

Sermon: One thing after another

Do you ever have days when you just go from one thing to the next?

Sometimes they are planned appointments or errands. Sometimes they are interruptions of your plans. And often it's both in the same day.

That's the kind of day Jesus is having in today's gospel, and it started even before all the things we hear about in today's gospel. Ever since he finished the Sermon on the Mount it's been one thing after another – healing a leper, raising the centurion's daughter from the dead, healing Peter's mother-in-law of a fever, teaching, calming a storm on the sea, casting out demons, healing a paralyzed man – and it just keeps coming in today's gospel. You've had days like that, right?

I used to think it was a calendar or scheduling issue, a question of time management. But I've come to realize it's more a spiritual issue and a question of presence.

One of the things that strikes me about Jesus in these situations is just how present he is to the moment. He looks at, listens to, and pays attention to what is happening, but he sees, hears, and engages what is going on. It's as if he's always asking himself, "What's going on in what is happening? What is the real need here and what is being asked of me?"

What if each situation is calling and asking for a response? What if they are the ways in which God is asking to be made real and present? What if we, just as was Jesus, are being asked to give existence to whatever it is God might be insisting and asking? That's what we see Jesus doing throughout today's gospel.

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a tax collector named Matthew and said, "Follow me." What comes to mind when you hear about tax collectors in the gospels?

Many of us have probably been told or come to believe that they are not nice people. They are disliked, poor, greedy, dishonest, collaborators with the Roman oppressors, betrayers of their fellow citizens, and unable to find better work. That may or may not be true. Either way they don't have a very good reputation.

They are the kind of people that are often and quickly judged and condemned. But Jesus didn't do that. I wonder what he saw in Matthew. I wonder what Matthew experienced within himself when Jesus saw and called him. Hope, self-worth, forgiveness, acceptance, new life? To be seen and called is a powerful experience of healing. Every day the Matthews of our lives and world sit by the side waiting to be seen and called. And sometimes we are Matthew waiting to be seen and called. I wonder who the Matthews are in Stirling and what they might need from you and me.

Whatever Matthew experienced of Jesus it was enough for him to get up and follow. There was no hesitation. He followed Jesus to dinner and found a place at the table with other tax collectors, sinners, and the disciples. Everyone had a place at the table. It didn't matter who they were or what they had done, except to the religious authorities. It mattered to them. They interrupted dinner and wanted to know why Jesus would "eat with tax collectors and sinners."

And that makes me wonder when I've done that and when you might have done that. It's easy and tempting to assume that we follow Jesus because we are righteous or that we are made righteous by following Jesus. We separate ourselves from "them" who are not righteous. But that's not what Jesus does. He doesn't do that to the dinner guests or to the religious authorities.

Jesus deepens and responds to the question the authorities ask. "I have come," he says, "not to call the righteous but sinners." "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

Do you hear what he is doing? He's equating sinners with patients who are hurting and in need of healing.

Have you ever thought of sin as a medical condition rather than a legal issue? What if sin is less about the actions we usually focus on and more about the wounds or hurts that cause us to act out? What if we could see our own sins and the sins of others in that way?

Maybe we would desire, learn, and practice mercy instead of sacrificing others and ourselves. And who among us doesn't need some mercy now and then?

While Jesus was talking to the religious authorities who had interrupted dinner, suddenly a leader of the synagogue shows up, interrupts Jesus, and says, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And what did Jesus do? He didn't say, "Can't you see I'm eating dinner? Why would you come now?" He didn't tell the man to make an appointment, and he didn't tell him to go away.

I think Jesus was awake and present to what was going on in that interruption. He heard and felt the father's grief, desperation, and faith. He knew it was a hands-on kind of need "and Jesus got up and followed him" in the same way Matthew got up and followed Jesus.

What are the hands-on needs in our community today? What are they in your life and relationships? Every day we face hands on needs asking us to get up, go, and do something. What is being asked of you today and what might you need to leave or let go of in order to respond?

Jesus leaves the table and goes with the synagogue leader to his house. On the way a woman suddenly came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak.

I wonder if when she touched Jesus' cloak, he felt her life leaking out of her. And today she is another interruption to his plans. But Jesus turned, saw her, and said, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well."

What do think she touched in Jesus? Maybe his empathy? Compassion? When has someone touched those in you? Who is touching them in you today? Who today is asking you to turn and see her or him?

When Jesus got to the leader's house everyone there knew the girl was dead. Flute players and a crowd making a commotion had already gathered for the funeral. They knew there was nothing that could be done. They laughed at Jesus when he said, "The girl is not dead but sleeping."

How often have we given up and played the flute or made a commotion sure that nothing could be done? When have we laughed at the possibility of real and meaningful change?

Jesus saw the possibility of hope in the midst of despair, light in the midst of darkness, and life in the midst of death. He's always looking for what is going on in what is happening. He took the girl by the hand and she "got up." When has someone done that for you? Who has helped you get up when you were in despair, darkness, or death? Who are the people in your life or this town today waiting, needing, to be taken by the hand and helped up? What would it be like to take their hand in yours?

Today's gospel sounds like a series of interruptions. That's often how those kinds of days feel to me. But what if what we often experience as interruptions are really points of realignment?

All along the way Jesus was aligning himself in two directions. He aligned himself with the people, events, circumstances, concerns, and needs that were before him regardless of who they were or what it was. We might think of this as his alignment with the horizontal axis of life.

And he aligned himself with whatever was being called for in the name of God: love, acceptance, forgiveness, meaning, hospitality, mercy, hope, healing, life. We might think of this as his alignment with the vertical axis of life.

Do you see the picture I am describing? It's the way of the cross but it's also a person with a face, a name, and a need. Is there alignment in your life today? If not, what needs to be tried and realigned? What might alignment look like in your life today and what is it asking of you? Amen