

Elmo the fuzzy red Sesame Street Muppet made quite a splash on X (formerly twitter) this week. He sent out to his 457,000 followers the text, "Elmo just checking in! How is everybody doing?" His question, viewed 140 million times, elicited 9000 responses mostly letting Elmo know people aren't doing so good. Sesame Street executives had no idea Elmo's question would resonate with so many people, and they eventually posted a follow-up directing people to mental health resources. We can chuckle about Elmo's social media impact, but on the other hand, are we really so surprised about how people are feeling. The war grinds on in Ukraine, the sorrow and depth of suffering in Gaza and Israel is overwhelming, and we have the noise and craziness of the 2024 election. There's so much turmoil currently in our world, and that comes on top of whatever is happening in our personal lives.

For me, the question comes down to how do we stay spiritually resilient in the face of the tensions of the times?

There is so much going on over which we have very little power. Anguished or angered over national or global events, we are not the ones accessing and pulling the levers of power.

So how do we navigate the year, amid the tensions of our times and our days?

How do we counter the feelings of powerlessness and even despair?

What more important time to lean into the wisdom of our faith tradition. And let go of fear and bitterness and anx, to refuel our lives with compassion, hope and equanimity. Today's Gospel text looks at a day in the life of Jesus, and holds clues for how we grow our spiritual resilience. How we replace a sense of powerlessness with agency.

In our passage from Mark, Jesus lingers all day in the home of Simon and Andrew enjoying the hospitality they have to offer. Rest for tired feet, food and drink that revives, conversation that is satisfying. Think of all the other significant encounters Jesus has in people's homes. Remember how he shared a meal with Zaccheus in his home, and Zaccheus' life is transformed. He attends a family/community wedding celebration in Cana, participating in the joy of the occasion by helping keep the wine flowing. He finds comfort and the opportunity to teach enjoying a meal with Mary and Martha.

We may take the routine and rhythm of our ordinary days for granted, but isn't it true that holy things happen in our homes and in community....moments of deep intimacy with a partner, friend or family member; vigil kept with the sick or dying; convivial times of entertaining others, sharing a meal and perhaps the gift of vulnerable conversation. One way we stay resilient and able to withstand or recover from stresses in our lives or adverse events is to honor the domestic spaces in which we live, and be alert to, and give thanks for, the holy things that indeed happen in our homes, gardens, neighborhoods. A few days ago, it was coming home to the surprise of my neighbor having pruned my particularly thorny and wildly out of control Graham Thomas rose bush. Her skill set, not mine so it was a sweet generous offering. When we are overwhelmed by national and global events out of our control, it's helpful to remember that our homes and neighborhoods—these domestic spaces where we spend so much of our lives—are important and available venues for powerful works of love.

If you are anything like me, we worry about and prioritize in our mind distant events over the proximate, big events over small ones. The places we meet God are not in abstract debates about the culture wars, but are in worship, in preparing a meal for the unhoused in our community, showing up at the Chili Cook-off, compassionately listening to a grieving friend, celebrating a niece or nephew's wedding.

These are the touchable realities in our lives, the world right in front of us to which we can bring ourselves and our unique gifts. This is where we have agency and control.

Now Jesus did more than enjoy Simon and Andrew's hospitality and connect with the family. He healed Simon's ill mother-in-law. He raises her up by the hand and her fever lifts; and being restored to health; she resumes her place in the family and community and serves Simon's guests. Reading this with our 21st century lenses, we see her as an undervalued woman who gets no rest once she is healed. But what if we see her as one enabled to take up again her calling in service to God? Mark actually uses the same Greek word to refer to this woman's service as he uses earlier to refer to the angels ministering to him during the time of his temptation experience. The word "diaconeo" which is often translated "to serve" can also be translated "to minister."

Jesus' healing of the woman suggests two lessons for growing our resilience. The first is that in our ordinary days we are invited to help free others for service to God, which means noticing and blessing the gifts and abilities of those around us. And supporting them in their use of their gifts. Helping them find ways to serve in gratitude and love. I know you do this in your church community as you share in projects together, and discern how one another's gifts can be used. In my experience as a coach with Unchained, one of my joys is identifying the gifts and talents of the young men, as they learn new skills while training the rescue dogs. At their graduation ceremony, the coaches get to call out and celebrate the skills and qualities we have observed in the young men, and then watch how meaningful our affirmations are to them. Their joy becomes mine.

