

and asked for prayer. Later that day, after the Bible study, I received a call from a close friend from the Bible study group who said, “We all have prayed about this and believe you should go and be with your family, and we have decided to pay your way.” So, the answer came: *Go. Respond to the need and accept the intrusion as an opportunity.*

My friends, I am sure most of us in this sanctuary at one time or another have had similar situations. Times when a situation presents itself – a need arises and we are called to make a decision. Do I interrupt my life – the agenda I have laid out for the use of my time, the uses I have decided are important for the money I have – when someone is in real need of caring and we are presented with the opportunity to respond.

In Mark’s Gospel, maybe we are being brought to see that Jesus, too, was human. He, too, had an agenda that got interrupted. This was no sudden phone call the minute he walked out the door and a salesman is on the line – a person he could easily dismiss. This was real human need that cried out to be cared for.

Jesus had opened his public ministry. He was anxious to go about the task of establishing his authority in the towns of Galilee. Even before the sun was up, he called his disciples to fall in. “Let us go on to the next towns that I may preach there also for that is why I was called.”

So, he started out and had a few early encounters, a few sermons delivered, a few twisted minds made whole. Then just as he’s getting into his mission (and he really intended it to be a preaching ministry), a leper appeared in front of him. *If you will, you can make me clean.*

It will help us to understand that lepers were not just called sick people – they were considered unclean, unholy, polluted. They were morally condemned and physically separated by the guardians of God’s truth, those who presumed to put everyone in their proper slot. By the Levitical Code, lepers were isolated, made to dress in rags with the upper lip covered, forced to warn others off with the cry, “Unclean, Unclean.” To draw near to Jesus, the leper was risking being stoned. But something inside this leper drove him forward. *If you will, you can make me clean.*

Jesus, you can not only cure me, you can heal me. You can restore me to my family, my community, the temple. You can make me whole again. All of this and much more was included in this plea for Jesus’ to help him.

The leper’s presence created a real problem for Jesus. If Jesus touched the leper, he became

ceremonially unclean himself. But Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the man, *I will. Be clean.* And in doing that Jesus, created a problem for himself. It meant he had to scrap his plans to go on to other towns. Jesus instructed the leper: *Show yourself to the priests and do not tell anyone who cured you.* Jesus knew that if the man told who cured him the gates of every town in Galilee would be officially closed to him. He tried to salvage the situation by telling the leper – keep quiet about who healed you.

But the man talked all over the place about what happened to him and the scriptures tell us: “He (Jesus) could no longer enter a town openly.” Jesus’ mission was permanently altered by responding to an interruption.

Now comes the unexpected twist. We read, “He was out in the country and people came to him from every quarter.” So, it seems that by responding to this interruption, Jesus actually created more openness from the people to hear God’s message to them.

My friends, interruptions will come. Whether it is a refugee seeking help, a friend who is in desperate need, or just a subtle hint from someone you are talking to who is reaching out for help. It is up to us to decide how we will approach them – as an interruption that upsets our agenda or as an opportunity. I recently ran across a beautiful poem that relates how Christ and we as Christians are called to handle interruptions:

The hands of Christ were loving hands  
That stopped to touch the spittle and the clay.  
The hands of Christ were searing hands  
That drew not back from human need.  
The hands of Christ were wounded hands  
That counted not the cost.

And yet, you say, “Take heed  
Keep your distance from their kind  
And keep them in their place.”  
Or else you counsel prudence  
For self must care for self,  
But, Oh, those hands again appear  
Tinted with grime and sweat and blood.  
You can not argue with those hands  
Doubt not, they say, “My name is love.”

And that is the essence of the Gospel message to the church and the world. God's name is love, Christ-like love, cruciform in shape. And knowing that some interruptions can alter our way, what else can we do when confronted with human need?

Jesus's actions are disturbing. They threaten our agenda-oriented life – our lives that are planned each day – lives that are often over-planned and over-stressed. In the midst of all the stress Jesus was under, he stopped to respond to an interruption, even it meant a change in his whole plan for his life.

But there is something else here. If we stopped with what I just said, we would leave this sanctuary totally guilt ridden that we don't respond to every request made of us. Remember that Jesus did not totally abandon his plan for his ministry on this earth. Notice that Jesus did not heal and did not feed every single person whom he met. If he had, he would have made the people dependant on him for their physical needs.

So, this makes it more difficult, does it not? We can not put together a neat formula directing us in our decisions for the use of our time, energies, our money, our very selves. It is not that easy.

Do we deal with this dilemma by putting out a sign, DO NOT DISTURB – do we just answer each time, "I am sorry, I just cannot deal with this – go to someone else"? Do we respond to every need and become exhausted?

It is clear that Jesus responded to needs, but it is also clear that he did not respond to every need. We often skip right on past this part of the text: "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."

So, whether it is that refugee on the other side of the world, or the person next door, someone in our families, or someone from the church asking us to serve in many and varied ways, we are called to pause long enough to pray. Let us pray that God will direct us how to turn an interruption into an opportunity.

## **Break Point!**

**February 19, 2017**

**Pastor Ed Morgan**

**The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

**Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39**

Could it be that Jesus was getting stressed? Consider: In one day, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, healing Peter's mother-in-law, healing the sick, and casting out demons. Pushing through the crowds; more healing, more casting out. Crowds. The city. Demands. Noise. So, the next morning, while it was still dark, Jesus slipped out of the city to find some solitude in a "deserted place." It was what he needed to do.

I am convinced that was what he needed to do to gain the proper attitude for what was to come. We, too, have busy, over-burdened lives. When intrusions interrupt our scheduled lives, how do we decide how to deal with them?

Let me share a personal story that has stuck with me for many years. It has been many years now, but I will never forget the night. The telephone rang and kept ringing – 2:00 A.M. My sister was on the phone. I struggled to wake up enough to hear what she was saying – your sister died this morning at 1:00. I struggled to clear my head enough to comprehend what I was hearing – my sister – 46 years old – dead – 1,000 miles away.

What should I do? My brothers and sisters and I were close to this special sister and I had a part in raising her two children over the years – what should I do?

My sister on the phone asked, "Will you come?" I could not answer that question immediately. A mixture of feelings flooded my senses – grief – shock – concern. I wanted to respond to this deep personal need. Yet, I also thought of my agenda for the week – the many things I would have to change – my family I did not want to leave for several days – plus we really did not have the money for the airline tickets.

Should I respond to this intrusion into my life or should I say, "No, I cannot come." The only thing I could say was, "I will call you sometime today and let you know."

That morning, I met with a group of men for Bible study. I shared my dilemma with them