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Mark 10:46-52

“Interrupted”

Jesus was on a mission. It was his purpose and his destiny to go to Jerusalem for a confrontation with the political and religious authorities. The Gospels convey his resolve when they indicate Jesus “set his face” toward Jerusalem.

In our story today, he was nearing his destination. Jericho was only 20 miles northeast of Jerusalem. With his disciples and a large crowd in tow, his journey toward the Holy City continued. They were almost out of town when they heard the shouting: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Bartimaeus was a blind person begging on the side of the road. He was not part of the entourage. He was not committed to Jesus or his cause. He was not going to help Jesus in his quest to get to Jerusalem. In fact, many of those following Jesus saw Bartimaeus as a distraction, a hindrance. They told him to keep it down. “Hush,” the sternly ordered.

I don’t know about you, but as I imagine that scene, I think about experiences I’ve had on the street. How many of us have walked past people in need, at some point or another, people hoping someone will show mercy by offering their spare change? How do we respond when we’re rushing to get to work or hustling to catch a train and we see someone in obvious need?

I was in a group at the church this week, when someone shared a story about being in a place where there were a number of homeless people on the sidewalk. This person shared with us how she stopped and talked for a moment. At the close of the conversation, the homeless person said, “Thanks for talking with us. Most of the time, we’re invisible.”

If we’re honest, we’d have to admit there are people who tend to be rendered invisible: restaurant servers, people who bag groceries, the people who tidy up the hotel room. In fact, it’s not just strangers we encounter as we go through our day. In our haste and in our busyness, even family can become invisible to us: our kids, parents, or even a spouse.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not suggesting we’re obligated to stop and give money to everyone who asks. I’m not suggesting we are responsible to solve the problems of every person that crosses our path. I believe we need to maintain boundaries in order to function. But I am suggesting that those encounters we might define as interruptions, can be important opportunities.

Apparently, there were many in the crowd who thought Bartimaeus should be invisible. “Stop shouting! Stop making it difficult for us to ignore you as we walk by! We’re trying to do something important. We need to get to Jerusalem and you’re not helping.”

When they tried to quiet Bartimaeus, he shouted even more loudly. Did you notice Mark's description of how Jesus responded? He stood still. He became attentive. He waited in order to see who it was shouting off in the distance.

The crowd wanted to keep moving without interruption. "Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." In Mark's Gospel, Jesus doesn't often stand still. He was on a mission. He was on his way to Jerusalem for the defining event of his life and, for one blind beggar on the side of the road, he stopped everything.

I'm touched by that little detail in the story. It tells me that if Jesus will stand still for Bartimaeus, maybe he'll stand still for me. Maybe he'll stand still for you, in your time of need, when you cry out for mercy. Maybe there are times when the most important thing we can do for another person is to stand still, to stop what we're doing and pay attention to them.

There is no question that the cries of Bartimaeus were an interruption. Jesus was on a mission. He set his face like flint toward Jerusalem. One way to look at it is to say Jesus was just a good multitasker. He was able to accomplish great ministry despite interruptions. Another way to think of it is that interruptions were his ministry. Bartimaeus mattered enough to stop everything.

This isn't a particularly profound insight. I'm not saying anything that you haven't thought of before. But this story might serve as a reminder to us that, sometimes, the interruption is the important thing. The interruption might be God's attempt at redirecting our focus. We can't always drop everything and give another person 100% of our attention, but interruptions can be incredible opportunities.

When you're busy doing something, your daughter or granddaughter might ask, "Do you want to go out and shoot baskets with me?" That's an opportunity. Your son or grandson might interrupt while you are in the middle of something and ask, "Do you want to watch a movie with me?" That's an opportunity. You can't always say yes, but those moments could be opportunities to spend vitally important time together.

Probably many of you drove by the archaeological dig that went on this past week here on York Street. There was a team of workers digging and sifting through dirt for a number of days. I heard they welcomed visitors to watch them work and to ask questions.

I walked over on Thursday afternoon. One of the workers saw me approach and greeted me. I said, "I heard you don't mind observers." He said, "That's right. However, we are in a scramble today, because this is our last day and we want to get as much done as possible before we have to close up."

He went on to take the time to describe the whole project. I asked if they had found anything significant. One of the other workers came over to show me some pottery shards and pieces of silverware that were hundreds of years old. They welcomed interruptions. They wanted to stop what they were doing and interact with the public. They made interruptions part of their process.

I walked away thinking what a marvelous thing. I want to be able to welcome interruptions. When and where it's possible, I want to make efforts to make room for interruptions in my life. Who knows? Maybe they aren't just distractions. Maybe the interruption is God trying to pull me in a different direction. Maybe the interruption is exactly where God intends me to place my focus.

When they told Bartimaeus to get up, because Jesus was calling him, he threw off his cloak and sprang up. The throwing off the cloak was an indication he was willing to leave his old life behind. It was a gesture reminiscent of when Jesus called his first disciples from their boats. They left their nets and their father Zebedee and followed him.

The followers of Jesus wanted to hush Bartimaeus. In contrast, Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus didn't see this encounter as a distraction. He saw it as an opportunity. Bartimaeus responded, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go, your faith has made you well." The text says, "Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way."

When Jesus began his ministry he read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind..." The interruption that day on the road in Jericho wasn't a distraction from Jesus's ministry. It was his ministry. Jesus ministered to Bartimaeus. Then, Bartimaeus became a disciple. He went from fixture on the side of the road to follower.

I want to close this sermon with a prayer. A dear friend of mine and colleague wrote this prayer. He says it every day. He once shared it with his congregation and I want to share it with you. He prays:

Lord, I offer you this day. I will attempt to be open, willing, and available for the work you want me to do. I have a plan for this day, a schedule, an agenda. Those plans may or may not conform to your will. Therefore, I will try to be attentive to interruptions, inconveniences, and unexpected encounters as opportunities for your Spirit to break into my day and redirect my path. I will strive to be gracious, generous, and present to everyone around me, and in every situation I find myself in. This is the day you have made. I will rejoice and be glad in it. I offer all my energies and efforts to you in gratitude; with a desire to live more fully connected and committed to you. In your name I pray. AMEN

That interruption that comes while you're on your way to do something else, could be the most important thing. It could be a need God has placed in your lap in order to fill. The only thing required of us is to welcome the interruption.