

# The Doctrine of 'Ministry Is in the Interruptions'

Pastor Laurie Hartzell's Sermon at First Presbyterian Church, Benton Harbor,  
Sunday, Oct. 13, 2019

## Luke 17:11-19

*On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."*

---

Look with me at the first line of this text for today. It says, "On the way to Jerusalem." Jesus is on his way somewhere when this happens. And Luke wants us to know that.

This is the picture I have in my head. Jesus and his disciples are on the road with a destination in mind: Jerusalem. They come into a village thinking they will be here for a bit, but not too long. Maybe they are thinking about what they will do when they get to Jerusalem. Where to stop for dinner. Whom to see. They are in an "in between" region between Samaria and Galilee. The Samaritans weren't people most good Jews trusted. The text doesn't tell us, but maybe they are walking a little faster, a little more on guard, through this village and this region.

Can you pull up any memories of when you were on your way somewhere? Maybe it was a trip that required a long car drive. You couldn't wait to get to that glorious destination or that hotel or to that city or to that relative's house. Or maybe it was an ordinary trip: You were on your way to the store or to school or to work. You might have been in a time crunch or not. But you wanted to get there.

Again, the text doesn't tell us Jesus' state of mind, but Luke does take the time to tell us that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He's going somewhere.

And then, a group of men come to him. Ten of them. And not just any men. They are men with leprosy, a skin disease that made people outcasts in those days. These men would be considered "unclean," and it would be dangerous for them to get too close. When I think of leprosy, I often think of when people were afraid to be even in the same room with people with AIDS. The text tells us that these men keep their distance. They know they are unclean and can't come near Jesus. But they want to see Jesus anyway.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and they interrupt his journey.

Help us, Jesus.  
Heal us.  
Have mercy!

Now again, the text doesn't tell us what Jesus is thinking or feeling at this moment. It does tell us that Jesus doesn't say much, just "Go show yourselves to the priests." Now, to enter back into normal society, the men would have to be declared "clean" by the priests. So Jesus tells them they will be healed and that they should go get certificates of "being clean" from the priest.

This is the picture. Ten men with leprosy come to Jesus. He stops and looks at them. Sees that they are lepers. He doesn't go into a long healing ordeal. Doesn't pick up mud like he did when he was healing the blind Bartimaeus. Doesn't lay hands on them or talk to them. It seems like a short interchange.

Jesus, have mercy on us. And Jesus says, "OK, go show yourselves to the priest," and then he is back on his way to Jerusalem.

A short interruption, it seems.

But what an interruption it is! Ten men are healed. The text is clear that 10 men – all of them – are made clean. Just that one interruption, that one sentence from Jesus, and their lives and the lives of their families are changed forever. Ten men who are outcasts are able to come back into the community.

And as the men are walking to the priest, one of them, a Samaritan, takes a look at his skin and notices that he is healed. He begins to praise God and decides to go back to Jesus. The Samaritan interrupts his own journey to be declared clean by the priest to go back and tell Jesus thank you. Now, I wonder if the Samaritan would have been allowed in the temple to be seen by the priest anyway. He was not just an outcast because he was a leper. It was a double whammy for him because he was a Samaritan, too.

Again, we don't know exactly what this Samaritan is thinking, but we know he interrupts his own journey, his own plan to go to the priest with the others, so he can listen to the gratitude within his soul and go tell Jesus thank you.

Like many of you, I've read this text many times in my life. And I believe the overarching message of this story has to do with living lives of gratitude. At the end of the conversation that Jesus has with the Samaritan, he says, "Your faith has made you well." In the original language, the word translated "well" in the New Revised Standard is "sozo." This Greek word means more than just "well." It means being made well in every way. Made whole. To be fully saved, fully saved – physically, mentally, spiritually. All 10 were physically healed from leprosy, but the Samaritan's willingness to be interrupted and return to say thanks helps open him up to a wholeness – a wholeness that was even deeper than the healing from the physical disease. There is a connection here between gratitude and wholeness. That is a big theme in this text.

However, in pondering the text this week, I was struck with something I hadn't noticed before. The changes – the life-giving changes in this text – happen amid the interruptions: when Jesus' trip plan is interrupted for a bit; when the man's journey to the temple is interrupted by his own internal gratitude bubbling up. Both Jesus and the Samaritan allow space for interruptions in their lives, and amid the interruptions, new life emerges.

