging nature of God's promises to us, and of grace happening long before Jesus entered the story.

Oh, yeah, and then Jesus healed him. "Stand up, take your mat, and walk." And he did. On the heels of several unexpected interruptions, Jesus confounds the scribes and does exactly what the gathered crowd had come to expect: he healed, and they all left amazed by what they had seen.

So. . .what are we to make of this story? First, I think we must start with the words in Isaiah and recognize that forgiveness is not ever something we deserve or have a claim on, but is, and always has been, something granted by God as a divine gift of love and community. Let me say that again: forgiveness is a gift of love and community granted by God. Forgiveness and grace

happens; so we are tempted, I think, to simply let it happen and sit comfortably in our little lives and enjoy it.

Instead, I think one of the things we must do is to get better at confessing our sins and our failures as a faithful discipline. In some ways, the skepticism of the scribes is healthier than we might think. Although we like to paint the scribes as rigid or unknowing, perhaps we should, in fact, take notice of their call to what I might describe as “the faith-based balance sheet.”

When I was called to this congregation, one of the first things I noticed was the primary place of confession in our liturgy. It is always there. It doesn't appear only for a season such as Lent but is, instead, always a part of our worship. And we always follow our confession with a reminder of God's forgiveness; it is all a tidy little package, isn't it? Sometimes I wonder if grace does that to us—makes our confessions into throw-away phrases that allow us to feel better but don't really mean that much. The consistency of grace in this week's lectionary texts is surely to be a comfort; but I fear that grace allows us—you and me together, Christians in general—to become lazy and complacent in our faith. Does grace ultimately just allow us to lazily slouch through life knowing that all will be forgiven? Am I acting faithfully enough to deserve it? Of course not, but am I doing anything at all?

Last night I read a letter from the North American delegation to the World Council of Churches Assembly, and I was stunned by what I read. Coming from 34 denominations, Letter A to Letter U, from the African American Episcopal Church to the United Church of Christ, are these words for the World Council Assembly:

“Grace to you and peace from God the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As leaders from the World Council of Churches member communions in the United States we greet the delegates to the 9th Assembly with joy and gratitude for your partnership in the Gospel in the years since we were last in Harare. During those years you have been constant in your love for us. We remember, in particular, the ways you embraced us with compassion in the days following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina just months ago. Your pastoral words, your gifts, and your prayers sustained us, reminding us that we were not alone but were joined in the Body of Christ to a community of deep encouragement and consolation. Even now you have welcomed us at this Assembly with rich hospitality. Know that we are profoundly grateful.

“Yet we acknowledge as well that we are citizens of a nation that has done much in these years to endanger the human family and to abuse the creation. Following the terrorist attacks you sent “living letters” inviting us into a deeper solidarity with those who suffer daily from violence around the world. But our country responded by seeking to reclaim a privileged and secure place in the world, raining down terror on the truly vulnerable among our global neighbors. Our leaders turned a deaf ear to the voices of church leaders throughout our nation and the world, entering into imperial projects that seek to dominate and control for the sake of our own national interests. Nations have been demonized and God has been enlisted in national agendas that are nothing short of idolatrous. We lament

with special anguish the war in Iraq, launched in deception and violating global norms of justice and human rights. We mourn all who have died or been injured in this war; we acknowledge, with shame, abuses carried out in our name; we confess that we have failed to raise a prophetic voice loud enough and persistent enough to deter our leaders from this path of preemptive war. Lord, have mercy.

“The rivers, oceans, lakes, rainforests, and wetlands that sustain us, even the air we breathe, continue to be violated, and global warming goes unchecked while we allow God’s creation to veer toward destruction. Yet our own country refuses to acknowledge its complicity and rejects multilateral agreements aimed at reversing disastrous trends. We consume without replenishing; we grasp finite resources as if they are private possessions; our uncontrolled appetites devour more and more of the earth’s gifts. We confess that we have failed to raise a prophetic voice loud enough and persistent enough to call our nation to global responsibility for the creation, that we ourselves are complicit in a culture of consumption that diminishes the earth. Christ, have mercy.

“The vast majority of the peoples of the earth live in crushing poverty. The starvation, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the treatable diseases that go untreated indict us, revealing the grim features of global economic injustice we have too often failed to acknowledge or confront. Our nation enjoys enormous wealth, yet we cling to our possessions rather than share. We have failed to embody the covenant of life to which our God calls us; hurricane Katrina revealed to the world those left behind in our own nation by the rupture of our social contract. As a nation we have refused to confront the racism that exists in our own communities and the racism that infects our policies around the world. We confess that we have failed to raise a prophetic voice loud enough and persistent enough to call our nation to seek just economic structures so that sharing by all will mean scarcity for none. In the face of the earth’s poverty, our wealth condemns us. Lord, have mercy.

“Sisters and brothers in the ecumenical community, we come to you in this Assembly grateful for hospitality we don’t deserve, for companionship we haven’t earned, for an embrace we don’t merit. In the hope that is promised in Christ and thankful for people of faith in our own country who have sustained our yearning for peace, we come to you seeking to be partners in the search for unity and justice. From a place seduced by the lure of empire we come to you in penitence, eager for grace, grace sufficient to transform spirits grown weary from the violence, degradation, and poverty our nation has sown, grace sufficient to transform spirits grown heavy with guilt, grace sufficient to transform the world. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Amen.”

And so my sermon on interruptions, on the need for us to take stock of how we let God intercede, on how we need to let God in. These are some devastating words supplied by a letter that was released late last night. In it, we are all indicated, *and* we are all set free with God’s grace. And so, here we sit, comfortable and warm. God’s grace has set us free. Inspired by that gift, let us be courageous enough to interrupt our comfort and risk responding to the needs of all God’s people. Thanks be to God. Amen.