

Urgent vs. Important

Mark 5:21-43

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In college I had a friend who had accidentally slipped and fallen down several concrete steps. He was badly bruised and sore, not sure about any broken bones. And so, I drove him to the emergency room of a local hospital. As we walked into the ER that afternoon, the first person we met was the triage nurse, who listened carefully to my friend as he described his symptoms.

I had never heard the word *triage* before, and when I got home, I did a little research and learned how critical the practice of triage is in the medical profession, especially in emergency medicine. In war or a natural disaster, when doctors are overwhelmed with need, triage is an absolutely indispensable process for saving lives while not overwhelming the medical response capacity that happens to be available.

I suspect every profession has some form of triage, some system of distinguishing between the urgent and important. When I moved into nonprofit work many years ago, I attended a one-day seminar on “Managing Multiple Priorities and Deadlines.” The entire day was spent learning the tools of administrative triage, learning how to distinguish between the urgent and the important, especially with the hundreds of e-mails I receive each week. Many tasks before us in a given day *are* important, but not everything that’s important is truly urgent.

In my experience as Principal for a Day at Thoreau School several years back, I soon discovered that both the principal and the school social worker were practicing triage all day, as were many of the teachers I observed. Life that day was filled with endless interruptions, and the staff was constantly making judgment calls, sorting out the urgent from the important. It was exhausting just to watch.

In my own profession, people's pressing needs seldom come before us in neat, conveniently timed packages. I may have a plan of what I want to accomplish in a given week, but more often than not my plan is disrupted by unexpected requests and needs that must be addressed. And over the years I’ve learned how to receive those interruptions as nudges from God, as unexpected opportunities for ministry, constantly reordering my priorities.

Our gospel text for today tells of two pushy people who refuse to let Jesus alone. It's a text about Jesus, but as is typical of Mark, it teaches us something about Jesus by showing him reflected in the faces of others.

I suspect that Jesus is tired. He has just rebuked an ill wind and calmed an angry sea. Then he cast out a crowd of demons into a herd of swine. Jesus has had a terribly busy week. Now he's on his way home to Nazareth.

No sooner has Jesus set foot on land than a leader of the synagogue named Jairus falls upon him and begs him to heal his daughter. Jesus is on his way to Nazareth for a big preaching engagement at his hometown synagogue, but as one always willing to be distracted, he goes off with Jairus. They must hurry because the little girl is at the point of death.

They had no sooner set off than this woman pushes her way into Jesus' entourage and grabs hold of Jesus' coat. You want to say to this woman, “Can’t you see he’s busy, in a hurry? A little girl is dying, and he has to get to her quickly. Surely you understand. Surely you can wait.”

The late Henri Nouwen told a wonderful story of a distinguished Notre Dame Professor with whom Nouwen was residing. The older teacher said to Nouwen, “You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.” (*Reaching Out*, p. 36)

The hemorrhaging woman presents not only an inopportune, untimely interruption, but one that is terribly inappropriate, offensive even. A woman who had suffered from hemorrhages—bleeding—for twelve years, sneaked up behind him and touched his cloak. Modern physicians may flinch at the way she is described: “She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all [the money] that she had, and she was no better, but rather grew worse.”

Now there’s a big problem brewing here that we miss sometimes. That woman’s physical condition had earned her the religious designation “unclean.” She was believed to be impure, because of her bleeding. Because it never stopped, she could not engage in the monthly purification rites required by all Jewish women. So, she was permanently “unclean,” not allowed to be in the synagogue, to participate in any religious rituals; she was not married, lived alone—was looked down on, ostracized, marginalized, isolated, alienated—a kind of ultimate outsider.

Listen to how feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther describes her: “Jewish law regarded a woman with a flow of blood as unclean and polluting anyone else she touched. Jesus’ reaction to the woman shows his deliberate discarding of the taboo, while the woman’s own terror at being discovered in touching his garment reveals her awareness at violating the taboo.” (*New Woman, New Earth*, p. 64)

That’s why she is so surreptitiously sneaking up out of the crowd from behind, reaching out to touch his robe. And it worked. The bleeding stopped—but somehow Jesus knew something had happened and asked, “Who touched me?”

