

HOLY INTERRUPTIONS

3/4/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Lent 3 (B): Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Many of you have come to know me fairly well over the past—almost four— years and you know that I like a plan. I like to know what we're doing; when we're doing it; how we're doing it; and—if you know me really well—what we're going to eat while we're doing it! So when there's an interruption, it can be hard for me to adjust. It's frustrating.

But interesting things happen via interruptions don't they? A few weeks ago, for instance, right as we were getting ready to kick-off our Lenten film series, a man knocked at the east entrance of the Parish Hall. He wanted to know if we had any bread to spare. Now, from where he was standing, he could see we had three pallets of bread, that had been delivered earlier that day by the Feeding America program.

His arrival, however, was not part of our plan. The plan was that those who had already gathered—those who came through the west entrance...those who know our campus—were going to eat supper together and watch a movie. That was the plan. The plan he should have been a part of was to show up the next day—on Thursday—when we have our weekly Food Pantry. That's when he could get bread.

But by the grace of God, before I voiced any of that, I realized I was standing right next to those three pallets of food, and that, not only did we have plenty of bread to share right then, we also had a huge pot of steamy, hearty soup on a table behind me. Thanks be to God, the words that made their way out of my mouth were: "Come on in and join us; we're just about to sit down to a nice soup supper."

Clay made it clear that he didn't like to be inside buildings for very long at a time, but he was hungry, so he was willing to chat a bit as we ate our soup together. And, on his way out the door, he chose a sleeve of cinnamon raisin bagels. After he left, I kept thinking of that famous passage from Hebrews: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (13:12).

My internal conversation about "my plans" also reminded me of the petition from the Litany of Penitence that says: "We confess our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people." How often do we want to help people only when it's convenient for us? And is it possible we exploit the people whom we serve, in that we need people to serve, so that we'll feel good about our work in the community...that is, when it's convenient for us; when it's not an interruption?

The interruptions in life, I believe, are our little wake-up calls to what's really going on; alerts to where our focus is really needed. Or, in the case of Jesus, as he threw tables around in the temple, the interruptions might be more like a giant, slap-in-the-face, kind of wake-up call!

In our Gospel reading this morning, we find the temple full of moneychangers, cattle, sheep, and doves. And it's pretty clear by Jesus' actions this isn't some sort of glorified "Blessing of the Animals". Quite the opposite, these animals were all onsite to be sold to worshipers for the sacrifices they would offer.

Many of them would have traveled a great distance, making the transport of a sacrificial animal impossible. On one hand, the vendors were providing an efficient solution. And it's true that the moneychangers were also providing a helpful service; you see, Roman coins were not acceptable to pay the Temple tax, and, yet, Roman coins were all that people could use outside the temple, so the moneychangers exchanged Roman coins for coins required in temple worship.

On the other hand, it's highly likely there was price-gauging happening, since the worshipers had no other options. So, then, not only does the petition I mentioned: "We confess our exploitation of other people," come into play, now we're also talking about a second petition, which is: "We confess our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts."

The interruption Jesus creates as he shouts out, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!", makes clear he's not so concerned that these activities are happening in the temple, but rather that the focus has become all about the money exchange, and the buying and selling of animals. Meanwhile, hardly anyone around seems to be remembering that they are there to focus on God

A very tame version of this takes place in some congregations during the exchange of the Peace. The words "May the peace of the Lord be with you," are not meant to be a greeting; instead, saying, "Peace be with you," is a symbolic statement of our intention to let go of any grievance we have with others, so that we can then, in clear conscience, receive communion—being at peace with God and our neighbor.

It's not that it's bad to say, "How are you?" and give someone a hug during the Peace, but if we become one of those congregations where the chatting goes on and on, while the worship gets cut short, then we have become indulgent in our own appetites and ways, and lost sight of the primary purpose of our gathering, which is worship and praise of God.

The holy interruption in our reading from Exodus is the people, who God has led out of slavery—those people, even after having just experienced God's grace—seem to have lost their manners. So God interrupts to say, "It looks like you're having a hard time keeping your focus on what's really important. Maybe some guidelines would be helpful."

The ten commandments are not meant to be a yardstick to measure people against, to figure out how much judgment they should experience for their wrong doings. Instead, the commandments are strategies for keeping one's focus on God and God's will. Living into the commandments, that familiar hymn might come to mind: "They'll know we are Christians by our love." Following the commandments means the world around us will notice our Christian ways by the love in our hearts, by the love in our words, and by the love in our actions.

The ten commandments are the antidote to those two petitions: "Our self-indulgent appetites and ways, our exploitation of other people, and our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts, along with our dishonesty in daily life and work."

Scripture reminds us often that this kind of living is counter-intuitive. It's not the way of the world. For instance that phrase I just read: "for our dishonesty in daily life and work", gets distorted in the assessment of how we're living, doesn't it?

Many people just assume that's how to get through life...with little white lies that "don't really hurt anyone". Sometimes we stretch the truth just slightly in order to, supposedly, "protect" the other person, or our children. But how often do we use that form of dishonesty to avoid doing the thing that's harder to do, which is to tell the truth in a way that's understandable, respectful and loving?

That's why the Apostle Paul refers to the "foolishness" of the cross. Following Jesus doesn't make sense—especially in a Capitalistic society like ours, where corners are often cut to ensure maximum profit. In order to get ahead, in order to be the most successful, in order to satiate an ever-growing appetite for progress, people are exploited.

So Paul declares that this idea, that Christ was crucified was a good thing because it benefits us, is a stumbling block to some, but that those who can accept it are receivers of the wisdom of God. I love what he does there, Paul knows we all want to be wise and strong, so he adds that "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Holy interruptions require us to surrender—to surrender our plan, to surrender our wisdom of what's best—and give into the wisdom of God. Even though we—in our individualistic ways—resist the idea of surrender, we have to remember that this is the kind of surrender that actually leads to freedom. Jesus throwing over tables in the temple doesn't call us into submission, rather, his interruption actually frees us to move our focus from worldly goods back to God—back to what's really important.

To consider, as part of your Lenten practice this week, I'll leave you with a quote I found last year and taped to my desk computer. They are the words of theologian Henri Nouwen, who wrote: "I used to complain about all the interruptions to my work until I realized that these interruptions *were* my work."

So they're not just interruptions, they are "holy interruptions", the very work to which God calls us.

-AMEN

Collect of the Day:

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Exodus 20:1-17

20Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Psalm 19

¹The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

²Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

³There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

⁴yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

⁵which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

⁷The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;

⁸the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;

⁹the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

¹²But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

¹³Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." ²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

John 2:13-22

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.