We're told that Jesus not only heals Simon's mother-in-law but many who gathered that night outside Simon's door. Jesus' healing stories can be problematic for us because we know that not everyone for whom we have heartily prayed for healing experiences a cure or a miracle. But can we see in this story that our task is not to perform a miracle? We have the same things to offer others that Jesus had: the warmth of reassuring touch, our steady presence, words of caring and love, offerings of support and dignity for the broken, the suffering, the sick and the dying, the power of prayer.

For whom are you a healing presence? In what activities is your church involved that bring healing and support to others, or to the community or neighborhood? I'm pretty sure you will be at the Chili Cookoff next week! This text gives us an image of Jesus committed to seeking healing and wholeness for others, and invites us to embody the same compassion, the same calling. And in doing so, we are blessed, filled up. And our spiritual resilience grows.

Now we're told that "the whole city was gathered around the door." So many desperate people. So much suffering.

The needs in our own community and the anguished suffering of people around the world is pretty overwhelming. And can leave us feeling not only powerless, but bereft of hope for things to be any different.

So focus on what Jesus does after that night of responding to the desperate crowd....

"In the morning, while it was still dark, he got up and went to a deserted place, and there he prayed." Notice—a deserted place, and he went alone. Solitude gives us the opportunity to pause, be reflective, listen for what God's word may be to us. Check out in our own heart, the needs, hopes, fears, longings, aspirations abiding there. Silence, solitude, these are restorative practices.

That Jesus went away to a deserted place while it was still dark, suggests he is somewhere out in the natural world. Nature itself is healing as we open ourselves to the beauty and wonder it holds. Was

Jesus revived as he simply gazed at the magnificent stars in the sky? As he watched dawn turn the skies pink as the sun rose? Was everything put back into perspective as he heard the first rousing chorus of morning birdsong? When we find ourselves amazed by the wonders of creation, the world is rearranged for us....enlarged. We grasp there is something more at work in the world than we usually see. And that is healing and restorative.

Jesus was unapologetic about his need for prayer, for time alone with God. As Jesus' world did, our world bursts with need and turmoil, sorrow and suffering. In prayer we have a chance to reorient ourselves, to find space in that tension between compassion and somehow needing to protect ourselves from overwhelm. Prayer is a restorative pause.

In the face of challenging times, we need spiritual resilience to be able to live with equanimity and hope. We nurture our spiritual resilience as we honor and give thanks for the holy things that happen in our domestic spaces—our homes, gardens, neighborhoods. When our attention turns to distant events over which we have little or no control, and we find ourselves succumbing to feelings of powerlessness, let's remember not to prioritize the distant over the proximate, the big over the little. And remember instead that every relationship, every encounter is a place to rediscover wonder: to invite mercy, encourage, heal, receive, reconcile, pray, celebrate, refuel, befriend our own heart. What are the touchable realities in our lives, where we can make a difference, where we can right now participate in powerful works of love and healing. This is where we have agency. And let's lean into spiritual practices that are restorative for us. Prayer and meditation, time spent in nature, experiences of hospitality with loved ones, worship, and using our gifts and talents in service to others, as well as identifying and supporting the gifts of others.

Our other text from Isaiah has an important word to share with us. It's a promise that the Lord who is the everlasting God, creator of the ends of the earth, gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. That those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. With this image of an eagle mounting up with wings, I'm reminded of the beauty of the hawks in my neighborhood, rising, circling, riding the wind currents above the trees. The image suggests not only power, but being lifted up. Lightness of being. Amid the tensions of our times, and as we do our part to nurture our spiritual resilience, may we be heartened and strengthened by Isaiah's fortifying words, "I will raise you up on eagle's wings, you shall run and not be weary, walk and not faint." May we trust the promise. Power for the faint. Strength for the weary.