

The Power of Resilience**John 9:1-41¹***Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC in Camden, March 22, 2020*

Someone came up with this humorous prayer:² “Thank you, God, for the gift of this day. So far, I have not gossiped, acted greedily, or behaved like a grump toward someone I love. I have not gotten lost in self-indulgence or fear. I have not projected my anxieties on anyone. But, God, in a few minutes, I will need to get out of bed and I have the feeling I am going to need a lot of help. Just saying.... Thanks much. Amen.” Do you ever start your day like that? It somehow seems particularly apt at this time of dealing with the Coronavirus?

Some might say that they have not yet obsessed this early in the day over where to get some toilet paper when even online deliveries look unpromising and outrageously expensive for the next 6-8 weeks (BTW – you can add it to your wedding gift registry on one website!). On the more existential side, some of you parents may be praying, “I have not lost patience with my children stuck at home yet.” Others may be aware that they will worry about how to pay the rent after being laid off. Or you might already sense your anger welling up toward people who don’t seem to get that you shouldn’t buy up stuff when some folks have to live paycheck to paycheck and find themselves standing in front of empty shelves. Some among us may know we’ll likely be checking the status of our stock market portfolio too much throughout the day and perseverate over when we’ll be able to retire, if at all.

Perhaps some of us are struggling with isolation already and fear being unable to cope with

¹ The context of the story is complex. John is addressing the experience of many early Christians of being expelled from the synagogue for regarding Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. That is why “the Jews” are so often targeted in this Gospel. The Gospel often challenges the reader to decide who Jesus is for them and focuses on the primary importance of faith in him as the embodiment of God and the agent of our healing. Stories that involve blindness often carry the additional meaning of a spiritual blindness. For John, those who are given the opportunity to see Jesus as the Christ/Messiah for who he is and reject him are blind and their lives are already “judged” because of his. That is, they are unable to tap into God’s grace and love by their own choosing, not as a punishment. It is important that we do not project this onto Jewish people. There are many ways in which one can be blind to God’s invitation to enter the flow of unconditional love beyond all bounds.

² Tara Brach offers a version of this in one of her talks on *Psychotherapy and Mindfulness*. The source is not named.

depression or a recent loss. Some may fear going back to an addictive or otherwise destructive behavior to self-soothe. Yet others may be terrified of getting ill or seeing a loved one with a compromised immune system be affected by the virus. Everything and everyone might morph for you into a potential source of contamination. If you are in the more vulnerable population, you may fear or experience blame by some who might reduce the crisis to having to “protect” people like you and having to pay a huge price for it themselves.

In light of all these challenges, how do we keep our sense of connection and belonging to each other? How do we learn to cope in ways that do not blame or lead to resignation? All week, the word resilience has come to my mind and heart. One dictionary defines it quite simply as the ability to bounce back. “Resilience” is derived from the Latin word *resilire* which means “to jump back.” The related word *salire* means “to leap” and is a building block of words like “somersault.” There is a lot of energy and potential in the word itself! What does it take to remain resilient? I would venture to say that humor, a chance to connect with our own sense of agency, supportive mutual relationships, positive modeling, reframing negative messages, working on what we can control or affect, learning from experience, thinking outside the box, and confronting the fear of change all play a role. They can enable us to not only bounce back but also possibly experience a measure of joy.

Our Gospel story from John provides us with a unique look at how one man managed to be resilient in the face of much opposition (please see footnote 1 for more context that I will not dwell on here). Our main character is a man who was born blind and has been marginalized by his community, including the religious leadership by virtue of his disability. Physical illness was seen as evidence of a punishment from God for a “sin” (missing the mark) committed either by the parents or the person who was ill. He has basically had to fend for himself and has survived by begging in the street. Even the disciples buy into the interpretation of illness being a result of sin when they ask Jesus to explain whether the young man or his parents sinned (Jn 9:2). Jesus denies the negative judgments that demand a correlation between suffering and punishment.

He reframes the whole issue by asking them to think outside of the box: stay focused on the potential good that God can work in this situation.

Jesus models support. His first concern is with the young man himself who is very receptive when Jesus proceeds to put mud and spit into his eyes. Then Jesus calls on the man's sense of agency by suggesting he bathe in the traditional healing pool of Siloam. The man emerges able to see but the people around him suddenly become blind in terms of their ability to understand and receive what just happened. We might also say that they have been losing their sight all along but now it worsens. The interactions that follow his healing are both comical and sad.