As you know, I'm spending these last sermons here as your pastor at First Presbyterian Church sharing with you things I've learned with you and from you in these past almost 10 years as your pastor and the previous 15 years before that as a layperson member of the congregation.

One of my biggest learnings here is that ministry often happens in the interruptions. When I'm trying to get a grant written or catch up on my email, and somebody calls needing something. When I plan for my day to go one way, and someone stops by to go to lunch so we can celebrate a clean cancer treatment, or there is a tragedy in the community and help is needed at the high school or at the Boys and Girls Club. Some of the most meaningful ministry in my time has happened amid interruptions. Thank you, Jesus, for interruptions!

One of the biggest interruptions happened on the day of my installation as pastor here. I had been serving as a designated pastor for two years, and the Session and I discerned that we were being called to a more permanent relationship. The morning of the installation, I walked into the old narthex to see gigantic puddles. I mean, really big ones! There had been a big storm the night before, and all the patching and fixes Gordon Helm and his friends had done for years to the 50-plus-year-old roof would no longer suffice. I had become pastor because I felt called to preach God's Word, be with you in times of joy and sorrow and join you in doing justice and outreach ministries with and in our community. I did not become pastor of this great church to deal with a building.

Yet it was amid dealing with this interruption that the Session established a Building Visioning Committee that spent almost three years praying and discerning what to do with our building and how to ensure its use for mission for years to come. In that process we heard more from our community about how much they valued our presence and our partnership, and then the Open Wide Our Front Door campaign began. And for many of us, fundraising was also an interruption to our plans. But look what happened as we have had the grace to live into that interruption. We not only have a new, beautiful building space; God has been growing something else in us too. A deeper capacity for shared mission. A deeper understanding that poverty communities need beauty, and that beautiful spaces can be vehicles for healing. I believe the Open Wide project opened up space for new things to grow among us that we may not even be able to articulate yet. All this from a huge interruption to our "ministry as usual" plans. How grateful I am that we have had the grace and wisdom to listen and live into that together.

But interruptions don't just happen on a macro scale like that. They happen on a micro scale, too. One day I was in my office trying to get the bulletin done and I got a call from the principal

at Morton School. There was going to be a special assembly and they were hoping I would come over. It was going to start in five minutes. I remember being irritated. It had been one of those weeks when every time I sat down to get the bulletin done, some interruption happened. But I put a comb through my hair and, as I was leaving, George Barfield stopped by to talk to me. I told him I was going over to Morton School, and he came with me. We went over and heard students read poems and other writings that they had created. I don't remember a single poem, but I remember being inspired by the capacity of these young children – third- and fourth-graders. They could share so much of their hearts and minds in writing. After the short assembly, Ms. Margaritas, the principal, pulled George and me aside to tell us that Morton School was going to become a first-through-eighth-grade building in the following year. It had been a kindergarten-through-sixth-grade building, and she was deeply concerned about having first-graders and eighth-graders in the same building. To make a long story short, we had a discussion that day about how to nurture leadership in the next school year's seventh- and eighth-graders, and that led to our beginning to create the Summer Youth Leadership Program, which was an important part of our summer programming for seven years. The youth from the Summer Youth Leadership Program ended up staying with us to form the ICE youth group and to work on going to Camp Henry. Many of our currently active youth came to this church through the Summer Youth Leadership Program.

How glad I am I had the grace to allow myself to be interrupted that day so something new could grow.

Did you read the quote in the bulletin by Deitrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was killed by the Hitler regime? His life was interrupted in significant ways by the evil in the world and by unjust incarceration. While I surely don't believe this kind of evil is God's will, we do know that amid these interruptions Bonhoeffer wrote his most significant works, which continue to nurture and lead many of us who seek to follow Christ. About interruptions he wrote:

*We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans. It is a strange fact that Christians and even ministers frequently consider their work so important and urgent that they will allow nothing to disturb them. They think they are doing God a service in this, but actually they are disdainful of God's 'crooked yet straight path.'*"

A sudden hospitalization, an expected or unexpected death, an accident, a fall resulting in a broken bone, the need for food when you don't have any, a notice that the power will be turned off. Being arrested for something you didn't do. Being arrested for something you or a loved one did do. An unexpected visit from a friend, or your child asking for some time on a busy day. Oh, life is full of so many interruptions to our plans. And over and over and over again, as I've been with you, I've learned that it is amid these interruptions that God often shows up. Often we are startled in interruptions, and these jolts can open up space for new things to grow. Changes can lead us, if we are willing, to be open to new ways of doing things and new ways of being.

