

The Holy Interruption

6/30/2024

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Benozzo Gozzoli, The Conversion of St. Paul

Preaching on:

Mark 5:21–43

I think most of you have heard by now that a little more than a week ago I announced that I'll be stepping down from my position as your senior minister here at the church. And in the interval here the church council and I have set my last day, which will be Sunday, September 8—which gives us 10

good weeks to say goodbye. And we need that time, I think, to say goodbye well—there's a lot to celebrate that we've accomplished together, there's a lot of gratitude to express for the way we've been there for one another, there are lots of fond memories to share, and there's going to be some real sadness for some of us—certainly for me and for Bonnie. If you haven't received my letter yet, please let me know and I'll make sure you get a copy.

Since my announcement I've gotten a lot of phone calls and emails and letters from folks and had in-person conversations with some of you, and you've all been so gracious and kind and complementary and encouraging even, which actually makes it a lot harder to leave, to be honest. It would be a lot easier if you all just said, "Good riddance! Scram! Don't let the door hit you!" But instead, your kindness and graciousness highlight for me all the more just how difficult this departure will be for me. It means so, so much to me that I've been able to be a positive part of your lives, and your support and your well wishes deepen the bond that we've built together over the last five years. And I think that's the process of a healthy goodbye. It's not trying to loosen the bond; it's deepening the bond to the point of completion, so that we can let go with sadness and with joy. Your love and encouragement as I take this next step in my life and career mean more to me than I can adequately express right now. Thank goodness, I've got 10 more weeks to hopefully work it out.

As I've spoken to colleagues and friends and family about my decision, the first question they have for me when I tell them I'm leaving (after they find out that I'm not taking the expected path of leaving for another position at another church is, "Why are you leaving then? What went wrong?" Lots of ministers drop out because they're emotionally or financially abused, their congregations are hotbeds of conflict and immaturity, or because they're simply overworked, and one way or another they just burn out. But nothing like that is the case for me here. We have our moments, of course, everybody does! But that's just a little spice in the curry here. We wouldn't want things to get boring! But this is a healthy, stable congregation in a desirable area with amazing people and lots of resources where I'm appreciated and supported. Everything is great. So, what the heck could possibly cause you to want to risk losing all that? Good question!

I'm going to be completely honest with you all and vulnerable to boot and let you know that I don't know exactly how to answer the question, "What's next?" yet. All I know is that like Jesus in our scripture reading this morning, I have been interrupted. And for reasons that I can't fully articulate yet, I know that I need to stop and give that holy interruption an opportunity to reveal and name itself in my life.

Just imagine the scene here for a minute: Jesus is on an important mission. Jairus' daughter is dying. They've got to rush to get there in time to heal her. They're fighting their way through this thick crowd, their minds must have been totally fixated on their goal—get to the house in time to save the little girl. And then Jesus does something totally bizarre. He just stops everything. "Somebody touched me! Who touched me?" And the disciples must have been like, "Look around you, scatterbrain, like everybody is touching you. Remember the dying little girl? Let's keep moving! Come on!" And Jairus!

Can you imagine how he must have felt? He must have been in an absolute panic for his daughter's life. What could be more important than just continuing to get there? And really—really—did Jesus even need to stop at all? The woman with the hemorrhage was right, she was already healed just by touching Jesus' cloak. You'd think he'd be grateful she didn't throw herself at his feet and demand his attention the way that Jairus and so many others did. He could just get on with it. Hemorrhage healed, keep going. But not Jesus. In the middle of this critical, life-or-death mission for this big shot from the synagogue, Jairus, Jesus allows himself to be interrupted by an unnamed unknown. He stops everything simply because of a feeling inside of him that doesn't really make any sense to anybody else, especially under the circumstances. And Jesus invites that unknown—that holy interruption—to speak and to reveal itself.

30 years ago this summer, at age 16, I heard the call to ministry. It was the same kind of thing—a literal interruption in my life, an abrupt moment where something shifted within me, and I suddenly knew beyond any doubt that I was going to be a minister. I heard a voice and everything. The whole shebang.

The next 10 years were spent simultaneously exploring and running away from that voice, that calling, that interruption in what I had previously thought my life might be. And then for the last 20 years, I fully committed to this inevitable and strange and wondrous calling. I went to seminary and worked my way up through ministry to arrive in this amazing place. And I assumed that the next 20 or 30 years would be much the same. I didn't think I'd be in Glen Ridge forever, but when I left, I assumed I would be leaving for the next logical step—a bigger church, a bigger platform, a bigger budget, a bigger staff, a bigger salary, etc. etc. Not that those things were necessarily motivating me, just that that was the next logical and acceptable career move laid out for someone in my position. But instead, I've been interrupted.

This has been a very slow process. It started for me in earnest last summer. God began to speak to me. Not all in one moment, not with one voice, but in dreams, and synchronicities, and relationships, and books, and longings within me that could not be ignored. And over the last year of struggle and exploration and prayer, God's intentions for my life have become clear to a degree. God is saying, I've got something for you to do that is off the beaten path. For the last 30 years, you have faithfully walked the clear path laid out for you by the church—college, the academic study of religion, resistance to the call, seminary, interfaith dialogue, internships, field education, a thesis, discernment, career counseling, psychological evaluation, search and call, ordination, chaplaincy, community minister, associate minister, interim minister, and senior minister. But now I'm asking you to risk it all, to take a leap of faith, and to step off the path of everybody's expectations (including your own) and do something different. As Robert Frost famously wrote, "Two paths diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference."

The thing about the road less traveled is that you don't know exactly where it's going to take you. What I know for sure is that I'm not leaving ministry, I'm not abandoning my call, I certainly haven't lost my

faith. God is calling to me now to focus my energies and gifts on a new kind of ministry beyond the walls of the established church. I have some ideas about what this might look like and what it might become, but they're not fully formed. They're nascent, fetal. They're still in the process of revealing themselves, and out of respect for them and this process, and in order to protect their integrity, I really can't lay it out for you—but most of all I can't do it because I don't know yet. Vaguely, I can say that I'm going to begin to work as a spiritual director and I'm going to be working on some creative projects like a book, and at least one podcast that's in the works, and some classes and retreats. And maybe—just maybe—I'm going to build something new and needed—maybe a new kind of church for a changing world. But in order for that to happen, I have to be faithful to this process and I have to allow myself to be interrupted and I need to make room in my life for something new to grow—as hard as that is to accept.

I wonder if you are open to interruptions. I'm not suggesting that everybody leave their jobs and try to make it on their own. This, for me, is a calling. You all have your own callings in life that are different than mine, look different from mine. But it's worth taking some space to consider if you've made enough room in your busy schedules, in your impressive accomplishments, in your noble and worthy goals, on your bucket lists, for a little something new that wants to be known to interrupt you. Interruptions are not often immediately appreciated. If they don't demand our attention, it's easy to let them slip away. But paying attention to them might (might!) make all the difference.