

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Welcoming Together
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1 Peter 5:1-11; Matthew 5:3

For a few years I worked in an elementary school with kids in first grade. One of my responsibilities was to monitor the kids on the playground. Most days it was just standing there talking to the other adults. Some days kids would ask us to play. And some days it would be like the day I am going to tell you about.

This day took place after three very rainy days, which means the kids had had indoor recess three days in a row. If you know anything about indoor recess you probably just gasped. Indoor recess is a poor substitute for running around outside. It does very little to help the kids decompress and expel energy. So, after three days of being inside, this day was the first time they were able to run around outside.

Chaos does not begin to describe the scene on that playground. When the memory pops into my head all I see are blurs of colors shooting past me as the kids flew by running at full speed.

From the center of this pandemonium came a scream. All recess monitors become very skilled at distinguishing between a scream of play or joy and a scream of distress. This was distress. Kids are also good at knowing the difference. The flashes of color stopped in their tracks and I could follow the eyeline of the kids to the one who was in need of help.

When I got to the source of the scream, I saw a boy hanging from the play structure bridge by the drawstring in his pants. The relief that he was physically okay and the sight of him parallel to the ground with this hyper cinched waist band made me smirk a little, but I pulled myself together to go help.

First, I scooped him up in my arms to relieve the pressure of the string. I asked him if he was okay and generally kept some small talk going while I got my bearings on what was happening. What I could pull together is that he was running around the slippery play structure, slipped, and slid between the baseboards of the bridge and the hand holds. The drawstring in his pants was perfectly pinched between two bridge boards.

While I was getting info, other adults had shown up and we realized the drawstring was not only pinched in the baseboards but now wedged under a bolt. When the kid was dangling it had also gotten twisted around a few times. It was a mess.

The easiest way to free the kid would have been to take his pants off, but since every other kid on the playground was watching, we decided that wasn't a great choice. We tried to untangle the string, pull harder, and bounce the bridge to get it unpinched. We tried everything. We decided the draw string needed to go and an adult went to get some scissors.

While we waited, we kept chatting with the kid to keep him calm. Other students came over to tell him jokes. We even got a magic trick shown to us! Finally, the adult came back with the scissors and we cut the drawstring to free him from the bridge.

When I was able to put the student down, he looked at the rope still tied to the bridge and looked at us and said "Thank goodness I had that rope!"

I looked at him confused and said, “But the rope is what got you caught.”

He replied, “Yeah, but if it hadn’t gotten caught, I would have hit the ground.”

Amazing perspective. If only we could see the world through the eyes of children. This might seem like an odd story to bring up while talking about the poor in spirit, but that verse was so short I thought we needed a little narrative example to latch onto as we talked today.

This story popped into my head as I was reading through different translations of this verse. Looking at different translations is my “day one” practice. It helps me better understand the scripture through the eyes of a variety of translators.

Translation is not as straightforward as we would like it to be sometimes. When a person or organization sits down to do a new translation they have to decide what takes precedent. Maybe the most important decision to be made before a single word is translated is if they will translate word for word or the general message. You honestly cannot have both. Often there is not an English word that equals exactly what the original language was saying. This verse actually is a great example of that. The word we read as “poor” in the English is much more nuanced in the Greek. The Greek carries with it the idea of poor but hopeful, or on the way up out of poor, or poor in one sense but rich in another. Just saying poor really does not cut it in English. So, we lose some meaning when we commit too much to word for word translation.

The other major way translators can choose to do a translation is general meaning of scripture. These translators will read a whole sentence or paragraphs and study it to understand what the original author wanted the original audience to get out of it. Then they ask, “How would I convey that same idea to someone today in my language.” The Message Bible is an example of this kind of translation. Matthew 5: verse 3 reads very differently in The Message Bible. It says, “Blessed are those who are at the end of their rope.” Now you can see why I thought of my friend hanging from his drawstring. When we translate this way, though we do lose some detail, things that don’t seem to impact the meaning get lost. So, when we read scripture it’s good for us to have a balance of word for word translations and general meaning.

Balance is key.

Whether Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” or “Blessed are those who are at the end of their rope,” these are not places we really want to rush to be. In fact, all the beatitudes are not exactly places we want to be, even if they are places where God blesses us. I don’t care how many blessings are given to those who mourn, I don’t want to be there. If there are blessings at the end of my rope, great, but I’m not hoping to be there any time soon.

What the beatitudes do for us, is reassure us that when we were there, or when we are there again, we know of God’s presence and blessing. Like Pastor John said last week, these are pieces of good news for the parts of life we aren’t particularly thrilled to be in.

Blessed are those who are at the end of their rope.

I think it is fairly safe to say we have reached an end of a rope at some point this year. The pandemic, the election, the protests, losing a loved one, whether it is a family member or friend or beloved public figure. This year has put butter on all our ropes and we are slipping further and further down toward the end.

The beatitudes help us see like that child on the playground. Thank goodness for the rope. The rope that keeps us from hitting the ground. The rope gives us time to scream out, and for help to find us. At the end of the rope is God waiting to hold us until we can be untangled or cut free.

I've heard people say: "I just stayed bed today," "the only thing I did was eat and sleep," or "I cry too much lately." These are end of the rope statements; however, they are framed by a worldly understanding of what being at the end of a rope means. Not how God sees it. The words "just" or "the only thing" or "too much" imply judgment on ourselves. That judgment is based in the assumption that we aren't meeting our productivity quota. The world lies to us and tells us that being productive is the most important and worth-giving thing we can do. We need to be productive with every minute. It's why we check our emails at red lights, our brains think, "I have 45 seconds. How can I fill it to be productive." This mindset forces us to fight against rest. Rest is not valued as productive enough. And yet we need it to survive.

If we looked at those end of rope statements through the lens of this beatitude they would sound more like: "I was at the end of my rope and was blessed to stay in bed today. I was at the end of my rope and was blessed to focus on nourishment and rest. I was at the end of my rope and was blessed to release my emotions with tears."

This beatitude begs us to not see rest as a bad thing, it does not take away from your value. Surrendering is not the same as giving up.

Let me say that again...surrendering is NOT the same as giving up. If that student had kept squirming and fighting the drawstring, it would have gotten tighter and he would have been in a much more dangerous situation. His willingness to just lay in my arms was the most helpful thing he could have done for himself.

When we degrade ourselves for resting, we never get a true rest. "I should be (blank)," kills the healing power of rest. It negates all the blessings at the end of our rope. It's like expecting Jell-O to congeal without putting it in the refrigerator. You can't rest while thinking about the "shoulds."

When it is time to rest, truly rest (and I'm sorry to inform those of us who want to plan and schedule everything, you can't always schedule the rest) there will be days when too much was thrown at you and you slip down to the end of your rope suddenly. You may need to surrender to dangling at the end of the rope at a very inconvenient time. If you fight it, you will become more tangled.

Rest comes when we open ourselves up to being thankful for the rope. Thankful for the push towards the blessings that wait for us there. Thankful for a moment to be in the arms of God and have that be the only thing keeping us from hitting the ground.

Of course, we will need to get back to being productive at some point. Having a purpose is important to well-being too. Balance is key. Being hyper focused on the individual daily tasks will wear us thin. And resting from the challenges of life will leave us empty. We need to live with a balance. And know that God is just as proud of us and just as present with us in both places. When we have it all together and when we are at the end of our rope.