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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
September 18, 2011
“Radical Hospitality: Two Directions At Once”
Matthew 9:18-26

One of the marks of daily life today is how frequently we have to deal with interruptions. You're trying to read a book when the phone rings, the cell phone vibrates, a new text message dings, the dog needs to be let out, the kids have a question, the dog needs to be let back in, and so on. While the variety of interruptions is greater now than in past years, the reality of having one's day interrupted is not new. There are lots of examples of this in the bible. Ask Noah, who was minding his own business when God told him a huge rainstorm was on its way. Ask Moses, who was tending sheep when he saw a burning bush. Ask Mary, whose prayer time was interrupted by an angel telling her of an unexpected pregnancy. Ask Peter, who was ready to launch his fishing boat when someone called him to a new profession. Ask Paul, who was riding hard for Damascus, when he was knocked off his horse and Christ set him on an entirely new life direction.

We plan out our days, but often something happens to change our plans. Sometimes God causes the disruption, since God is bigger than our day planners and refuses to be squeezed into available openings in our calendar. Remember: This is the “my ways are not your ways” God. This is the all-time God, the one who is Lord of the days of our lives; the Lord of all my children, yes, the Lord of the young and the restless, the bold and the beautiful, the One who is our true guiding light. And why is it important to remember this? Because (wait for it) we only have one life to live.

Now where was I? I seem to have gotten distracted. Ah yes, interruptions. Look at today's story from Matthew 9. Jesus has to deal with a double interruption. Jesus is talking to the followers of John the Baptist, telling them that now is a time to celebrate, not to fast. Now is a time for new ideas and new faith. Because if the new things are lived out in old ways, as when new wine is poured into old wineskins, things will tear and simply fall apart. Then came Interruption #1. A leader in the synagogue, a well-known person of some social standing, came forward and knelt down at Jesus' feet. He asked Jesus to lay a healing hand on his daughter, who has just died, believing that if he did so, the girl would live again. He is asking for more than a healing miracle; he is asking for resurrection. Jesus helped the man to his feet and off they went.

Before they'd gone any distance, a woman pushed her way forward and touched the fringe of Jesus' cloak. Now you likely already know the issues this woman was dealing with. She had a flow of blood, which made her ritually unclean. Anyone who touched her was also unclean and couldn't participate in the worship life of the temple unless they performed special ablutions. The woman had suffered from these hemorrhages for 12 years, so she was a social leper, far down the ladder of proper society. And as a woman in that day and age, she couldn't just walk up to Jesus and ask him to heal her; so she opted for Plan B, which was to sneak up behind Jesus and touch his garment, believing that touching even the fringe of his cloak would make her well.

But her touch was felt by Jesus and she immediately became Interruption #2. Jesus was now pulled in two directions at once. Help the man's daughter; help this daughter of Abraham. Help with an urgent need; help with the woman's chronic need. Respond to the powerful leader of the synagogue; take time for this woman from the margins. Jesus was doubly interrupted and now was being pulled in two directions.

This tug of war is not just a superficial one: help the man or help the woman. It is also a deeper, spiritual and existential one. Think about it. Should Jesus get involved or not? Should he help the well-connected man or take time for the outcast? Notice how the aspect of "touch" is so important in this narrative: the woman reaching in from the boundaries to touch even the fringe of Jesus' cloak that she might be saved, made well. Or later Jesus taking the dead girl by the hand, and with that touch, restoring her to life. These are not just acts of charity and compassion. With the woman, Jesus is bringing her back into society, tearing down the walls that said she was a second-class citizen in the world. And with the young girl, Jesus' restoration of her to life tears down the walls of a world that said young children are expendable, fathers grieving is just part of the expected routine, and there is no power on earth able to change those realities.

