

Participles

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I am sorry to have to tell you that today's sermon begins with a boring grammar lesson.

At the risk of giving you flashbacks to earlier years. We need to talk about participles.

Now participles, as some of you may remember are verbs used as adjectives. Action words, being used to describe something.

For example: the panting dog, or the dancing child, or the waving flag.

You use a participle when you want to describe someone, or something, based on what they are doing.

An interesting thing about particles, or at least I think it is kind of interesting, is that they are used a lot in the Bible. That's because Ancient Greek uses participles a lot.

And not just with single words, but whole phrases. Which leads to a lot of sentences that wouldn't sound right to us.

Like, the "panting-because-it-is-so-hot-out dog" "or the around-and-around-in-cicles-dancing child."

We read the Bible translated into English, and a lot of these participles get smoothed out into English that makes more sense. So a literal translation might be something like: "A walking-up-to-Jesus man asked him a question."

We would say, "A man walked up to Jesus and asked him a question."

So, to review. Participles are action words used to describe someone or something. And in the Bible, they happen a lot, in ways that get lost in translation. There are these sort of hidden participles all over the place

Why am I telling you this?

Well, today's reading is full of them.

In fact, an almost impossibly long string of participles are used to describe this woman who grabs a hold of Jesus cloak in the crowd.

Most of the time, reading the Bible in translation as we do works just fine. But every once-in-a-while, it causes us to miss a bit of beautiful poetry or prose, that carries an important message to us.

Today's reading—I think—is one of those times.

Here is the section as we heard it:

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak.

But in the original language, it is just one long string of participles, uninterrupted, if we translated it very literally it would sound something more like this:

Now, there was a bleeding-for-twelve-years, suffering-under-many-physicians, spending-all-she-had, not-benefiting-at-all, rather-becoming-worse, hearing-about-Jesus, coming-up-behind-him woman. And she touched his cloak.

I love how this passage kind of captures the breathless, cascading, desperation she must have felt as she went through year, after year, after year of her life getting worse, going broke, until she hears about this Jesus, finds him in the crowd and then we land, with a nice simple sentence. She touched his cloak.

And just that little grab of his outer garment does for her what all those doctors could not. And she is healed.

How many of us could write a breathless string of participles to describe our lives over this past year?

How many of us are stretched-to-thin, tired-all-the-time, working-from-home, chasing-the-kids, on zoom all the time people.

Or how many of us are alone-too-much, talking-to-ourselves, feeling-without-purpose, afraid-to-go-back-to-life, stuck-in-a-rut people.

The woman in this story is introduced to us with this breathless string of participles. She is introduced to us, described simply as the sum of everything that is going wrong in her life. Her identity is given to us simply as the aggregate of her suffering.

That is until she meets Jesus. Until that moment of encounter when in faith-filled, but desperate hope she strains through the crush of the crowd and just manages to grab a fistful of his coat.

Everything stops, and Jesus takes notice. The disciples can't believe it because so many people are reaching for him, how could he distinguish one from the others. But he can, and he turns to her. He calls her "daughter."

This is why I wanted to give you a boring grammar lesson.

Because hidden in this poetry of this story is a sensation that we may know well.

The sensation of breathlessly grasping for hope. The sensation of feeling weighed down, as if our whole identity is just a pile of problems and worries and fears.

Participles are a tricky thing, because if you are not careful, they can get you thinking that who you can be summed up just by listing off what you do, or what is happening to us.

Hidden in this story is another miracle.

It comes when you finally reach the end of that long sentence, when her hand touches him, and you can take a breath.

And it comes when he turns to her, and sees right through every story and struggle that might define her to the world, he sees right to the heart of who she is, who any of us is, a child of God, and he calls her. Daughter.

The grammar of this story leads us right to the heart of the miracle. It shows us right where to take a breath.

And I think that in order to face our lives in the days, and weeks, and months, and years ahead we all need to find that breath.

We need to find a moment, maybe this moment, where we can put a period on the long-winded string of descriptors that have entangled us, the pile of identities and responsibilities that obscure the most basic fact about everyone of us.

Child of God. Beautiful. Forgiven. Loved.

Sometimes when I am in the middle of a busy day, or a stressful moment, or an anxious season of life, I use the image of this story to help myself begin to pray.

I close my eyes, and feel the crush of my crowded and clamoring life, and I imagine that moment of reaching out, and grabbing onto Christ, and breathing, almost as if for the first time.

Landing, still, in the presence of the Holy One. And the noise recedes, so that I can hear that first truth once more:

Child of God. Child of God.