

Life is full of complications and interruptions. Full of complications and interruptions.

It's a line from one of my favorite movies, *Love Actually*. It's a classic by now. Not a movie to watch with your kids or with your parents perhaps, but a rich exploration of the many ways that people's attempts at love can be both beautiful and broken.

Life is full of complications and interruptions. It's what Carl says to Sarah when Sarah's brother calls at an inopportune time. Carl and Sarah have had a year-long attraction to one another and it is finally acknowledged by both of them and then the phone rings. Sarah's brother is in a care facility for his mental illness. He's high maintenance and demanding of Sarah's attention. Sarah leaves Carl to see about her brother. Carl says, "It's Ok, Sarah. Life is full of complications and interruptions."

I was reminded of this scene when thinking about our Gospel reading for today. I imagine that Jesus planned his teaching carefully for this moment in the synagogue. His life to this point was filled with study and preparation, and he was teaching in a way that astounded everyone. What he had worked hard to do was paying off. People were learning, they were listening to him, and perhaps he could lead them to a new understanding of God. A carpenter who was making an impression that went beyond even those schooled in the trade of Scripture interpretation, the scribes. But his plans are interrupted when a man with an "unclean spirit" calls out to him in fear – "what do you have to do with us?" Can you imagine? In the middle of what's going so well, and was probably very well thought out, a man jumps up and causes a commotion. The people are impressed by his teaching, but now someone is calling him the Holy One of God. Life is full of complications and interruptions.

It's something we can count on. We can make the best of plans and execute them flawlessly, and something happens that takes us in an unexpected direction and we have to adapt. Life is full of complications and interruptions.

St. Benedict, born in 480, developed a monastic order and monks took vows – still take vows – of stability, obedience and conversion of life. Stability, obedience, and conversion of life. Behind these vows is the acknowledgement that change is a constant, and how we accept change has everything to do with how we live our lives as faithful Christians. The words don't express the meaning behind them very well, so let me explain a little.

Stability is the concept that we don't run away from what may be difficult or not according to our expectations, but that we find God in the here and now, in the people, places and things of our lives. Regardless of whatever chaos might come upon us, or simple boredom, God is to be found in the now. Stability means that we seek God in the midst of our every day lives, in this place and in this time and with this community of family or friends, and we don't run away. We find God in the bother of it all, the tedium, the unknown, or even in grief. We don't look for greener pastures, like a stray sheep out

on its own. We have a tendency to do that in crisis, wander off on our own and forget that God is with us always, even and maybe especially in crisis. Stability – standing firm in the realities that life throws at us knowing that God is with us. When we pay attention with a stance of stability we can learn about the ways in which we flee from God, ourselves and others, and we can enter into a deeper acceptance of ourselves and all of the circumstances of life. Our lives lived with God offer stability even in the midst of raging instability around us. We make a decision to live lives of stability.

Obedience is really a matter of listening deeply to God through scripture, prayer, other people, readings, nature. It's not just hearing, it's taking in what we experience through all of the ways we listen to God and incorporate what we learn into our lives and take action based on our listening. We listen to learn about God's will for our lives and our place in the world. At its most basic level, it's living the reality of death and resurrection, of losing life to find life because as we listen, we learn that what we think is true is being challenged and the old understanding no longer works. Listening deeply and remaining open to whatever word comes from the listening creates relationships, with one another and with God. When practiced, obedience cracks open the myths we tell ourselves and allows for new life. Even though it is risky and requires vulnerability, obedience brings new life.

Conversion of life acknowledges that change is a constant and presents us with a challenge. We can dig in and try to resist any change that comes upon us and remain unchanged ourselves, or we can allow circumstances a chance to offer us new growth, to become a new creation. In the example of Carl and Sarah from the movie *Love Actually*, they are presented with a challenge. Sarah's brother, who calls her every 10 minutes throughout the day and evening, calls and interrupts their sweet moment. Carl asks her if it helps her brother for her to answer every time he calls, will he actually get better because she picks up the phone every time he calls. She admits that it probably doesn't. Carl challenges her to see a life for herself that includes some happiness for her but she cannot give up the role she has created for herself to try to be her brother's savior. She rejects an opportunity for conversion of life.

We are given opportunities for conversion every day. The more we listen deeply (obedience), seek God in the circumstances of our lives rather than running away (stability), the more willing we are to embrace the reality of change and the more likely we are to experience rebirth on an ongoing basis (conversion of life). The Benedictine vows aren't just for monks. They form a foundation of being for Christians. They remind us of the constant opportunity and challenge of the Christian life and require us to remember daily who we are and to whom we belong.

Life is full of complications and interruptions, and God does not flee from them. We have the witness of Jesus's life and ministry, and his death to show us the way. Even through crucifixion, God remains steadfast, and new life was born. We can experience God in the here and now of our lives, too. We can listen with our hearts and minds and souls for God's call on our lives. We can offer our lives as a living sacrifice to God who will always bring about something fresh and new with us.

Amen.