

Strength in Hard Times
Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson
March 1, 2015

Every day, every hour, someone is laid low.

You sit on the crate in the parking lot,
unnoticed,
and put your finger up to the wind,
and pray, "give me a break, give me a break."
Hard times.

Sometimes, the hard times come in a bang. All at once.
You were going along with your day,
and then
the mail comes
the phone rings
the doctor, the lawyer, the loved one says, I have news.
And now your world is different.

Sometimes, the hard times come drip-drip-drip.
The bad news, bad luck, builds.
You get stuck in a situation and don't know how to get
out.
Things just get stuck.
Fear replaces hope, and you wonder not just how you'll
get through today, or this week, or this year,
but how you'll get through life like this.

Every day, every hour,
someone is laid low.

Sometimes you are up and sometimes you are down.
This is life.

How many of you have ever had hard times?
A tough day, a tough year, bad news, at once or over
time?

Go ahead, raise your hands.
Ever had hard times?

Everybody faces them.
Everyone.

When I was in seminary, lo those many years ago,
I remember talking about this.
“How was I supposed to relate,” I wondered, “to folks
who’ve had tragedy, when I haven’t?”

This was the question I asked my professors.

Two things were said.

First, don’t be in denial.

I hadn’t faced what I’d call tragedy, but I’d faced
challenges.

Just because they were not as big as some folks’
challenges, doesn’t mean they were not real.

So, please, don’t deny the reality of the hard times you
might face

just because it could be worse.

Second, my professors, and the older students, said,
“don’t worry that you haven’t faced life challenges yet.
You will. You just have to live longer.”

Well, they were right about that too.
Live long enough, and there will be hard times.
That's just the way it is.

Lo those many years ago, in seminary,
we had a conversation about that age-old question:
why do bad things happen to good people?
More importantly, what do we say to folks when bad
things happen?
When we become real ministers, we wondered, what do
we say?

The professor, who'd spent 40 years in parish ministry,
said, "You don't really say anything.
If something needs to be said, you say,
'This sucks.'
'Sometimes life sucks.'"

And you didn't deserve it.
And it's not part of a plan.
It just happened.

And then the question is, now what?

I have 12 years of ministry now under my belt, not yet
40,
but I know my professor was right.
I have sat with you, and with others,
when times are hard.
When life sucks.

And you don't come, usually, looking for absolution or explanation.

You, I, am reassured by not being alone.

And we just need an ear.

One without judgment.

And then, we might say, "now what?"

I have seen folks face hard times so often.

You.

Family, friends, colleagues, and, yeah, my own self.

And I can see now, the patterns:

some folks get through, get stronger, heal, recover, grow, and survive.

Others . . . don't.

They remain, stuck.

They get knocked down and they don't get back up.

This week and next, I want to share with you what I've seen, and what I know, about resilience. About what it takes to have strength in hard times.

Next week, we're going to talk more about friendship, community,

how we help each other have that resilience and how we form a community of resilience.

Today, I want to talk more about the personal, about the interior life, the habits of soul, the perspective and power

that helps us not just get through it,
but get stronger and healthier and wiser
because we've faced hard times with spiritual resilience.

The good news is that folks do overcome obstacles.
Every day, every hour, someone is laid low,
and every day, every hour, someone gets back up,
takes life on, and goes forward.
Disappointment pierces through,
still they keep on loving;
though with pain we make our way,
still with hope we meet the day.
Every day, every hour, folks find the inner strength,
the equanimity and the courage,
to face challenges, to stay true to themselves,
to hold on and build a better life.

This is good news.
Because you can do it too.
If your hard times are not past-tense,
but right now, you can get through.
You can find the strength, and you will be stronger and
wiser for it.
You can.
Others have, every day, and you can too.
I believe in you, and I know you can do it.
You might need to ask for help.
But you can do it.

Where does our help come?

We lift our eyes and seek out that strength and wisdom;
where does it come from?

