

Interrupted

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Mark 5:21-43³⁵ While Jesus was saying this, some messengers came from Jairus' house and told him, "Your daughter has died. Why bother the Teacher any longer?"
- Proverbs 14 (selected verses)²⁹ If you stay calm, you are wise, but if you have a hot temper, you only show how stupid you are.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: What we experience as "interruptions" can present opportunities to serve in unanticipated ways.

Many of you may recognize the name but not the face of our church's Office Administrator Crystal Duffield. You see her name every week. When you hold a bulletin or read a newsletter, you are connecting with one of the many, many things she does for our church every week... except this past week. Crystal was on vacation. I'm glad she took vacation. She deserves it. She's earned it. And if she was trying to play a practical joke on our Director of Christian Education Lisa Watts or our custodian Paul Piscitelli or me, she really pulled a good one.

It actually began last Sunday when Lisa and I discovered that the church's computer system was down. Must have been the result of the heavy storms that had hit our area in the days previous. We weren't able to connect to the internet, which means our computers can't talk to each other or print to our copier. We could turn on our computers, but that was just about it. Crystal normally is our liaison with our computer system vendor... but on Monday morning, Lisa and I came prepared to set aside what we planned to do in order to get our computer network back up to speed. I determined the extent of our internet problem and she contacted and followed up with our "IT guy" until our computer system was up and running again that afternoon. That's when we could get back to our normal work.

That's also when we discovered that our phone system wasn't working properly. I did some trouble-shooting while Lisa contacted our telecom provider. Somehow, that problem was resolved; I'm still not entirely clear how that happened.

Then Wednesday morning Lisa and I pulled into the parking lot at about the same time to discover that a blacktop resurfacing crew had started to spray the new coating on the parking lot. We knew they were coming sometime. We didn't know they were coming that day. They were supposed to call us the day before... and maybe they did... but maybe it was when our phones were misbehaving.

I located the crew's supervisor. I learned that they were not going to do one-half of the parking lot that day and the other half the next day, as they've done in years past. No, they were blocking off all of our driveways and our entire parking lot to seal the whole thing that day. After Lisa and I had an emergency strategy meeting in the hallway, she and I got on the phone immediately to contact other employees coming in that morning, and the prayer group that planned to show up at 10:30, and the Men's A.A. group that would expect to meet here that night.

Oh, and then rain on Wednesday afternoon forced the blacktop crew to stop their work halfway through, so they kept the main part of the parking lot roped off so they could come back the next day to finish spraying the sealant.

Now, despite what it might sound like, I'm not complaining. But realize that those were not the only things Lisa and I had to do last week. In addition to managing all of those unexpected developments, Lisa had meetings to plan for, Sunday school materials to prepare, assignments to work out; I had this service and a memorial to plan, two sermons to write, two bulletins to prepare, people to meet, meetings to attend, other stuff.

But for me and especially for Lisa, this past week was filled with a variety of interruptions – interruptions that ordinarily we would have been spared because Office Administrator Crystal Duffield would have intercepted them and handled them.

I thought quite a bit about interruptions this week. I thought about how often in the Bible it seemed that interruptions were the norm rather than the exception. Think of the life of the apostle Paul.

- The book of Acts tells us that his call to serve Jesus came when a startling vision interrupted his trip from Jerusalem to Damascus where he was headed to seize followers of Jesus (cf. Chap.9).
- One of Paul's preaching tours was interrupted when he and his colleague Silas were arrested and imprisoned in Philippi (cf. Chap. 16).
- Sometime later religious traditionalists had Paul arrested again, interrupting a preaching tour that had brought him to the Jerusalem temple (cf. Chap. 21).
- And when he was being extradited to Rome to appeal his arrest before the Emperor, even that voyage was interrupted... by a shipwreck of all things! (cf. Chaps. 27-28).

For that matter, Jesus himself always seemed to be getting interrupted. His life was a continuous stream of interruptions. "How many times do we read that Jesus was 'on the road to...' or 'on His way to...' when something significant happened?"¹

Today's gospel reading actually told two stories. Jesus was heading to the home of a Jewish Council member named Jairus to visit his little girl who was very sick. On the way there, Jesus had that encounter with the woman who had suffered from chronic hemorrhaging. That woman and the crowd she was in interrupted Jesus in his travels to the point that when he resumed his trip to the home of Jairus, people came to tell him, "Don't bother. You took too long. The little girl died." They thought that the interruption cost the little girl her life. Of course, we know that Jesus pressed on, by some miracle healed the girl and restored her to her family.

So was the interruption a nuisance? Not to the woman who had suffered chronic hemorrhaging. Was the interruption costly? Not to the little girl who was restored to her family.

So why do we assume that interruptions are a bother or a burden?

[Theologian] Henri Nouwen wrote of a now-famous conversation which helped him think about interruptions as something other than a bother. He writes, "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 know . . . my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work."

...Nouwen went on to be transformed by the professor's statement. He 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 . . . 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."

[What if we saw interruptions as a gift? What if, instead of resisting them out of frustration, we saw them as an opportunity to be open to God?]²

It can be hard to learn to view interruptions as opportunities.

- When you're up against a deadline, whether it is to get dressed and hit the road for an appointment, or to finish a report for the boss, an unexpected visit or request or phone call or task adds stress to the situation.
- Kids, when your parents tell you to pause your video game and take out the trash, that interruption can be irritating. But how much more irritating would it be if the trash didn't

¹ "The God of Interruptions" by Cynthia Ruchti in *Guideposts* at <https://www.guideposts.org/faith/daily-devotions/christian-devotionals/the-god-of-interruptions>, accessed 8/18/2016

² "Our interruptions are our work" by Jenny Williams in *Faith & Leadership* at <https://www.faithandleadership.com/jenny-williams-our-interruptions-are-our-work>, accessed 8/18/2016

get taken out and your parents had to interrupt you many more times to kill the ants that had overrun your house?

- Parents, you just want to finish reading the paper or checking email but your child keeps interrupting with questions about when dinner will be or what it will be or where a favorite toy is or how birds can poop while they're flying or can the automatic garage door mash a potato....

Yes, it can be hard to learn to view interruptions as opportunities.

Irish author and scholar C.S. Lewis is best known for his "Chronicles of Narnia" fantasy series. We can only imagine how often, while trying to write, that he would be interrupted by his students or colleagues or family. But Lewis once observed, "The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's 'own,' or 'real' life. The truth is of course that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life -- the life God is sending one day by day."³

I can think of only one instance in the scriptures where Jesus appeared annoyed by an interruption – Matthew Chapter 15 tells of a time when Jesus and the disciples had gotten away for a brief retreat. When a Canaanite woman – clearly an idol-worshiper – appeals for him to remove a demonic spirit that has possessed her daughter, at first Jesus seems peeved by the interruption to his "R&R." But even then, when he realizes the depth of her faith in him, he commends her and heals the daughter.

Jesus was focused. He was focused on trying to live according to the will of God his Heavenly Father. But he would not allow his mood to be spoiled by interruptions that diverted his attention, interruptions that made demands of his time and energy, interruptions that raised obstacles to his planned course of action. He chose to see interruptions as opportunities to serve perhaps in ways he hadn't anticipated.

What would it mean to you if for the rest of this day you tried to thank God for the interruptions that arise in your life? See how many times you can genuinely thank the Lord for interruptions today. And then look for the blessing that arose unexpectedly because what you thought was an interruption turned out to be the guidance of God's hand gently directing you in a way you hadn't anticipated.

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³ – C.S. Lewis, [The Collected Works of C.S. Lewis](http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/interruptions) at <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/interruptions>, accessed 8/18/2016