

“The Interrupted Life”

Sermon for Sunday, June 6th, 2010 by The Rev. Joe Summers

Last Thursday night we celebrated Penny’s retirement party. Then on Friday Donna and I drove to Madison where on Saturday we attended various events connected to a memorial gathering for our friend Dave Austin, who died a year ago. Sunday we went to Chicago to the wedding of the son of some dear friends of ours. Monday we drove back. This week there’s been all the stuff of catching up with daily life in our parish and . . . Ruby’s graduation, a Nicaragua Project breakfast event, an Oasis service, the annual Prison Creative Arts Project Board gathering, and, in the midst of it all, the horrifying news of Israel’s attack on an aid convoy that killed at least eight people trying to get aid to those whom Israel is holding captive in Gaza.

One of the things I struggle with in my life is interruptions. Sometimes my life can seem like one big interruption. I spoke recently about “Days like days and days not like days.” Many of those “days not like days” are days where interruptions happen such that, at the end of the day, little of what I set out to do has gotten done. At its worst, interruptions seem to pile up on each other, such that I end up not really being able to focus on anything. If our capacity for attention is one of our most precious gifts, then not being able to focus is a serious waste of something incredibly precious. I heard this week that constant distractions, such as spending a lot of time on the internet each day, profoundly reduces our capacity for a deeper kind of engagement, a deeper kind of listening, a deeper kind of thinking. I think this is part of why I’ve always loved the writings of Thomas Merton. His emphasis on solitude and contemplation seems to take you in the opposite direction. As I get older, I find myself longing for the kind of contemplative life where each day has a kind of set order to it, silence, and a deepened capacity for listening and engagement.

One of the reasons why we center our life as a church in the reading of the gospels is that we believe that, in Jesus, we can see what it is to live the life of the wholly beloved, the life of one who knows God’s acceptance, love, and affirmation of them and what a difference that awareness makes. In Jesus we can see what it is to lead a life led by the Holy Spirit, what it is to have the Holy Spirit work in you and through you for the restoration and healing of others and the world. Yet sometimes what we hear, if we’re able to hear it at all, doesn’t necessarily sound like good news.

One of the things that strikes me in today's gospel is that Jesus' life was filled with one interruption after another. He's on his way here or there. Someone or some group stops him, and this person, or people, or situation, seems to demand a response. Rather than saying, "Hey... I'm sorry I'm in the midst of doing such and such, so I'll get back to you," Jesus responds -- then and there. While much of Jesus' ministry seems to have been a series of interruptions, for Jesus, these interruptions were clearly not interruptions. They were what was important: a Centurion who had a slave who was dear to him who was gravely ill, a widow whose only son had died, signaling her own social death in that patriarchal culture, people hungering to understand more about God and God life. For those of us who like our plans, who take satisfaction from making lists of things we want to get done each day and then checking them off, this is a message so challenging--we may not want to hear it.

We are called to love others as we love ourselves, so this is not about never being able to do what we want to do. It's not about always having to set our priorities aside. We wouldn't wish that for anyone. But it does mean remembering this strange mystery of time and being human and that moments come to us and, in these moments, there are opportunities that we either realize or they are lost: the moment where something can be heard or understood which has eluded us, the moment where we are open to being loved or encouraged or challenged, the moment where we are able to be vulnerable and to be touched, the moment where we are up to taking a real risk.

When we think about our special memories, those times when we really felt alive or happy-- the fact that they are so often fairly brief encounters is testimony to the power of moments where somehow we were exceptionally open to the universe, often in the form of some person who met us in that moment, who was able to be present to us, just when we were able to be present. It might be a little walk down the beach they took with us (without our sisters or brothers), or staying up late one night to have some kind of special talk with us, or the way they met us with compassion and kindness when we interrupted their work or their sleep, because there was something we really needed. Those moments seem to me to often be about the unexpected, a moment when some kind of space was created for real intimacy. These encounters, these moments, have so much to do with what enables us to keep on keeping on. We can give these powerful moments to others if... we are willing to set our agenda aside and embrace them.

It's not an easy thing. When Jesus tells Peter that, when he was young, he went where he wanted, but when he is old, he will be led by others where he would rather not go--- I don't think he's just talking about how Peter was going to die. I think it's a message about what it is to live a life with a big heart and being led by the Spirit. If often means being led in the opposite direction from where you were headed.

Knowing where to focus our attention is not simple or obvious. Often behind someone's initial approach is a much more serious question or need that they are not even aware of. Other times, people can be simply inconsiderate. It's easy to misjudge what/who we really need to focus our love and attention on. When Jesus said each day, "Pick up your cross and follow me", I think he was partly talking about our being willing to dwell in this ambiguity and to be willing to let go of our agenda and trust that, if we give ourselves in love, we will ultimately be led in the paths we are needing to walk.