There is a fable attributed to Aesop, "the tree and the reed":

Well, little one," said a Tree to a Reed that was growing
at its foot,
"why do you not plant your feet deeply in the ground,
and raise your
head boldly in the air as I do?"

"I am contented with my lot," said the Reed. "I may not
be so grand,
but I think I am safer."

"Safe!" sneered the Tree. "Who shall pluck me up by the
roots or bow
my head to the ground?" But it soon had to repent of its
boasting, for
a hurricane arose which tore it up from its roots, and cast
it a useless log on the ground, while the little Reed,
bending to the force of the wind, soon stood upright
again when the storm had passed over.

You'll find a version of this parable in every culture:
a Mandarin proverb says "the tree that does not bend
with the wind will be broken by the wind."
Similar sayings are attributed to pretty much every
tradition.

Personal resilience isn't about invulnerability, in other words.

It's not about thinking that nothing will ever go wrong. The folks who bounce back from tragedy, they do take time to grieve, to morn, to wail in the dirt and gnash their teeth.

And then they get up and start living. They don't spend too much time saying, "Why me?"

They don't say, "it's not fair!"

Life isn't fair, and "anyone who says differently is selling something." (W. Goldman)

Like the reed that bends, they adapt.

They ride out the storm, then get to work getting upright again.

I have seen people who have faced tragedy, people I love and know well, and, years later, decades later, the story of the bad day, the tragedy, remains the central event in their lives.

"What happened to me."

But folks with personal resilience, on the other hand, make the story of their life about overcoming the tragedy:

what they learned, how they grew, how they became stronger.

It isn't "what happened to me"

it's "what I became."

They take the truth of the Tao Te Ching, or Ecclesiastics,
sometimes you are up, sometimes down,
for everything there is a season,
and they avoid the excesses,
the yo-yo of feeling successful or like a failure based on
the circumstances of the present moment.

They breathe.

They slow down.

They breathe.

They take the long view, and know that some days,
you just put one foot in front of the other,
and then, you look back, and see how far you've come.

You might go along for a while:

poor me, I am always last,

but then you discover a strength you forgot you had,
you embrace your unique power:

to stop the train from coming back down the mountain.

You are not an engine, maybe,

and need their help,

but you matter, you are stronger than you know.

And after that day, after that awakening,

you believe in yourself.

A sense of perspective.

A willingness to change and adapt to the new reality,
and not hold onto a past that can no longer be.

An ability to see that joy and sorrow are both natural parts of life:

neither cynics or naive pollyanna's,
they take life as it comes,
build on what's good,
and try to do right without expectation of universal success.

These are the qualities of the resilient person.
The reed who bends with the wind.

Now, before I say much more, I need to deal with a difficult issue:
an issue of justice, an issue of evil, and issue of what we call "theodicy" -
the problem of evil.

Some hard times are dealt out randomly, to everyone.
Bad things just happen.
And it doesn't matter who you are.

But some hard times are deeply unjust.
They are a consequence of systems of oppression,
violence, theft, racism, sexism.
It's not credible for me, a well-educated, middle-class,
white, able-bodied male,
to say,
just roll with the changes,
resilience is easy, no problem.

I've got it pretty easy, in terms of how society is structured.

I've got lots of advantages I haven't earned, and which other folks don't have.

It makes it easier for me to overcome challenges.

I have social and material resources that others don't, and not because of my own effort, at least not entirely; and the lack of those resources for others isn't always their "fault,"

it's often centuries of past and current injustice.

So, for those of us who find overcoming challenge to be easier because of our privilege,

we have a justice obligation to make it easier for others.

And for those who don't have those privileges,

I think it is important to see the justice context - and to work against that injustice, of course,

and to not let injustice become fate;

don't let the bastards win, in other words.

In education, they talk about a "resiliency model" of poverty -

how folks with challenges can develop strong resiliency, instead of a "deprivation model" where we just assume they are unable.

This is a good way to think about this.

It's not fair.

Life isn't fair.

But we can make it more fair, for us and for everyone, and we should.

