

“Sparking Resilience”

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Will you please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

The title of this sermon is “Sparking Resilience.” I will admit that the times when I most need resilience are times when I don’t much want to need it. In fact, I am usually praying for something else. But, according to the letter from Paul that we heard today, the Holy Spirit will often know what we need to pray for more deeply and fully than we, ourselves, know.

“Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

I wonder if you have ever had that experience of not knowing what to pray for, or when you pray for one thing, but feel that you have been answered in a different, better way? According to our scripture, this happens all the time, whether we are fully aware of it or not. But I can say from experience that when we’re aware of it happening, it’s pretty amazing.

Several years ago, my family experienced a crisis due to my daughter’s health issue. I was very frightened and overwhelmed, and so I prayed. I have developed a prayer practice where I start by completely relaxing my body and mind. Then, with my eyes closed, I imagine myself in the presence of Jesus. Being in a deeply relaxed state, I am close to sleep and so my mind tends to wander and create the interaction with Jesus without me being very conscious of it. I don’t say to myself, for example, I want to see Jesus in a garden. My mind, or perhaps the Holy Spirit, just picks a spot. I often pray in this way when I am most sad, scared or just in need of comfort. In most of those prayers, I see Jesus wrap me in his arms and just hold me while I weep, or I see him sit with me in a doctor’s office or hospital and hold my hand. That’s the kind of comfort I went looking for when my daughter was so sick.

To my shock, though, the vision I saw in my head did not play itself out as I had expected. Instead of comforting me, Jesus took me by my shoulders and put his forehead on mine. Then he pulled back a little and looked me deeply in the eyes, and I felt myself filled with resilience. I had a powerful sense that everything was not okay, that it was going to get worse before it got better, but that I had the strength to get through it.

To be honest, I was really angry. “No!” I said. “You missed the message! This wasn’t a prayer for strength, this was a take-this-cup-away-from-me moment! I want you to fix this!” I didn’t want to need resilience; I didn’t want to need strength. I wanted God to make everything better. But in my mind, Jesus simply kept looking at me in the eyes. “You will get through this,” I heard in my mind. “You can and you will.”

I have rarely been so grateful for the intercession of the Holy Spirit in my prayers. God knew what I needed far more than I knew. I left that time of prayer feeling rather apprehensive,

but certain—entirely and deeply certain—that my family would get through it. And things did get worse, and we weathered it, and my daughter eventually got better. And during that entire ordeal, I continually felt Jesus’ hands on my shoulders and saw him looking into my eyes, telling me we would get through it.

I share this story with you because I think that now is another time when we probably need resilience, even though we might be praying for something else. This might be a time when the Holy Spirit is trying to give us a gift that we might not be asking for. As I listen to people and read social media posts, I keep hearing a similar refrain: Many of us are on the edge. We’re not sure how much longer we can take this social isolation and uncertainty. We’re scared to send our kids back to school, but not sure we can homeschool them. We’re uncertain about the economy, worried about how politics are playing out in our country... We’ve just had it and would really like God to step in and fix it!

But, as Trevor Noah said in a recent Daily Social Distancing Show, we might be bored of coronavirus, but coronavirus isn’t bored of us. No matter how we’re feeling about this disease and the changes it has forced us to make, it’s still out there, unchanged, doing its thing. It’s times like this, then, that we need resilience.

One way to help build resilience in ourselves is through joy and laughter. What sparks joy and laughter for you? I like playing with my cats, playing board games with my family and watching silly animal videos. I watch comedies and read inspiring stories. I find a lot of joy in nature, so I go outside, visit lakes and gardens, and just let beauty sooth my soul.

Others find joy in art and music. Do you know that Chris Cypher has organized a porch and yard art show in Grand Ledge? It is scheduled for August 15th. You can drive or walk through the neighborhoods and visit the beautiful art that people have created, but in a safe, socially distant way with masks and hand sanitizer. You will even be able to purchase the art or possibly donate to Ledge Craft Lane (since their major fundraiser this year was canceled). Chris is going to set up a Facebook page called Grand Ledge Arts and Crafts on the Porch, if you’re interested in learning more about it.

Others are organizing recreation and recreation activities, which definitely boost our body’s serotonin and dopamine levels and help create resilience. I like to walk, especially on these beautiful summer days. But I also grew up as a dancer and am amazed every time I dance at how much joy it gives me. For me, dance is like a prayer—a way that my body can reach out to God without words, and it feels like God reaches back with the answer of joy.

But if you’re struggling to find joy right now, let me share some good news with you. Although you might have moments, or even hours, when you think that you can’t make it, that you can’t do this anymore, if you are hearing, seeing or reading this sermon, you are already making it. Look back over these months and notice what you’ve already been through and that you are here now. You have done it, and you CAN keep making it. You are already resilient.

Paul’s words to the Romans, words provided at a time when the newly created Christian church was in peril, are true for us today as well:

If God is for us, then who can be against us?...Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

My dear ones, this may be a time when we want to pray for God to take this cup away from us but, instead, we need to accept the strength and resilience God provides. Remember that we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. You are already resilient because God is for you. Even in these difficult times, God is *for you*.

So how has the Holy Spirit already given you resilience? If you're not sure, start with what gives you joy or something that makes you laugh. How can it become a daily prayer for you? How might you use that prayer to spark resilience in you? In those terrible moments, when you feel like you can't make it anymore, remember that Christ's love always surrounds you. Indeed, for me, one of the most joyous and resilient-making facts is this:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation [including disease!] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.