

"Spirituality Is Key"

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Texts: Matthew 14: 13-21 and Matthew 6: 5-8

Over the past several weeks, we have been talking about radical resilience. Today is the last in this series, where we have been trying to get to the root (which means means the same thing as radical) of resilience (the ability to meet, learn from, and not be crushed by the challenges and stresses of life). In this final day, I think we're talking about the most important topic in the series: spirituality. For "attending to our spirituality is an essential skill for radical resilience" (Alice Updike Scannell, Episcopal priest and educator, as quoted in *Daily Meditations*, Center for Action and Contemplation, January 1, 2024). At the same time, not all religions or spiritual belief systems are helpful for radical resilience. So what do we need? What would meet the goal, which is "the ability to meet, learn from, and not be crushed by the challenges and stresses of life"?

Alice Updike Scannell considered spirituality to be an essential skill for radical resilience. But not just any spirituality. "The kind of spirituality that serves as a radical resilience," writes Scannell, "respects the dignity of every human being; understands that all beings, the environment, and the universe are

interconnected; views the Higher Power as loving; and holds honesty, self-awareness, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, openness, acceptance and healing as core values." Put another way, we need dedicated spiritual time for ourselves, spiritual support from others, and an openness to searching for meaning.

Jesus modeled for us the need for dedicated spiritual time. He showed it to us several times, but we might have missed it when looking for something else. In both of our scriptures this morning, we see Jesus either leaving to be off by himself (in the second scripture) or telling us to go off by ourselves to pray (in the first scripture). In the second scripture, we dive into the story of the feeding of the 5000. Miraculous, wonderful and a great story we all know. But we miss the beginning of the story where Jesus goes off for personal, spiritual time. And in the first scripture, we get all into what's coming: the Lord's Prayer, and we skip over the part about needing private space. He even goes so far as to tell us to lock the door behind us. Think of his context. How easy would it have been for someone in a home to go lock a door and have time to themselves. And yet, he encourages them to do it anyway.

Why does that matter? Because we are full of excuses to neglect our

spirituality. Some of us it is because we have equated spirituality with religion and we have problems with religion. So we throw out the baby with the bathwater and ignore the whole thing. Instead of changing what religion looks like, we reject it all. We would be right to do so if our religion or spiritual belief system is judgmental, punitive, rigid, or exclusive. Scannell tells us that these are obstacles to resilience (*Daily Meditations*, January 1). Think about it: if your system is rigid and a life challenge comes along, how will your rigid system deal with the anomaly that has presented itself? If you use the word "always" when discussing your faith, and you are not talking about God "always" being love, then you've set yourself up for your spirituality and your religion being a hinderance, not a help, for resilience.

We need dedicated, open, expansive, spiritual time to ourselves to grow deeper in our faith. Whether it's in the woods, in a room of your home, here in this sanctuary alone or with only a couple people, or some other place you choose, it's imperative to stop the noise of life and listen for the voice of something greater than ourselves. In church world, we call that something greater than ourselves God or our Higher Power. The terms aren't as important as realizing we need something more than just ourselves and other people.

And yet, "spiritual support often comes from other people -- some from those we know and some from strangers who offer a kind word or come forward to help when we need it." She writes that we also might find spiritual support through our religious tradition, twelve-step program, or a meditative practice such as tai chi, mindfulness meditation, or yoga. All of those things are true, but I want to underscore that despite our beliefs to the contrary, we need other people. Yes, they are frustrating, annoying, and can drive us crazy. We already talked about needing time to ourselves. But note that Jesus never stayed there. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed, then he went to be among friends, prayed again, came back, and again. I know his friends let him down, but that's true of all friends, and it doesn't change the fact that we need them. We need other people. That also means we are needed as well.

Most importantly, we have to open up our minds, our hearts and our spirits. Almost all of us -- I might say all of us -- have become so rigid and so set in our ways that we haven't been open to new ideas, people, or spirituality. In fact, I'd say we're not even open to new words, ideas and plans that come directly from God. Even in our meditation, we often reject that which makes us uncomfortable, or challenges our pre-conceived notions about what God -- or any other spiritual source -- might be saying to us.

Scannell continues, "Whenever we seek to understand how we can best live our lives with meaning and purpose, through prayer, meditation, or other practice of spiritual discernment, and we pay attention with an open mind to what comes to us in response to that practice, we're engaging with our spirituality as a radical resilience skill. Over time, engagement with spirituality in this way is transformative. It changes the way we understand ourselves. It opens our hearts to an awareness of gratitude and leads us into greater compassion and a sense of connection with others."

But she has a caution for us and that is, "if we haven't paid attention to deepening our spiritual life as we've become adults, we're likely to lack the spiritual resources we need to be radically resilient. Our childhood understanding of spirituality is usually not adequate when we experience the kind of adversity that changes our life forever. When we search for meaning in what has happened to us, and we search for an understanding of who we are when we can't do what we used to do, or be who we used to be, then we need spiritual resources that go deeper..."

I believe that this is the largest problem we have in the realm of spirituality and religion. Most, if not all of us refuse to go deeper. We're afraid of

encountering pain that we've buried, pushed away, or just plain ignored. James Hollis, in his book *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life* writes, "Encounters with [painful] experiences (which he calls "swampland visitations") in the spiritual framework of resilience ultimately lead to enlargement, not diminishment. If truth be told, we wish we didn't have to grow, but life is asking more of us than that."

I invite you to grow. Your life is asking more than you are giving it. Your spirit is eager for something deeper. Your soul is looking something more than either/or. Resilience depends on continued growth and openness to something greater than ourselves. How we do that isn't nearly as important as that we do it. For spirituality is key to resilience.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.