

**Convocation Worship Service
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Luke 8:40-56

Grace-full Interruptions

Twenty-five years later, things have changed at YDS, among them, chapel, where worship is now organized around the daily lectionary. The passage we heard from Luke belongs to this particular day. I was asked to consider it, and I'm glad for this, because imbedded within these well-known healing stories lie powerful truths for the church that still reads and sweats them.

My seminary days are mostly a blur, begun when I was just twenty-one. I was mostly an emotional mess, confused, deeply uncertain about what I was doing here. As for that, I managed my work well enough, but oddly I have only scattershot memories of specific events and moments. I remember well my room in Brainerd. And Jim Dittes and his infamous class, "Commitment and Alienation." (I was pretty strong on the alienation side of things then.) Extending the three-year M.Div. program into five, eventually I found myself convinced of ordination. I was less sure about the denominational piece, but it has all worked out pretty well. I am, however, quasi-amused that I'm back here doing this, tracking the distance of my life between then and now.

While preparing these thoughts another memory came to me, about Harry Adams. I couldn't tell you which year it was, but sometime in the mid-seventies in the middle of a lecture on sermon preparation professor Adams suddenly stopped short and said something like this: "I want to interrupt this talk with a word about interruptions. They will inevitably happen to you. A day will soon come when you believe you are preparing your most erudite and important message upon which hangs the very souls of your congregation or at least your future ministry among them, when a difficult individual barges into your office or a crisis finds you on the telephone and you will need to drop what you're doing and attend to the interruption. Let me tell you right now that your ministry is all about the interruptions." Then he picked up his lecture where he had left it.

For some reason that bit of wisdom lodged in my mind like the bright North Star on that day, and now, some decades later, I find trap doors opening revealing depths of meaning within it I hadn't suspected back then.

We all know the worn cliché: Life is what happens when you've planned something else. Such bits of wisdom reach the status of cliché because they so obviously capture a piece of the truth. Tracking the course of our lives, wouldn't most of us say but for the interruptions to our plans, we would not be the persons we've become?

Like you, I've heard many persons tell the tale of their life over the years. If I were to include my own, I've learned that most, if not all, profound spiritual awakenings come as interruptions, surprises. Afterwards we find them woven into our spiritual fabric, but at their first occurrence, we were unprepared. And haven't those of us who've been at this for a while learned that the really spiritual mature individuals we know are those who are in a sort of constant ready state for the new thing God intends? They're on the lookout for it; they have an instinct for it.

And of course this models the Jesus we find in the Gospels; we might even give him another name: "The Great Interruption," or perhaps, "The Great Interrupter." The power brokers thought they could put an end to the interruption, but here we all sit. And so it continues.

And so we read of the hemorrhaging woman and the healing of Jairus's daughter, multilayered stories intermingled by the dynamics of interruptions. On the way to heal the interruption of disease and death of one young daughter, Jesus is interrupted by another anonymous woman reaching out from the crowd.¹

Here's what we know about her: once she had money and position, but she spent all she had on physicians. Sounds intriguingly contemporary so far. For twelve years she has hemorrhaged trying all possible means to relieve her misery. Notice the number twelve, the age of the young daughter. The Levitical codes stipulated that, if a woman hemorrhages for many days and not at the time of her impurity, she shall remain unclean. Every bed on which she lies shall be treated as the bed of impurity; everything on which she sits shall be unclean. Whoever touches these things shall be unclean and shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until the evening.

This woman is an outsider of the first order. By religious proscription she should not be out in public because anyone who touches her, or even touches the chair she sits upon, would be tainted. She has a great physical agony, she has been stripped of her wealth, but more: she has a social and spiritual agony. She has become an untouchable.

She is bold, however. She has that spiritual instinct. Risking a breach of the religious mores, she interrupts Jesus' journey to Jairus's house and extends her hand to him in a spontaneous act of faith. Or is it desperation (Does it matter what we name it)?

Confronted by Jesus, she spills out her story and is in turn surprised by his reception. Though he's already engaged in a matter of some import with a prominent member of the community, he responds to her with compassion, calls her "daughter," giving her a rank and position equal to that of the sick 12-year-old daughter of the leader of the synagogue.

As Luke recounts the tale, Jesus takes these interruptions and twists them into an interruption of the social conventions of his day to create a new sort of community. We all see it clearly, right? Just who deserves the name “daughter,” and who doesn’t? In this series of small, unplanned, surprising events, Jesus cracks the barriers of clean/unclean, up/down, and in/out. A desperate person at the top of the ladder and another at the bottom, both reach out to Jesus in their need, and through his compassionate response he reveals their true genetics.

Like Harry Adams said, “Ministry is all about the interruptions.” Now, most likely, he had something more homely in mind back then; something more basic to the everyday experience for those of us who thought what we had to say was going to be so very important.

Since then I have found the harder, sometimes excruciating task has been to listen for what the Spirit has to say. For when the Spirit speaks, her voice invariably ruffles the feathers of those who believe they otherwise have the social and religious mores of the day nailed. It’s no accident my saying it that way; after all, they nailed Jesus to a tree.

Of course, at our most mature we confess that “we” and “they” tend to blur into one and the same.

This is part of the perplexing mystery we attempt to mediate. Our situation is complicated. We are the handlers of a severe mercy. We often operate within a world of our own devising, blind to the imperatives of the truth we hold.

I vividly experienced this standing in the chapel of the castle at Cape Coast, Ghana, West Africa, an important embarkation point for the trans-Atlantic slave trade. There the floor of the Christian chapel doubled as the ceiling of the dungeon, which held tens and hundreds of thousands of slaves over tens and hundreds of years—captured, bound and sold for distant shores and, most tellingly, deemed unworthy of Christian mercy. The faithful standing on the heads of the slaves, as it were, who fully defended their economies for many centuries with sacred scriptures to excluding, deadly effect.

In the preface to his *Three Gospels*, Reynolds Price writes, “The church in most of its past and present forms has defaced...whole broad aspects of Jesus’ teaching; but in no case has the church turned more culpably from his aim and his practice than in its hateful rejection of what it sees as outcasts: the whores and cheats, the traitors and killers, the baffled and stunned, the social outlaw, the maimed and hideous and contagious.”²

That’s a devastating critique. Hard to argue with. On the other hand, we have also within our flawed tradition the seeds of the antidote. Most importantly, we worship at the altar of The Great Interruption, that living Spirit of Christ who calls us to join him in interrupting the easy, given conventions of the day that leave so many sons and daughters for dead outside the door of his home.

Part of the Mystery with which we’ve been entrusted includes serving a gospel of Hope, capital “H”. Such a hope the world has a hard time grabbing on to. Such a hope even we have a

hard time grabbing on to. Hope of such staggering proportions that most likely it would blow the roofs off our churches if it were fully embraced.

Generally, I find Christians approach this hope with a tentative tenderness – when desperate enough, we’ll reach out our hand to touch Jesus and call it faith, and he’ll give us the benefit of the doubt, thank God. Thank God!

But I now yearn to be among those who are in the constant ready state for the new thing God intends. That’s consistent with what I learned here over twenty-five years ago, and I’m trusting it will keep things pretty interesting for the next twenty-five.

¹ see Charles L. Campbell’s commentary on the same story in Mark 5:21- 43 in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2001, p. 209ff.

² Reynolds Price, *Three Gospels*, Scribners, New York, 1996, p.33.

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