

Professor Richard Ward tells the story of when he was a teenager. It was late one evening. Since he was the oldest of five children, his parents would often ask him to take care of his younger siblings while they attended some meeting at the church. His father was the pastor of the church. On this night, he had made his own deal. Yes, he would keep the others if, his girlfriend Janet could come over to, uh, help him.

Richard had already learned that parents with five children will make almost any kind of deal to get a babysitter. So later that evening, there he was, here she was sitting next to him on the couch while "the children were all nestled all snug in their beds." Richard and his girlfriend Janet were relishing their closeness and quiet conversation, when...

Knock! Knock! Knock!

It was the kind of knock that had terror and desperation in it.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Richard went to the door, opened it and saw her for the first time. She must have been more than six feet tall, chestnut hair falling down around her shoulders. About his parent's age, he guessed. She was dressed in a house coat and slippers, and staggering on our porch, drunk! It was the first time Richard had ever seen anybody who was drunk.

"Is Rev. Ward at home?" she asked. Janet came close and squeezed his arm. Richard said he was so mad at that moment. He was angry at this woman. He so resented this interruption. He resented his parents for being absent and leaving him to handle this. What in the world would he say?

"No, he is at church," Richard said, "I am his son, can I help you?" "May I come in? I need somebody to talk to." she said through tears. Then Richard recognized her. Her daughter was one of his classmates at school. "Yes, please, come in."

Richard said he was frightened, he was confused, and he was trying desperately to remember what those traveling evangelists had said about how to lead a soul to Christ. Richard then led her into the kitchen. The smell of alcohol and the lit cigarette soon permeated the room.

Richard asked if he could get her anything. She asked for a cup of coffee. Richard had never made a cup of coffee in his life. He says he was feeling like a stranger in his own house.

This was not the way he had planned out his evening. He had rushed to get the kids to sleep so that he could have private time with Janet. And then this drunk woman comes in and interrupts it all. This drunk woman with all of her dependency and chronic issues that he was ill equipped to try to help.

I'm wondering if this feeling of resentment is similar to what Simon the Leper must have been feeling. All we are told about him in this story is that Jesus is at his house as an invited guest. Jesus is dining with him and other close friends and I am sure Simon was mesmerized by the things that Jesus had to say. A dinner party with Jesus and only special invited guests. Can you imagine what that opportunity must be like? In many ways it was the perfectly planned evening.

But then she walks in. An uninvited guest. A woman with needs. This woman enters carrying a bottle of very expensive perfume. Opening the bottle, she pours it on the head of Jesus. The rest of the guests are furious. "She could have used that perfume in a way that would have benefited others," they exclaim. Of course, Jesus knew they were not concerned with the needs of the poor. They were only concerned with attempting to embarrass her for ruining their private party with Jesus.

But then Jesus had a very different take on her. He did not chastise her for covering his body in very expensive perfume, the kind used for burials. He instead praised her. He praised her for the beauty which she brought through her act.

Do you face the anguish of interruptions in your life? You plan that special date with your spouse away from the kids but then the babysitter calls and says that your youngest has just thrown up. You plan a day away from work to be with your family or friends and someone calls you about something that they demand is an emergency. You spend months planning a special event but then something unexpected happens and it ruins whatever plans you made.

Here in this story before us the plans of Simon are ruined. Ruined by a woman who shows up with a bottle of perfume that she pours over the head of Jesus. Simon and his guests are upset. But Jesus has a very different reaction. Jesus says that she has done a very beautiful thing.

In reflecting back to that interruption which occurred to him when he was a teenager, Richard Ward says this. He says, "She came to our house next door to the church because she believed that somehow the presence of Christ would be there. She came hoping to encounter the Christ who could meet her in her emptiness and restore her to health and wholeness."

Richard Ward's story reminded me of a similar encounter in my life. Several years ago I lived in Siler City, NC and the ACC baseball tournament was being played about an hour away in Durham, NC at the Durham Bulls baseball park. I had a little brother through the local Big Brothers organization and I planned to take him to a game since he was a big UNC fan and they were playing Clemson.

To get to Durham from Siler City, I went the back way which passed by a country church that was having a fish fry. My plan was to stop at the church on the way and get a fish dinner with Jeffrey and then eat it at the stadium as a tailgate. Great plan. Got the fish and got to the stadium.

As we were getting out of the car, a man approached us. He asked me if we had any food for he was hungry. So here I am. And my little brother Jeffrey is watching me. I had the perfect plans for that day. And then they are interrupted by a man and his needs. What is a Christian to do in light of that interruption when he has a plate of fish sitting in his car?

We all encounter interruptions in our lives. Sometimes these interruptions make us angry. We become angry because these interruptions interfere with our plans. But I wonder how our attitude could be different if we saw these interruptions as things of beauty? What if the interruptions are opportunities for us to see something that otherwise we would be missing?

What if these interruptions are opportunities for us to experience God in a powerful way? What if these interruptions are opportunities for us to witness to our Christian faith by the way we handle those interruptions?

This week you may have some good plans. Your plans may be interrupted. Your plans may be interrupted by someone who has some real needs.

What beautiful thing could happen from this interruption and the way you respond to it?

What beautiful thing could this person have to teach you? AMEN.

-Ward, Richard, "In Memory of Her," http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/ward_4521.htm

-Text: Mark 14: 1-12

-Given: Feb. 26, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)