In acting on these interruptions, Jesus is pulled in two directions because of the people involved, and pulled in two directions about whether to challenge the existing social laws and customs. Jesus could have done a good deed for the powerful man on that day and yet, if he shrugged off the woman, his action would not have caused positive changes in how the larger society was structured. Help the influential leader of the synagogue and avoid the poor woman would have reinforced the idea that wealth and privilege are God-ordained. Jesus chose both to heal and make a statement about how society was structured. In the same way, Jesus could have made the miracles all about him, announcing "Yes, I cured the woman's flow of blood. And stay right here while I bring this young girl back to life." Those would still have been miraculous deeds, but the focus would have been solely on Jesus as a wonder worker. Instead, Jesus brings the marginalized woman forward and says to all "Daughter, your faith has made you well," empowering her as a person of worth in the eyes of the Lord, despite what the pious people around her thought of her.

And later, Jesus sent away the skeptical mourners with an amazing retort, "The girl is not dead but sleeping", announcing that the worldly powers we take for granted are neither absolute nor unyielding when considered in reference to our almighty God. Jesus acted in two directions at once – in a direct, hands-on, healing ministry and a larger, transformative, socially-engaged witness to the world. In keeping with our theme of the month, that is why his deeds of hospitality and mercy were radical.

I've packed a lot into this sermon so far. Let me give a couple quick illustrations to help flesh out these ideas a bit more. As Christians who serve Jesus Christ who is the Savior of the World, we need to have a global breadth of vision. I recently read an interesting statistic. During World War II, it's true that America played a critical role and over 143,000 American soldiers died in the fight against Germany. But what is seldom mentioned is that the Soviet Union in that same war lost 11 million people. To talk about World War II as if it only involved Eisenhower, Roosevelt, and Patton is to risk defining it

solely from our perspective and miss the larger perspective.¹ We need to balance American history and world history.

A second example. Young adults in India are bursting onto the global economic stage, hoping to get out of cycles of poverty by being entrepreneurs in today's fast-paced, Internet-connected world. One reporter described how they are busy learning skills from the business world like how to do SWOT analyses. How many of you have been to meetings where you look at your company in terms of SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats? Knowing this skill is good training, but is it good education? The reporter noted that these Indian students learned a lot about MBA skills but didn't know their own country's history: India's religious, political, and cultural riches; Asoka, Gandhi, Tagore.² Real learning about things like faith and morals takes depth learning. This is true for Indian students and American students. SWOT analysis can only get you so far. It is by moving in a second direction, in the direction of in-depth study, of knowing the spiritual and moral foundations that gives our nation its real strength.

Jesus had a double interruption which pulled him in two directions. He also responded to it by moving in two directions at once: responding to the persons involved and to the larger community context around him. He reached out one on one: healing the woman, raising the young girl – while also reaching out to cross barriers that were contrary to God's will for our common life together. He brought back into the circle of human fellowship the woman who'd been pushed to the margins for years. He treated her with respect, calling her "daughter" and making her equal to the male leader of the synagogue who was standing right there and anxious to get Jesus into his own house. And to the skeptics and cynics, seeing nothing beyond a sad reality of the fragile young girl and her grieving father, Jesus offered another narrative: a narrative of hospitality that is radical and life-changing; a story of resurrection, of new life, of Easter hope that turns all this world's wisdom into foolishness.

So what are we to do when we feel pulled in two directions at once? Remember that interruptions can be God-moments, times when we are pulled out of our daily lives and gain a glimpse of things eternal. Remember that as you decide what to do now, it's important to see things with the heart, to see the big picture and to look beyond the immediate to the larger reality of God's creation. And as we do our best, by grace, to respond in times of need, remember that all that is truly worthwhile in this life arises from a deeper truth – a truth revealed by a crucified Lord who became the Resurrected Savior. Before this truth, we are humbled; humbled like the woman who only dared to touch the fringe of the robe; humbled like the grieving father who fell on his knees before Jesus. But in each of their cases and in our cases, pulled in many directions as we might be, Christ is anxious to offer us the same words of comfort: "Take heart, your faith has made you well." Take heart, indeed.

AMEN

¹ From Adam Kirsch's review of Norman Davies book "No Simple Victory: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945" (2007); *New York Times Book Review*, May 29, 2011, p. 10.

² Anand Giridharadas, "The Caste Buster," *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 2, 2011, p. 41.