

Cat Goodrich
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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The Secret to Happiness
Luke 17:11-19, Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

At around 8:30 Thursday night, I got a phone call from Kandi, our church sexton.

“Oh my God, Cat,” she said, “there is water everywhere! A pipe burst in the basement and it is totally flooded and water is just spraying everywhere! We need to call a plumber, or someone who can come make this stop!”

I was in my living room. I’d just put my girls to bed and settled down on the sofa. Dary was out of town, and it had been a late night for them – we’d all been at church for the Faith in Action meeting, with almost 60 people gathered in our fellowship hall to share a meal and learn about systemic racism by way of mass incarceration in Alabama. The groundwork is being laid for a voting rights restoration campaign that Faith in Action is pursuing over the next few years.

As we ate chicken and heard testimonies from formerly incarcerated people, we learned about who can and cannot vote, who does and does not vote, and who benefits from the current status quo here in Alabama. While we learned about the travesty and impact of voter disenfranchisement upstairs, a disaster of a different kind was unfolding in the basement. The threads of a valve on a pipe leading from the street into our building weakened and finally failed, spraying water like a firehose for several hours before anyone realized what had happened.

Now the basement has flooded before – water drains off the steps from the courtyard down there after heavy rains, but nothing like this: there were inches of standing water up to the bottom step, boxes upon boxes of files soaked and ruined, stacks of old carpets, sets for plays, toys and preschool supplies and lumber, blueprints and a jumble of stuff stashed under the stairs, including a pretty sweet shark poster – all sodden and stained and whew. What a mess.

What might have happened if we hadn’t had a meeting on Thursday night?

If Kandi hadn't stayed late to clean up, heard the water, and gone down to investigate?

If David Bryson hadn't responded to my call and headed back to church to attempt to shut off the water supply? An unmitigated disaster, for sure. A catastrophe!

Luckily, the disaster is merely a minor headache.

Kandi was surely tired, having been on her feet all day, cooking and cleaning up a big meal. I'm sure she was ready to clock out and go home.

David was surely ready to be home with his family. But.

They were willing to interrupt those plans, to respond to a crisis, to deal with a plumber and negotiate with the water works and find the water shut off and help prevent further damage to our beloved old church. And I am so very grateful to them for that.

Today's passage is about an interruption, too.

Jesus is making his way through the borderlands between Samaria and Judea on his way to Jerusalem, when he sees some men in need. They cry out to him, "Master, have mercy!" and he stops.

Now Jesus surely was tired – he'd been traveling a long time. He must have been in a hurry to get where he was going because most Jews avoided going to Samaria. The road that passed through there was the fastest way to get to Jerusalem, but it was dangerous. Earlier in his journey, a Samaritan village turned Jesus away, refusing to offer him shelter. This was not a safe or hospitable land where Jesus found himself. Many other travellers would take a long detour just to avoid it, but not Jesus.

He must have been in a hurry.

Even still, when the people suffering from leprosy cry out to him, he stops. He looks at them, he listens, and he allows his journey to be interrupted by their need. And he heals them.

Interruption is seldom convenient. By its very nature, an interruption is not something we have planned... as we scurry from one meeting to the next, from one place to another, helping someone in need is often not on our agenda. It can be a pain in the neck to be interrupted - We are busy people. But. If we are to follow the example of Jesus, we've got to respond to the

people and the needs around us, no matter how much of an interruption they are. We must be willing to look and see who is in need. To listen and hear their pain. To help if we can. Because that is how we find opportunities to heal and be healed!

Had Kandi not stopped, listened, looked, and taken time to help, had David not interrupted his plans to head home for the night – and morning, and afternoon the next day – there might still be standing water down there! We'd all be remembering our baptisms this morning! And really, so many of you do this! I could call names, but I won't – you know who you are. This is a community that is willing to be interrupted!

