

INTERRUPTIONS

Sermon preached by K.C. Ptomey, Jr.

February 15, 2009

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scripture: Mark 1:40-45

Introductory Words Before the Sermon

I've got some good news and I've got some bad news.

The Good News is that Jon is recuperating well from the surgery last Monday and although he is extremely exhausted, he's in good spirits and deeply appreciative of your prayers and other expressions of concern and support.

The bad news is that Jon will be gone for at least 8 to 10 weeks and in his absence you're stuck with me!

Last Sunday in his sermon Jon mentioned the preaching group, the Moveable Feast, of which he and I are members. He said "We're not all good preachers but we love to preach and have tolerant congregations." Jon is one of the truly good preachers in our group. I trust that during the next several weeks you will prove to be among the tolerant congregations of which Jon spoke.

I am not naïve. I know why Jon asked me to fill in for him. I'm here to do what all visiting preachers are expected to do, make the real preacher look good. I'll do my best! By the time Jon gets back in this pulpit you will be overjoyed to see him and not simply because he has regained his health.

Already you have extended wonderful hospitality to me. I thank you. And want you to know that I feel enormously grateful to Jon and to your Session for the invitation to serve you for these several weeks. This is a fabulous church with a great history and a dynamic ministry in the City of New York. I am delighted to be here.

"My interruptions are my ministry." I've heard ministers say that. I have even heard a few sermons on that theme. The sermons usually go something like this: There was a time when I resented interruptions. I'd be in the middle of writing a sermon or preparing a lesson, and someone would knock on my study door or call me on the phone. Then it takes fifteen minutes to regain my train of thought. But over the years I have found that often interruptions lead to significant conversation, or a deeper relationship, or an insight into a new avenue of service.

So let me state without equivocation on this first day of my ministry among you, that interruptions are *not* my ministry. I need time to think, to read, to ponder, to create.

Sermon writing and teaching don't come easy to me. I have to work at it; and in order to do it well, I need several hours of uninterrupted time each week.

Early in my ministry a friend and mentor said to me, "If you are going to be available in any quality way on Sunday to the several hundred people to whom you preach, you cannot be available every hour of every day of the week." Those words have been a comfort to me over the years. And a salve for my conscience also for the considerable guilt I have felt about locking myself away in my study for hours at a stretch. You can understand then how relieved I was when on my first visit here a couple of weeks ago Jon led me up the three or four flights of steps to the Fosdick hideaway in the south building. When I laid my eyes on that isolated, quiet space, it was crystal clear that the Holy Spirit had surely led me to this church.

I read that when Harry Emerson Fosdick was at the Riverside Church he had a study across town, far from the church and not only did he isolate himself there to study and write but he also had a home on a private island in Maine to which he withdrew every summer – no interruptions there to be sure.

My conscience is clear. I'll not feel guilty about the fact that interruptions are *not* my ministry.

In our text for the morning, we find Jesus in what Mark refers to as a deserted place.¹ As Mark tells it, the previous day had been a busy one. Jesus called several disciples, cast a demon out of a man in the synagogue at Capernaum, and healed Simon's mother-in-law of a fever. Apparently word got out in the surrounding countryside and people came from everywhere, seeking healing. Mark says Jesus cast out many demons and cured many people of all kinds of diseases.² Perhaps this is why very early the next morning Jesus slips away to a deserted place.

But wouldn't you know it, no sooner than he finds a quiet place, his disciples interrupt him. Mark puts a sharp edge on it, "His disciples *hunted for him*."³ "Everyone is searching for you," they say.⁴

It would appear, however, that Jesus will not be interrupted. "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do."⁵ If he is going to stay on point, if he is going to do what he is primarily called to do, he can't be interrupted by the multitude of people in the previous town, who seek his attention.

¹ Mark 1:35 (NRSV). Subsequent citations are from Mark, unless otherwise indicated.

² 1:33-34.

³ 1:36.

⁴ 1:37.

⁵ 1:38.

Then another interruption - Jesus is confronted by a leper. Mark tells us that it makes Jesus mad. Now, I know the New Revised Standard Version says “he was moved with pity.” But a more accurate translation of the text is “he was angered.”⁶ Scholars have different opinions about why he was angry. One says it was because leprosy was a manifestation of evil.⁷ Another thinks it was because the leper admitted that Jesus could heal him, but doubted that he would. Or it could be Jesus was angered that this disease and the attitude toward it had the power to reduce a person to such a pitiful state.⁸ And, get this, some commentators say Jesus is angry because the leper has interrupted his primary mission.⁹

Mark is a clever storyteller. He shapes this narrative in such a way that Jesus’ interruptions become the occasion for the enactment of the mission for which he comes into the world. Or one could say, I hate to admit it, but one could say that Mark’s story reveals that Jesus’ interruptions are in fact his ministry!

Among scholars there is disagreement about the nature of the disease that the Bible refers to as leprosy. But whatever the medical analysis, in Jesus’ day the most terrible aspect of leprosy was that it alienated people from community. Lepers were ostracized. Listen to what the Book of Leviticus says about people with this disease.