One of my favorite interruption stories happened when I was at Meijer many years ago. I was filling a cup with Diet Pepsi from that machine near the customer service area, and Jen Van

Beek walked up to me in tears. At that time Jen and Daniel had two children, Lois and Ezra, and both children were in school for the first time. Jen was experiencing some freedom and discerning what the next steps in her life would be. And she came up to tell me the news that she found out she was unexpectedly pregnant again. She was surprised, excited, worried and confused. They were only going to have two children and were getting ready for this new phase in their lives – and suddenly they would have a new baby and diapers and all that again. Personally, my spirit leapt for joy when she told me. A new baby. A baptism. The gift of new life! And those of us who know Sylvia know that this child, along with another unexpected baby born just a few weeks after her, Taylor Wilson, are full of joy and curiosity, and more. Can we imagine the world now without these two fabulous young girls? And over and over and over again Jen and Daniel have told me what a delight Sylvia is in their lives and family. GIFT!

And interruptions don't just come from without, from things that happen to us. Sometimes they come from within. One illustration is that Samaritan who had the grace to be interrupted by his gratitude and then act on it.

There have been numerous times when I'm working on a sermon and think I'm going in a certain direction. Sometimes I have the whole sermon almost done, but then a new thought will come. If the thought stays with me, I can be confident it may be from the Holy Spirit and I should listen to it. Or something may happen in the world or the community that changes the course of the sermon. It's fair to say that at least one-fourth of my sermons are born from interruptions.

Also, the restlessness I've been feeling in my spirit the past year or so was an interruption. Life is going well here, and I love my ministry at First Presbyterian. We were just completing Open Wide, and I love working in and with this community. Why the restlessness? It was an interruption to my plan, which was to just enjoy my ministry here until retirement. And then the call from Westminster came to me amid that interrupting restlessness. But ministry happens when we tend to the interruptions, doesn't it? And I believe this interruption in my life and in our life here will mean a new day for First Presbyterian, a new day full of grace and purpose that God continues to grow in this congregation as you travel WITH our community. And I trust that this interruption will be full of new adventures for Ted and me, too. Like the 10th leper, it is important to pay attention when something interrupts our spirits.

Many of you are attentive to the interruptions that happen in your spirit. Here are some things I've heard you say: "So and so came to mind today. I stopped for a minute to pray for them." Or: "It was such a beautiful day that I just had to stop everything and take a minute and enjoy it and thank God!" Or: "I woke up this morning with this person on my mind and knew I needed to call and check on them." Interruptions, and listening to these interruptions. You know how to do that and have taught me.

Now, of course, not every interruption is an invitation from God. We must be discerning and mindful and prayerful. And sometimes we need the input from others to help us discern whether to stay the path we are on or let ourselves be interrupted. Sometimes we are called to go the second mile with folks and interrupt our own plans, and sometimes we aren't.

So, as we talk about interruptions today, what is happening in your life? Are there any interruptions at play in your life today? Maybe there are joyful interruptions: a sudden visit of a loved one, a baby on the way, the recognition of a new talent in your life. Or maybe they are more challenging interruptions: a health crisis, the unexpected or even expected loss of a loved one, someone needing something from you that you aren't sure you want to deal with.

I can promise you that this week you will get interrupted – in your work or in your thinking or in your thoughts. Someone will interrupt your plans. Something will come into your brain that you have not thought of before, and you won't be sure if you should attend to it. Ah, yes, you will get interrupted!

And maybe we are a people who need interruptions. It is easy for us to cling to what was and what has worked and to what the prophet Isaiah calls “the former things.” But we serve a God who is always doing a new thing. And it is hard for those of us who like routines to be open to those new things unless we are interrupted!

And amid the interruptions of our lives, let us be like the Samaritan whom Jesus healed, if we can. Let us say THANK YOU. Thank you to our gracious God.

And my friends, I want to thank you. Thank you for being a congregation who is willing to let interruptions be part of your ministry. Indeed, thank you for being a congregation that is wise enough to know that, oftentimes, a new call from God comes smack dab in the middle of an interruption. And thank you for being a place where I have been able to learn more deeply to pay attention to the interruptions that come from without and those that come from within in my life. Our lives, our work and our church belong to God. We never know when things we think of as interruptions are actually the chances to live into something brand new!

In the name of God, our creator, Christ, our Savior, and the Holy Spirit.

**Amen!**