Parenthood can at times seem like one endless distraction. There are so many concrete things you have to do to like: trying to make sure your kids are well fed, clothed, sheltered, have their basic needs met, are successful in school, learn how to work hard, develop good core values, relate well to others. The list of goals are so over the top that, even if you worked day and night and did nothing else with your life, you still wouldn't have the time to get them all done. In the meanwhile, if you get too caught up in your goals and seeing that they get done--- you deprive your child of what they are perhaps most needing: the attention of one who appreciates them, likes them, can see the good in them even when they can't see it in themselves. This is so vital, because they are surrounded by mirrors that distort their perception of themselves that say, if they are not x y or z, they are not worthy of respect, worthy of love.

When you love your children so much that you want the world for them, and there are so many things to do, it can be so much easier to focus on doing the concrete stuff, making the money, cleaning the house, making sure they brush their teeth, than to create the space to simply enjoy them and/or to really listen to what they're thinking or going through. In the midst of all we have to do, we need to get good at listening for that quiet knock at the door that says--"this is the moment to set those things aside and really be fully present to the one knocking at the door." Often it is these little moments that bring the dead back to life.

We also need to get good at listening and responding, when the knock comes from within.

Maybe it's the sudden inspiration to do something we've been meaning to do for a long time: to write a poem, to take a walk, to see someone. Can we give ourselves the permission to love ourselves by letting go of our agenda and following those calls? Can we do it each day? What happens to us and our hearts if we don't? Do we always postpone responding to these quiet knocks, because someone else's needs always seem to be the priority? If so, that's not loving others as we love ourselves; that's not loving ourselves!

Loving ourselves is also terribly important because it tends to dictate our capacity for loving others. We hear the importance of self love in the excerpt from Paul's letter to the Galatians which we heard today. Paul's enemies are trying to get people to reject Paul's vision of the inclusive nature of the Gospel by saying that he's not an apostle at all, he's a secondary apostle, one whose authority is derivative from others. It's a testimony to how much Paul really felt known, accepted, and loved by God that he doesn't have to build himself up before such criticism. "Yes you're right" he says, "I did come to Christianity after Jesus already died. I am like one untimely born. Yes, I can be a royal pain in the butt. I am the least of all the apostles, but I am an apostle. I have seen the risen Lord, and so I'm not going to back down from what I see to be true --even if you can't handle it. Even if so much of the tradition contradicts the vision I have received." Paul would not let them shut the door on grace, and it made such a difference. That's the power of loving yourself. It's about something so much bigger, so much wiser, than our egos. And we'll only be able to find our way to loving others with this kind of power, if we also find our way to letting ourselves be loved.

Looking for balance between responding to the outer knocks and the inner knocks, I think of the author Tillie Olsen trying to balance her life as a writer and a working class mother, and how it seemed so hard for her, as a mother who deeply loved her children and was able to see what they were up against, and had to work to make a living, to carve out even little spaces for the kind of attention that writing demands. And yet, though Tillie may not have had the kind of time for writing that she wanted, it is no accident that each of her shorts stories are like diamonds which show us how life can still

shine through all the interruptions and worries of working class life.

So often, what may appear at first to be interruptions, prove to be far more important than whatever agenda we had imagined for ourselves. If we are going to be open to an agenda for our lives that is bigger than our own, an agenda that will call for gifts and capacities from us that we can't even imagine, its going to require us practicing letting ourselves be led, practicing being awake, or waking up, to whatever, whoever, is knocking on our door at any one moment in time so that---we can encounter ---eternity.

For Jesus says that, ultimately, the One knocking at our door is God, the one knocking at our door is the one who has the power to raise us back to life, the one who has the power to take our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh, and so often this happens through what we initially perceive as interruptions.

That's the lesson of the story we hear from First Kings today about the widow who sets aside an incredibly worthy agenda, one last meal with her son before they died, how could anything be more important than that? But the story tells us that by opening her heart a little further through feeding the stranger-- not only do they all live, but later this same stranger will return and bring her son back to life after he has died.

In the midst of all the demands of my life, I'm increasingly trying to simply focus on being present. I find that, the more present I can be, the more likely I am to make good judgments as to where to focus my attention, and the more likely I am to receive those gifts that each day has to bring. It's not easy. There are so many other voices crying out in pain or anger or fear, saying my worth is based on getting through my little check list, saying my worth is based on being able to look back and see a list of accomplishments, saying don't give this or that your full attention or you won't have any attention to spare for what you need to get done. I suspect they are the same voices that diverted the priest and the holy lawyer from helping the stranger who lay beaten and lying on the side of the road. I'm sure the Samaritan heard the same voices but he was somehow open to seeing that the one who lay on the side of the road was his brother, a fellow human being, so he could not but delay his trip, could not but help set aside what he was planning to do that day to befriend this man in need. And he didn't just do what was necessary. No. He went over the top in caring for him, leaving us a

lasting vision of what it means to really love our neighbor. He showed us how living the life of the beloved is ultimately not about us, it's about something that happens between us and the world, it is a holy mystery that again and again calls us to step out into a world that is chaotic and confusing, because that is where we will meet the Lord of life.

And if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.