Some people are so astonished about the change in him that they refuse to believe that he is the same young man who used to beg (Jn 4:9). They think it must be a case of mistaken identity. That's not the kind of reframing that builds resilience! Others are so flabbergasted that they become convinced that he must not have been blind in the first place (Jn 4:18). There you go again. When the religious leaders are called in to make sense of the situation, they get hung up on the fact that Jesus healed him on the Sabbath day of rest and negate the power and beauty of his healing (Jn 4:16). They all give evidence to our tragic capacity to refuse to believe or celebrate a good thing or think outside the box of dogmas, rules, and fears! When people try to get empirical evidence through the man's parents, the parents act petrified. They fear a backlash against them if they acknowledge that Jesus had the power to heal their son. So they just throw the hot potato back in their son's lap. They collectively do just about everything you can do to squash resilience!

Amazingly, the man is so emboldened that he speaks up for himself and validates his own experience. He begins by simply acknowledging that he was healed by Jesus whom he has yet to see with his own eyes.³ He also essentially says: 'Yes, I have been blind from birth,' and 'Why

³ This would also be true of Christians living during the writer's time (likely 90 AD or early 2nd century) who would not have met Jesus.

do you all keep asking the same stupid questions (Jn 4:27)?' 'How can you question the goodness of Jesus' power given the fact that he healed me,' he wonders? The others are so locked in their interpretation of reality and need for control that they prefer to drive the young man out of town rather than embrace this transformation and gift of new sight.

When Jesus hears that the man has been expelled, he immediately comes looking for him to stand by him and offers a deepening of their mutual relationship. The healed man affirms his trust in Jesus as the Christ which means the anointed/blessed one. The man is able to see not only with his eyes but with his heart. Jesus as the Christ mirrors his worth and dignity to him more fully. He could see himself with the eyes of Christ as a beloved child of God.⁴ He, too, is anointed and blessed no matter what others say who fail to see what truly matters. Jesus as Christ helped him dispel more fully the negative story that labeled his illness as a sign of sin. He has gained a sense of confidence that lifts him above the judgments and expectations of others and grounds him more deeply in the love of God. The efficacy of resilience actually does not depend so much on a physical cure, as much as that is desired, but is our life-line to claiming who and whose we really are. Resilient people remain open to all that allows for possibility and transformation amidst life's gifts and challenges.

During these challenging times, we are all invited to support that which makes for resilience. For those of us who are feeling especially vulnerable, this might mean not giving in to seeing ourselves as helpless while still taking wise precautions. For those who are laid off it may mean not defining our sense of worth solely by our professional success and capacity to spend money. For those on the edge financially, it may mean accepting assistance without allowing a sense of shame. All of us are invited to expand our compassion toward all who have even fewer resources - like in Africa where the virus is spreading now.

⁴ We know that plenty of people don't receive physical healing but he still exemplifies many of the attitudes and attributes that make for resilience no matter what situation we find ourselves in.

Like our poem from earlier in the service suggested⁵, this is a time to remember that our life is meant to be a celebration of this world. May the Italians singing on their balconies teach us that. It is a time to gather the “sunlight dropping soundlessly” upon the trees. It is still a time to dream of yet a greater wholeness for us all. It is a time to recognize priorities. It is time to welcome unexpected opportunities including the fact that our oceans and air are getting a chance to become cleaner. We are also discovering worship and connection in new ways. It is an opportunity to embrace that the well-being of one and the well-being of all are one and the same thing. It is a time of trusting in the power of renewal even in uncertain times.

It is also a time “to cast our hopes upon possibilities that abide only in departure” to quote the poem again. I think this line invites us to dare to embrace change (=departure) in order that newness may be possible. As we let go into what is, whether it is delight or momentary despair in the moment, we can actually fall more deeply into our true identity, “returning, finally to the stillness from which it began.” This stillness is the ultimate depth of God from whom all emerges and to whom everything returns safely in the end.

As we continue to live into this strange new normal, let us open eyes to wherever people are opting to embrace beauty and love. Let us mirror for each other how the Christ energy that has been at work from the beginning of creation emerging is alive in all of us and every thing today. Amen.

P.S.: Following the sermon, we are viewing a video from the Universal Christ website of Father Richard Rohr. Go to www.universalchrist.cac.org and scroll down all the way to the end of the website page and click on “The Universal Christ Book Trailer.” The dog in the picture is Venus, Richard’s dog who died 1.5 years ago. He says that she was one of his teachers for seeing Christ in all things. People in the video are reading favorite quotes from the book.

⁵ Everyone was encouraged to download the poem “From Which It All Began” by Bernadette Miller at <https://gratefulness.org/from-which-it-all-began>.