The person who has the leprosy disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean”...He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.¹⁰

The most destructive aspect of leprosy was the way in which it disrupted human community, the way it alienated people from human contact, human compassion, human caring. In touching this leper Jesus, then, steps into solidarity with him. Jesus draws him into relationship, into community. And that is what his whole ministry was about, wasn’t it? It was a ministry of reconciliation, of bringing human beings into relationship with God and one another.

It should not surprise us, then, that Jesus’ ministry was controversial. In his cultural context religion often led to the building and maintenance of boundaries between lepers and others, between the clean and the unclean, between the holy and the unholy, the righteous and sinners, between the sacred and the profane.¹¹

⁶ George Telford, “Mark 1:40-45,” *Interpretation*, (January 1982), p. 55. This is a brilliant article, and I am deeply indebted to Telford for his insights that contributed much to my understanding of this passage.

⁷ Werner Kelber

⁸ A.M. Hunter

⁹ James Luther Mays, George Telford.

¹⁰ Leviticus 13:45-46.

¹¹ Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 40.

Jesus' ministry was and is controversial precisely because it displays boundary-breaking power. Jesus' miracles demonstrate his desire to bring people closer to God and each other.

Several weeks ago the "Mystery Worshipper" visited this church. Like a restaurant critic, the Mystery Worshipper drops in unannounced and samples the worship life of the church. You got a pretty good review! Well, I'm no stealth critic, but last Sunday I dropped in for the first time and you know what impressed me most? Well, in addition to the beauty of the sanctuary and the quality of music in this place, and the competence of the staff, you know what impressed me? How many children there are in this place! Some might think that having all these children in worship interrupts the liturgy, the quiet, the sacredness of the moment. Some might think pausing in the service to make a special place for children to gather here on the chancel steps for prayer interrupts an otherwise dignified service. But not you! I haven't heard a single negative comment about the place of children in the life of the church. They don't interrupt our worship. They are part of our ministry aren't they? They are the future of the church, aren't they? They are the promise of a more just and loving and peaceful world, aren't they? That is, if we embrace them not as an interruption but as an opportunity for ministry. An opportunity to shape the faith and faithfulness of the next generation.

Jon can't brag on you too much, you might be tempted to the sin of pride. But, while Jon's away, I can and I will brag on you. (After all, I am temporary around here. I'll leave soon and he'll have to deal with your pride.) You show evidence of a profound understanding that your interruptions can and often are your ministry.

Early in chapter one Mark writes, "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ..." And there follows story after story of Jesus' allowing himself to be interrupted by those who need his healing touch; who need his preaching and teaching to be sure, but who need as much or more to be included in the embrace of his love and care "Follow me," he says, to Simon and Andrew and James and John, who interrupt their fishing and follow as he begins to reach out and teach them to reach out in love to outcasts, the diseased, the ostracized, the demon possessed. He embodies God's loving embrace of all of God's children. But here's the kicker: He looks us straight in the eye and says, "Follow me. Embrace with me all of God's children. Reach across the boundaries and the fences and the walls, across the prejudices and the fears that alienate God's children from one another. Follow me."

Many years ago, in fact during the time when Jimmy Carter was president, you will remember that a number of Americans were captured and held in Iran. Anger toward Iran and toward those of the Muslim faith was nowhere more intense than in the State of Texas where I was serving at the time. It happened that one of the members of that congregation rented rooms to college students and one of those students living in her home was Iranian. One day, over the back fence, her neighbor confronted her. "Why are continuing to allow that Iranian to rent from you?" "Because," my parishioner answered,

“because I am a Christian, darn it!” (She used stronger language than that but I’ll not go there on my first Sunday with you.) “Because I am a Christian, darn it.”

One might say that she allowed an interruption of her politics and of her prejudice for the sake of the ministry to which Christ was calling her in that moment.

I don’t know about you, but I know about myself that often I wish to avoid such interruptions of my politics and my prejudices. I just want those in need of love, of a hospitable, non-judgmental embrace, to go away and not interrupt me or my church!

Last Sunday Jon invited me to stand with him at the front door following the service. It was an extraordinary experience. A huge interruption was occurring in the life of this congregation and its pastor. He was going into surgery and would be out for several months. You would have a temporary preacher whom you do not know. And in addition, you are in the middle of a capital campaign. What terrible timing for the interruption of a pastor’s and a church’s life.

In his sermon last Sunday Jon challenged you to accept this interruption as an opportunity for ministry. It took you no longer than the moment when you reached the front door after the service to accept Jon’s challenge. You reached out to him with hugs and words of encouragement and support. You wrapped your love around him and you assured him of your prayers. You became pastors to your pastor. This untimely interruption has become a ministry.

It took me only one week to become aware of a major interruption in the life of this church – a capital campaign. Who needs it in the midst of this economy! To your credit you are two-thirds of the way to your goal and it appears that you’ll get there. But, success in raising the money leads to another major interruption: your buildings are going to be in chaos, programs and offices and classes are going to be relocated. It’s going to be a mess around here!

But, of course, these interruptions are all about ministry, to children, to the homeless and the hurting and the least of God’s beloved children. You made a decision years ago that these buildings would be used in ministry seven days a week. It makes for chaos around here most of the time, and lots of interruptions. But it’s your ministry. Christ called, “follow me” and you did and you do.

“Interruptions are my ministry.” I’ve heard people say that. The longer I live the more I realize the truth of it.

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