The crowd of people who came to the meeting on Thursday night – they were probably tired and worn out from a long day. There were other places they could've been. But they interrupted those plans and came here, and spent time together talking, and learning, and planning, because the disruption of the structures of racism and white supremacy is too important to stay home.

Each one of you has made a choice to be here, interrupting a culture that has no time for church by gathering together in this space to give thanks to God for the blessing of this life, and I am so very grateful for that! Martin Luther called worship “the 10th leper turning back,” to offer his thanks and praise to Jesus for being healed.¹

And so we gather, too.

This passage isn't only about interruption. It also tells us something about gratitude.

Sometimes I wonder if we are hardwired to be discontented, dissatisfied, and ungrateful. We have a tendency to compare what we have with what others have, and to want that other thing, whatever it is we don't have.

I see it in my daughters when a gift is given or a dessert is shared. Immediately, there is comparison – who got more? Whose is better? Of course, it's possible they're driven by a fierce longing for justice and equity. Probably not, but one can always hope.

¹ Lose, David, “Commentary on Luke 17:11-19,” Preaching this Week on Working Preacher.com from Luther Seminary, 10/10/10, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=783.

Buddhism is predicated on the Buddha's four noble truths. Truth one: life is suffering. Truth two: suffering comes from want, from craving the things we don't have. Are we hardwired for discontent? Whether we are or not, the world is not calibrated for us to feel content very often – happiness and contentment aren't good for the market! There is money to be made from discontent, from envy, from a driving desire for something new and different.

Nine of the ten lepers didn't even stop to say thank you! They rushed off in search of the priest to confirm their healing. And they missed the chance to rejoice in the presence of God... they left Jesus standing there in the road.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we must be content with pain, or suffering, or marginalization. The lepers sought to change their situation – they cried out for healing from their affliction and Christ heard them. He interrupted his plans and met them there in the road and healed them. But the gospel wants us to see the example of the Samaritan leper – the least likely person to be a good example, reviled and ostracized for both his race and his illness. The Samaritan is the one who recognizes Jesus for who he is, and when he realizes he has been healed, falls at Jesus' feet in praise and gratitude.

In their book, *The Book of Joy*, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu talk about the power of gratitude. They define gratitude as the “recognition of all that holds us in the web of life and all that has made it possible to have the life that we have and the moment that we are experiencing. Thanksgiving is the natural response to life and may be the only way to savor it.”² Gratitude is a pathway to joy – it is a choice that transforms the way we see the world. As one Benedictine monk put it, “It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy.”³ The Dalai Lama, who has lived a life of exile, observes, “even suffering helps you develop empathy and compassion for others.”⁴ Their book taught me that in a way, we are, in fact, hard-wired to be discontented, unsatisfied. They observe, “Our brains have evolved with a negative bias...” – at many points in human history, the ability to see what was wrong

² Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Douglas Carlton Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, Penguin Random House: New York, 2016, p. 242.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

or dangerous helped us survive.⁵ But now, “gratitude cuts across this default mode of the mind.”⁶ Learning to give thanks to God in the midst of the mess heals us, strengthens us, and helps us see what is right in the midst of so much that is wrong. Gratitude gives us the power to continue to work for transformation.

I am not grateful that the pipe burst. I am not grateful that we have a basement that is filled with soggy wet mess. But when I was finally able to make it back here to work on Friday morning, David Bryson was already here, with a shop-vac, sucking up water like he hadn’t been up till midnight the night before running around with plumbers, and I am so very grateful for that. I’m grateful it will be cleared out in the next few days. I am grateful for Kandi, and David Bryson, and James Vines, and for all of you who have given time and energy to care for our property over the years. And I am grateful to God for all of you, a community of faith that is willing to be interrupted, to see the need around us and respond with compassion. A community that seeks to embrace what is right in the midst of so much that is wrong, and praises God together.

Interruptions are inevitable. The question is, how will we choose to respond? I hope, with compassion and gratitude. Thanks be to God.

⁵ *ibid*, p247.

⁶ *ibid*.