But by now we’ve almost forgotten that there is another urgent mission underway. Jesus was hurrying to the bedside of a dying twelve-year-old. Her father is frantic—even the disciples are impatient as he takes his time, talks to the woman who by now, having been discovered, is cowering at his feet.

“Daughter,” he says—my guess is no one has called her that or any term of endearment for at least twelve years— “Daughter,” he says, “your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

The emerging problem is that he is not only late—in fact too late—he’s also now unclean. This unclean woman has touched him. The law is clear. He must stop what he is doing, take all his clothes off, bathe, wash his clothes and withdraw from all human contact until sundown. He is officially unclean—contagious—he is not supposed to touch anyone.

And instead of complying with his religion’s rules and regulations, he sets out once again for Jairus’s house—an unclean healer—a wounded healer, to use Henri Nouwen’s lovely phrase—heading out to the most ritually fastidious, religiously correct household of the leader of the local synagogue.

But if you know much about Jesus, you know that of course he is going to stop, minister to the bleeding woman, speak to her, empower her, and give her a brief commentary on faith. We have seen Jesus stop and talk to almost anybody on other occasions. So, if we are one of his disciples, we tug at his robe, try to nudge the woman away so we can get Jesus back on schedule and on his way again to Jairus's house.

We might be tempted to praise Jesus for his willingness to be interrupted, to take time for the chronic needs of little people like this woman, were it not that, in doing so, Jesus manages to lose Jairus's daughter. Some people meet Jesus and Jairus before they get to Jairus's house and, not mincing words, tell Jairus that his daughter is dead. And something about the way they announce the death makes you think they almost said it with perverted glee. "See? (as if to blame Jesus) Your daughter is dead."

Jesus, it seems, has really blown it this time. He has spent so much time with that poor, sick-for-twelve-years, complaining woman that he has lost this 12-year-old girl from a prominent

family. How is the gospel writer Mark ever to move Jesus to his preaching appointment in Nazareth if he allows these hysterical fathers and these pushy women to keep elbowing their way into the plot?

Jairus and the woman *are* the point of Mark's gospel, of course. It's not that Mark wanted to tell a coherent, orderly, sequential account of Jesus and kept getting sidetracked. Jesus rarely travels directly from point A to the expected point B. There are always insertions, interruptions, surprises, people whom we did not expect to meet, lessons we had not planned to learn. Jesus himself is the greatest, most unexpected interruption of all.

Professor Dan Via (*The Ethics of Mark's Gospel: In the Middle of Time*) calls this text an Easter story, Mark's way of preparing us to go out to the cemetery during Holy Week to be shocked and surprised. One day on our orderly, predictable march toward death, we got interrupted. We would not have been surprised if Jesus had rebuked the pushy woman and told her to get out of his way; that's the way we expect the powerful to treat the powerless. We would not have been shocked to learn that Jairus' daughter was dead and remained so, rather than that Jesus raised her back to life.

We are realists, after all. Jesus will have none of our imposed order and busy schedules. He leads us down a road more circuitous than that toward Nazareth. He inserts into all of our journeys those frightened parents and the suffering sick from whom we have averted our gaze. He assaults us with life and rebirth just when we had adjusted to death.

Although called on first by Jairus, Jesus rightly judges the urgency of the woman's touch. Henri Nouwen has said that when pastors lose sight of the utterly essential, they will merely do what is very important. The same is true for all of us, I believe. We may not have within us the power to heal or to raise the dead, but we can offer hope and time--and sound judgment--as to the urgency of such requests.

What we have to offer is not a vain hope that will bear no fruit, but a hope based on God's promise never to leave or forsake us in our time of greatest need. The time we offer to people who interrupt our lives can be of immense encouragement in the midst of struggles and suffering. Just to take a moment to focus intently on their concerns can be heartening to them beyond measure as they wrestle with the setbacks and adversities that come to all of us from time to time.

A wise old pastor once spoke about a parishioner who frequently complained that he was so disorganized. "Please forgive this poor, disorganized pastor," he told the elder. "Having had my days so often disrupted, sometimes I've had to throw away the appointment book just to tag along beside Jesus." Amen.