Pastor Troy E. Medlin
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Grace, River Forest
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A Merciful Word Made Flesh

God's initiative always interrupts the world as it is.

Every once in a while, on a particularly long run I will experiment with wearing some kind of backpack. Usually it is a version of a camelback, which holds water, with a straw coming out the top to make for easy hydration. No matter how often I try to wear one, It never becomes a part of my normal attire.

A couple of years ago, on a hazy summer morning, I was out at Waterfall Glen. I had decided to wear a camelbak. I realized what I had other times. Instead of making my journey easier, it made it harder. Every step I was reminded that there was something on my back. An extra weight. As I rounded the first couple miles it was affecting my gate. Every step felt harder. I wanted to stop constantly. Go backwards. Until finally, I sat down on a bench that had appeared blessedly as a gift inviting me to rest. There- I decided I needed to drop the backpack and run unburdened the rest of the way, trusting that hydration would come from other sources. There had to be another way. Off I went, weight gone, free into the future.

Joseph was the one harmed. Sold into slavery by his own kin. Now, years later, deep into a famine in Egypt they encounter each other again. Joseph is the one with the power. The Administrative assistant to Pharaoh. Despite all that had happened, it is not the ones who sinned, but the one sinned against that acts. Joseph takes the initiative. Moves toward his brothers. If you notice they don't even apologize. He tells them he will take care of them, provide for them, shelter them, protect them. Kisses them and weeps upon them. Something that evokes an image of deep embrace- profound love. Forgiveness. His initiative interrupts the ways of this world.

This interruption is not about legitimizing harm or excusing sin. It is about saying- "I have been allowing you to take up too much space in my mind and heart, like a weight that was affecting my gate and keeping me from moving on." It's about you declaring- I'm dropping what you have placed on me so I can walk into the future. Joseph was freed from another captivity.

Later in Luke it's the Father not the brother who had been sinned against who does the work. While the prodigal was a long way off, he takes the initiative, runs out to greet him, embraces him, kisses him, gives him a ring, sets a feast. The son does begin to apologize but he doesn't want to hear it- he interrupts his sorry speech with the insistence to join the party.

At the end of Luke it is Jesus- the merciful word made flesh who has been despised, rejected, cut off, and sinned against who takes the initiative. Hanging on the cross, he interrupts the death-dealing ways of this world literally hell bent on retribution and revenge as he speaks with all the authority of Heaven: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

In our own baptism. While we were still sinners, bent on our own way, committed to our self-justification- God took all of the initiative and did all of the work. Interrupting all of our assumptions about God and salvation. It is grace at the beginning, middle, and end. Coming all the way down. Relentlessly running towards you. Clothing you in Christ’s righteousness. Placing Christ’s light in your hand. Joining you to Christ’s death and resurrection. Setting a feast for you, even in the presence of trouble. Forgiving you of everything. Providing you with the Spirit of God and a community that is his body. Your place in the triune life of God is as secure as the word that makes it happen.

So- what about the teaching of Jesus today? Our own lives? The diagnosis that shakes the ground under our feet? The conflict that keeps us up at night? The continued chaos and evil dealt out by those in authority that has implications for people in this room who have devoted their lives to service and, for the most vulnerable?

You are embraced by God. The one prefigured by Joseph, lover of lost ones, speaking plainly of the reign of God, made known in the crucified, and among us still.

This embrace doesn’t consume, it is generative. In this embrace we are free. Free to drop our pretense. Leave behind our pretending. To release others, no matter who they are, into God’s care. That’s a lot to carry. We can call a thing what it is. Be honest. Mourn. Weep. Lament. Be angry. Our trust is in God, not who is orchestrating cruel events for some greater good (we can drop that too) - but who does promise resurrection on the other side of every death and weeps alongside us all the while never leaving us alone.

Weight gone- we move into the future. Joined to the one who interrupts the ways of the world, that becomes our calling. Baptized to be interrupters. We know the truth- it sets us free again and again. That makes our journey lighter. Love our enemies, turn the other cheek, give to everyone who begs, do good without expecting a reward. And- interrupt the constant scroll of meanness with mercy made flesh- for your neighbors sake. As Pope Francis said today, “don’t be afraid to risk love.” What might we interrupt together? Remember- you belong to God on both sides of the grave. The risen life is yours. Nothing and no one else can lay claim on you. No present moment can erase the cross on your brow. Your true north.
So- drop it. Keep going. Your neighbors need your interruptions.