There's another dozen sermons in that idea, of course,
and I've preached and will preach them.
But this question of social injustice leads to another sticky
wicket with personal resilience:
the problem of evil
the problem of god's grace, or lack thereof.

We look to the hills,
to the Lord who will keep us safe,
but the Lord doesn't come,
or at least, not all are kept safe.
And then what?

This is complicated.

If you were to ask many people
how did they get through hard times,
they'd tell you, without a doubt, they did it with the help
of God.

"God healed me."

"God gave me strength."

You've probably all heard people say this,
and some of us have said it ourselves, or something like
it.

"In the depths of my despair, I felt the presence of the
holy,
and was healed of my sorrow,
given courage,
experience a love beyond belief,

and that's how, that's how I overcame the challenges before me."

I've said that.

I meant it.

Some of us have experienced the holy as a source of strength.

Others of us have not had that experience.

Don't expect it, don't want it, no thank you very much.

We don't look to the hills for the lord,
we find a source of strength elsewhere.

In our own being, in the universe itself, in friends, in beauty, in reason and science.

I think, first, it is important that we don't denigrate whatever source of strength that people find.

If an ancient mantra helps you, I won't mock it.

If God is your strength, then I'm glad you have that.

If a rigorous commitment to science gives you perspective and peace, then that's wonderful.

Your source doesn't need to have the same name as mine.

Second, though, I think the problem of evil, the problem of selective favor, is real.

Every day, every hour, someone faces hard times.

Every day, every hour, someone is laid low.

And every day, every hour, someone bounces back.
Becomes stronger.
Faces their challenges and grows as a person.
And sometimes, folks don't.
And I can't subscribe to a God, or a holy power, or a
universe,
in which that's the plan.
I can't accept a divinity that blesses some with inner
strength and curses others without it.
The notion that God would cure some cancers but not
others,
or help some folks get jobs, but not others,
or give peace to some, but not others,
is as ridiculous to me as the notion that God would cause
one sports team to win and another to lose.

Instead of a God that rewards and punishes,
if we want to say that we find our help in the holy,
and I, personally, do want to say that,
then I think we say that the grace, the peace, the
strength, the wisdom of the spirit,
that energy,
flows through all things, and is present to everyone,
in good times and in hard times both.
It doesn't solve our problems or interfere in our lives,
but we can call on the presence in our hours of need
as a source of resilience, as a source of ultimate hope,
and everyone can, if they wish.
It won't change the world as it is,
but it might change us -

change our attitude from fear to hope,
from resentment to acceptance,
from being stuck to moving forward -
and if we change in that way,
then we can, more often than otherwise, overcome the
hard days and nights which are dealt to us.

That's what I think, anyway.

The good news is that people do get through the hard
times.

Disappointment does pierce us through.

Betrayal, pain, misfortune - it's all real.

It happens.

And you can stay stuck there forever, if you want to.

But ugh, ugh. That's not what your life is for.

Thriving as a person is your birthright.

Not perfection, not ease, not happiness every day,
but thriving.

So bend with the storm,
grieve, morn, gnash your teeth
for a while.

And then get up.

Dust yourself off.

And begin again.

One step at a time.

The good news is that people do get through the hard
times.

I've seen it.

They grow wiser, stronger, more gracious.
They accept what is, and then reach for what can be.
They adapt, like the reed in the wind,
and rise again, like the spring that is waiting under the
snow and the cold,
but will, will, come to us.
They find the power within themselves,
and from the spirit of life and power according to their
own understanding,
and they let that power feed their best self.
They fight injustice and live with compassion for
themselves and others,
but also are filled with gratitude for life's gifts,
even in the hardest days and nights of life.
The good news is that you can do it, too,
you can.
Accept, adapt, dig deep, and become the person you
need to be, hope to be,
for the next chapter of your life.
You can.
You will.
There is a power in each of us, and between each of us,
that is stronger than circumstance, wiser than despair,
a hope more true than fear.
Feel that power flow through your being,
know it is real,
and know that you can do what must be done,
you can go on,
and become,
and that your soul will unfurl its wings.

Let us sing together.