

# The Ministry of Interruptions

*This sermon was preached by Pastor Heather Wigdahl on Sunday, June 28, 2009 at Trinity Lutheran Church.*

What is the difference between heaven and hell? An old Japanese tale, tells it like this: A young man dies suddenly—finds himself in a beautiful place. He wasn't particularly faithful, and he thinks to himself, "I must have been better than I thought!" The young man is escorted by an angel into a great banquet hall to a huge table set with all kinds of delicacies. He's seated then, with many others, and his plate is filled before him! *But...*when he picks up his fork to eat, he realizes he *can't* bend his elbows. A board is strapped to both his arms; he can't get food to his mouth. When he looks around, the same is true for everyone else: each is furiously trying to feed themselves to no avail. What he thought to be heaven, must surely be hell.

He asks the angel, "could I have *just* one glimpse of heaven?" The angel then whisks him off, yet to another huge banquet hall. There sits another great table, filled with equally delectable foods. Ah, this is heaven! Yet low and behold, the same boards are strapped to every arm! Dismayed, he sees no difference between heaven and hell...until he watches those seated more closely. Instead of desperately trying to feed themselves, they are simply reaching over to feel one another. Heaven and hell, such a small difference, but oh, how significant.

One of the goals, in New Testament is to make this distinction: to *teach us* the difference between heaven and hell. Now ancient people really didn't think of "hell" so much as a place as they did a "state of being." That is to say, HELL was thought of as the experience of being cut off from God. And HEAVEN: being connected to God; being in relationship *with* God.

When Jesus, as he often does, describes the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, he does not point to a PLACE—but rather to a *way of being, of seeing, of thinking, of living; a unique way of sharing life with God and with others*. In God's kingdom, there are promises for someday, but there are also promises for *everyday*.

Paul suggests in our first reading for this morning that we see a glimpse of heaven when he says: "*the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.*" He is quoting from the Old Testament story about manna from heaven. A little piece of heaven in God's kingdom is enacted whenever those who have, share and when those who need, receive.

In our gospel for today, Jesus shows us yet another glimpse of heaven, as he opens up a future for both a woman and a girl. Yet for Jesus to do so meant he must overstep social boundaries, and challenge the rules of the day. To touch or be touched by either of these women, meant that Jesus *himself* would become deemed “unclean” according to Jewish law.

The hemorrhaging woman, bleeding for 12 years, meant that she hadn’t been welcome in the temple for that long. She was ritually unclean, unholy. Blood in ancient Israel was considered to be one’s *life* force—for her to be bleeding for 12 years meant, that she was *literally* losing her life for that long. Neither should have Jesus touched the little girl, for when Jesus finally reaches her, she is already dead. To touch a dead body was completely taboo, unless preparing it for burial.

In spite of all this, Jesus heals them both. But the significance of their healing goes far beyond a physical cure. Jesus restores to life, the little girl—but, you know, she will still die one day. Jesus heals the woman, yet she likely will face some other illness or injury of some sort in her life, as we all do. She’ll die, one day too. The saving that Jesus does, opens up for them a future. Throughout the gospels, this is always the more significant miracle. Where once there was only death and darkness, in Christ now there is light and life.

Literally, in Greek, the word for healing is the same word for salvation, is the same word for “being made whole.” Where once there were ideas only of scarcity, now in faith Jesus shows us abundance. Where there once were ideas of exclusion and judgment, Jesus shows us acceptance and welcome. Where there were once only feelings of desperation and isolation, Jesus shows us hope and community.

And don’t we ALL need such healing? AND, can’t we all, at times, help to enact such healing, too? Wherever there is power in Christ, there is power in his body—in us.

Much has changed, I suppose, over 2000 years. And healing miracle stories like we hear this morning can feel sort of distant, even trite. But even through the veil of time, there is such *light* that shines through Jesus; light that shines through his insight into our human experience; light that shines through his response to the deepest parts of our human need. We yearn to feel accepted. We ache to be included. We long for a sense of IDENTITY, and connection, and purpose. Jesus always sees people fully. And Jesus never turns away.

You know, there is a pretty significant lesson from these stories that we often overlook, and it has to do with how the story begins. Jesus was smack dab in the middle of “doing

ministry,” of important work. The crowd was pressing in on him, likely ready for a sermon, expecting perhaps, that he had worked tirelessly to prepare some words of wisdom for them. But instead, what happens? He’s interrupted, right?

Do you know what that’s like? When you are in the middle of something really important to suddenly be interrupted, knowing that if you respond, you will never as fully get back to your task at hand.

I often spend Saturdays at home completing a sermon...and it’s like Eleanor has this radar...she can be so happily playing in her room and the moment I sit down to work, she is right there, with very different plans. I wish I could say that I always *respond* as graciously as Jesus.

Jesus, in fact, is interrupted twice. Interrupted first by the girl’s father and then by the nameless woman. You could say that even his interruption is interrupted!

Isn’t it true, that faith is *often* lived in such *moments of interruption*. When our day is going just according to plan...faith calls us to a detour; to stop our very important work and respond in some way to the real life needs of others.

Jesus’ disciples probably wondered how he would ever teach them anything if he continued to give in to every interruption. But Jairus and the woman **are** his teachings. Those interruptions **are** his ministry. And perhaps the ways we respond to the interruptions of our own lives become OUR discipleship too...and become yet another glimpse of heaven among us.

When you think about it, as a parent or as a friend, the most important moments in these relationships usually come in the unplanned; we can’t really schedule “good parenting” nor can we assign certain hours in our planner for when someone we love will need us. Be it at the bedside of someone ill, over coffee with someone struggling, in the middle of the night with someone aching, or just in the little moments here and there throughout the day—our faith is often lived in life’s interruptions.

Jesus calls us to use the power we have to be healers—to use our gifts, our talents, our resources, and our very presence. But first, we have to take notice. First, we may have to stop our very important work, so that we will allow the interruptions God places before us, to be what lead us forward in faith. That’s not always an easy thing to do, to see God IN our interruptions. But might I suggest this next week, when you find your day interrupted by someone who needs you, take it as a sign, that YOU have some healing power to share with them. And may you be blessed by your interruptions! Amen.