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I remember one time in Hungary looking out a second story classroom window. I was looking down at the track, where my seniors were running for gym class. The sixth graders had just been released and were milling about the courtyard area where the track was. The whole school yard was encircled by a very old and very tall brick wall, which probably stood 8 feet high.

A small group of sixth graders caught my eye. They were standing next to this wall, and it soon became evident that some sort of bet had just been placed. I saw a few of them shake hands, and then one boy, the smallest of them all, backed way up, ran at the wall with all his might and jumped at the last second, trying to grab the top of the wall with his hands in the hopes of launching his body over the wall, so that he could land safely on the other side and then return to proudly collect his money.

Unfortunately, things didn't go as planned.

In fact, I couldn't believe my eyes...because, what actually happened, was this small boy ran at the wall with all his strength and speed and instead of pole vaulting his little body over the wall, he rocketed straight into it and knocked himself out. As he lay there in the grass, his friends collected on their bet and walked away, leaving him there. Some friends! The PE teacher, though, a lovely man named Miklos, came running over to the boy and helped him up. The stubborn boy refused to go see the nurse, and eventually the PE teacher returned to his class.

For the rest of the afternoon, however, the little boy tried again and again and again to scale that wall. And again and again and again, he failed. I saw him close up when he came in hours later, and he was a bloody mess. His fingers were raw and bloody from trying to claw his way up the wall. His poor little forehead was covered in bruises and gashes and goose-eggs from hurling himself into the old brick wall. It seemed he simply couldn't understand that there was no possible way he would be able to scale that wall all by himself. There were no laws of physics that would allow for this to happen. It was, by all rights, absolutely and completely impossible.

At least it was impossible for him to scale the wall all *by himself*...his salvation finally came at the end of the afternoon, when Miklos was finished with his last gym class and apparently could not stand to see this poor little boy hurl himself at the brick wall one more time. And so as I watched from the second story window, I saw Miklos approach the boy, walk with him to the wall, get down on one knee and offer him a boost, with his fingers laced tight together. At first, the boy refused and shook his head, clearly telling the teacher, "I can do it all by myself." And Miklos must have replied something like, "No, you can't do it by yourself. There is no way you can do it by yourself. But here, I'll help you. Put your foot here and I'll give you a boost. Trust me."

It took some coercing. But the teacher prevailed. The boy hesitatingly put a small foot into the teachers strong hands and, with one strong thrust, Miklos flung the boy over the wall, where he landed with a thud in the grass on the other side. Injured though he was, even I could hear his shouts of victory even from my second story window.

This memory came to mind as I thought about this morning's Gospel, which isn't really much of a Gospel, if we define Gospel as "good news." Because there doesn't seem to be much good news in this reading from Matthew...just a laundry list of human failures and shortcomings. Jesus takes the Ten Commandments, which we all love to use as a measuring rod to judge other people, and turns the table back on us. And we hate it when that happens.

The commandment says do not murder, Jesus explains, but I say if you are even a little angry at someone, you've killed them in your heart.

The commandment says do not commit adultery, Jesus explains, but I say if you even look at another person lustfully, you've committed adultery.

The commandment says don't swear, Jesus explains, but I say if you say anything more than yes or no, you've used God's name wrongly by dragging his holy name through the muck of your life.

And this is just an excerpt from his sermon...he hits all the commandments...*you've heard it said that way, but I say it this way*, Jesus says as he goes down the list, and eventually we all get knocked to the floor...the list gets us all...I'm there, in the one about divorce and many others, and you're there, too...If Jesus preached this sermon on a Sunday morning to a congregation, you can bet as soon as he left they would convene a call committee meeting to get rid of him and find a new pastor...no one would hear this sermon and shake Jesus' hand and say, "A wonderful sermon today, Jesus, thank you for preaching it." No, people would awkwardly avoid shaking his hand and sneak out the back door and meet up in the parking lot, all wondering why Pastor Jesus was so crabby today.

The truth that Jesus is not so gently unveiling is that we are that small boy, taking repeated runs at that brick wall. We are that small boy, making failed attempt after failed attempt to reach heaven on our own. We are that small boy, repeating the same exercises in futility at achieving perfection on our own. And time after time, we keep running headfirst in to that brick wall. It is too big for us. We simply can't scale it alone. We have no choice but to fail. And that is a dismal realization.

But there is a little humor here, I should mention...What's funny is that if you look up this sermon in the Bible in the book of Matthew, you see that Jesus moves from this laundry list of human failures and shortcomings to the section where he tells us not to worry...He moves from itemizing all the ways we can never measure up to telling us not to worry about anything...to look at the lilies growing in the field, that THEY don't worry about a thing and look how beautiful they are...but this doesn't make us feel any better....

...because when we've just been told we are failures and then we're told not to worry about it, all we do is feel worse, because now we feel guilty on top of feeling like failures.

So why does Jesus do this? Is he mean? Is he a schoolyard bully, who enjoys knocking us down on the ground and then kicking us while we're down there? How can we NOT worry, when we know what failures we are?

Jesus tells us not to worry about our failures and our shortcomings because he is the teacher who comes to us and kneels down in front of us and laces his fingers together and tells us to trust him, to put our foot there, to lean into him with all our weight...that he will lift us over whatever insurmountable hurdle it is that keeps us from him. Jesus is that teacher who knows we can't enter his kingdom all by ourselves, but he also knows we need to figure that out for ourselves...but first we need to run into that brick wall a dozen times or two dozen times or three hundred times.

Jesus doesn't list our failures to reveal how worthless we are. He does this to reveal how much we need him. On our own, we simply cannot scale the wall that stands between us and God's kingdom, but that's why we need Jesus...if we could do it on our own, there would be no need for him. Jesus knows we are stubborn and want to prove him wrong. We want to show him we can do it all by ourselves. He must laugh to himself, I know I would if I were God.

Jesus knows he needs to let us run at that wall time and time again, until we finally come to our own realization that we can't make it on our own. It is at that moment, when we are bloody and defeated and exhausted and humiliated...it is at that precise moment when we finally understand that we will never, ever scale that wall alone, it is at that moment when we encounter the grace of God, face to face, kneeling in front of us, forever patient, forever waiting.