

Date: 01/24/21

Bounce Back and Press On

Texts: **2 Corinthians 11: 21b-30; Philippians 3: 10-16**; José N. Harris: **Getting back up**

Recently I saw a super slow motion video on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHV1YbeznCo>). It was filmed at 6000 frames a second. A tennis racket was hitting a tennis ball for a serve that was clocked at 142 miles per hour. As the racket hit the ball, the ball started compressing. It caused a small bulge out the back of the racket, but the ball itself got so thin that it was barely wider than the frame of the racket, if at all. The round ball under force had become almost flat. Of course, as it flew off the racket going the other way it started expanding again and took on a variety of weird shapes before resuming its round form. If you picked it up at the other end of the court after it had come to rest against the backstop, it would have been round again. That, my friends, is resilience. The ability to bounce back after extreme pressure and to carry on.

Now, the tennis ball was essentially unchanged by the traumatic experience of being flattened and rounding again, but people aren't like that. We don't come through trauma unscathed. When we are under pressure, we get scars. Sometimes they're physical, and sometimes they're emotional, sometimes they're mental. Sometimes they're all three. We are going through a time that has enough stress that it could flatten a tennis ball and send it flying away at 142 miles an hour 20 times over! In the last year, 25, 566, 789 of our family, friends, and neighbors have contracted Covid 19. 427,635 of those have died, people who were more than a number to those who loved them and will miss them forever, including some that we knew and who were special to us. And even if Covid hasn't touched us personally as a disease, it's touched us as a society. We've had to adjust to new ways of working, of getting our children educated, of meeting together, of buying groceries, of doing worship.

That's stressful. That's hard. Be kind to yourself if you're struggling. Give yourself a break if you aren't your best self all the time, or even any of the time. Cut yourself some slack. You deserve it. You need it. I give you permission to grieve what you've lost and to take time mourning a way of life that was and may not be coming back unchanged.

This stress works itself out everywhere. Parents may lose their temper more easily. Children may act up or be disobedient. Your boss's irritability may be high. Your patience may be short. This is normal. This is natural. We're going through a dangerous and frightening time. Stress

comes out like this. Go easy on yourself. Go easy on others. They may have a harder road than you know. You may have a harder road than they know. If you need help, reach out for help. There's no shame in that. That's a sign of strength.

Besides all that, politics has been stressful. Even former President Trump's biggest fans would admit that he could be erratic and unpredictable. Watching for the latest tweet to tell us what the federal government would do next meant that we were always on edge for four years. Humans like the future to be predictable. If it's not, we get stressed. President Trump, whatever his virtues, was not predictable. Whether it was thinking about using nuclear weapons to stop a hurricane, or injecting yourself with bleach to stop the virus, or inciting an insurrection at the Capitol to stop the peaceful transfer of power, President Trump was constantly doing things that were unexpected. That is stressful on supporters and detractors alike. We've all been through something together here, something difficult and divisive, no matter which side of the divide we've been on.

What we need is the ability to be resilient. We need to be able to bounce back from these things. When we get compressed flat, we need to be able to round out again. The Bible certainly knows about the need for resilience. It's all over the place there, but I'm going to focus on the life of Paul the Apostle this morning. Man, that guy had a stressful life.

In his second letter to the Corinthians he tells us a little bit about his life: he's been in prison numerous times. He was been whipped five times with forty lashes minus one. Forty lashes was thought to be the amount that would kill you, so forty lashes minus one means that he was almost killed five times. He was beaten with rods. He was stoned. He was shipwrecked three times. He was under pressure as he tried to take care of all the churches he had founded. Some of them, like the Corinthian church itself, weren't easy churches. We know a little more about the time Paul was stoned. The story is told in Acts, chapter 14. Paul was in Asia Minor, which is modern Turkey, at a city called Lystra. Crowds there dragged Paul out of the city and stoned him. They left him for dead. Some of Paul's converts in Lystra gathered around Paul and were able to revive him. Paul got up and went back into the city. That's resilience! The next day he went on to a different city. That's not being a glutton for punishment. But he continued doing his best to spread the good news about Jesus and his resurrection. Paul carried on. That's the essence of resilience, isn't it, being able to experience setbacks, to go through stressful times that almost kill you, and being able to carry on.

How did Paul do that? What was his secret? Paul writes to the Philippians about it. He says, "I have learned to be content whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and

of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Putting his trust in Jesus. Relying on him in all circumstances. That’s the secret to Paul’s ability to bounce back. Knowing that he wasn’t going through it alone, but that Christ was with him.

In Paul’s second letter to his young assistant, Timothy, Paul writes more about this relationship. He says: “I suffer as I do for the sake of the good news about Jesus, who did away with death and brought us eternal life. *I know the one in whom I have put my trust*, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until the day of his coming.” He knows the one in whom he has put his trust. Paul is able to bounce back from whatever life throws at him because he knows this Jesus in whom he has put his trust. He’s not serving a stranger, but a person he knows and trusts. Of course, as far as we know, Paul never met Jesus during Jesus’ lifetime. Paul met the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus, but other than that, he had to get to know Jesus the way we do: through stories about him told by his disciples; through prayer to him in difficult situations; through the stories of other disciples who have also experienced the power of the risen Jesus; through constant reliance on Jesus for strength in the midst of difficulties.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul talks about his resilience in Jesus: “It’s clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; we are perplexed, but not driven to despair; we are persecuted but not forsaken; we are struck down, but not destroyed; we are always carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” That series of ‘buts’ is at the heart of resilience: we’re not crushed, not despairing, not forsaken, not destroyed in spite of all that we go through because we know the life and death of Jesus. Paul can be resilient because he models his life after the life of Jesus. After all, what could be more resilient than dying on a cross and then coming back to life again?

We have come through much stress already, and we are still undergoing further stress from the ongoing pandemic. This is the shape of our lives for the moment, and we have to deal with it. Our road is a difficult one. We are getting our own afflictions, our own perplexities, our own times of being struck down. Paul reminds us that with Jesus, there’s a ‘but’ that must be heard: but we are not crushed, but we are not driven to despair, but we are not destroyed. We can keep going, we can bounce back because we know a secret, we know the one in whom we have trusted. In Philippians again, Paul talks about resilience, about bouncing back. He says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. ... This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

So that is what we will do: let's put behind us what is behind us. Let's look forward to what lies ahead of us, still out of reach, but not out of sight. Let us be gentle with ourselves and with others. Let us cut ourselves some slack and give ourselves a break as we've been compressed almost flat by life at 142 miles an hour. But through it all, let us press on. Press on in life, being there for each other, press on working for God and justice, press on being as loving as we can be to ourselves and to others. In all things, let us have resilience, and with Christ's help, I promise you, we will bounce back. Amen