

The Discipline of God

One of the most formative childhood memories happened the August I was 8 or 10 and it happened at the dinner table. Well, sort of.

First, a little backdrop. My family was- is unlike any I've met. My brother calls us the House of Chaos. See, my older brother was born with spina bifida. Loads of surgeries right away and throughout his childhood. A few years later, my sister was born, prematurely. Then, I was born. Then my nearly Irish twin, my younger brother. Then, Katie did not talk. And did not talk. Eventually, a intellectual or developmental disability was confirmed. A year or so later, I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. And, just to top it off, I like to think of my younger brother's fully functional body as his disability!

So, my mom and dad imposed their will on this zoo by serving us dinner together every night. Dinners were loud, fun, silly, and included a spill most every night.

But, dinner together was an anchor for us.

So, back to that special August night. My mom- as you might imagine- offered us simple meals. But, occasionally, she made the most amazing blueberry muffins from the Joy of Cooking cookbook. These muffins were a complete highlight. Not dessert, but dinner. Right there alongside the tuna salad with mayo.

In those days, diabetes was controlled- not treated- by adhering to a very strict number of carbohydrates at every meal. In retrospect, it was a hopeless cause, but nonetheless, it was the gold standard at the time. I was allotted one half blueberry muffin. I often negotiated for more or different things as I learned the system. So, that night, I wanted the other half of the blueberry muffin. Of course! But, the answer was no. A firm and definitive no. And, it was

followed by instructions for the after dinner chores: clear the table. Which I dutifully did.

Smile

I carefully carried the almost empty platter of muffins through the door and into the kitchen.

I promptly ate the forbidden portion. As if. As if, no one would notice. As if, my father would not find out. As if.

Circumstances may have dealt my family chaos, but we were not going to forego discipline.

What is your primary memory of being disciplined?

How did you experience it then? How do you make sense of it now?

Let's read Hebrews 12:3-11.

Pray before reading it.

The Book of Hebrews is a full on sermon of encouragement.

They were in a battle against sin- and the dangers of stepping away from the life and hope and way of Jesus.

Their encouragement begins with remembering Jesus, sent by God.

He endured the wrath of sinners

He resisted to the point of spilling his blood- to death.

He accomplished our full acceptance and entrance into the family of God.

His sacrifice ensured we have been made full sons and daughters of the Most High God, or as one common Jewish prayer recites, the King of the Universe.

Both Proverbs 3:11-12 and this Hebrews passage speak to us as children of God.

The Proverbs passage strings five little poems together.

Each section tells the listeners something NOT to do, something TO do, and a promise of motivation for acting accordingly.

Do not do this.

Do this.

The promises include many things: You will experience abundant welfare, many days, favor with God and people, direct ways of getting where you want to go, healing and refreshment, plenty to eat and drink (not a small thing in a time in history without food preservation!)

The writer of Hebrews builds on that pattern: What not to do, what to do, and why, especially as he turns from Jesus and begins to encourage them in how to respond.

Apostacy- and the struggle with sin requires faithful discipline.

And, so, at the forefront of our attention this morning is the word *discipline*. The Hebrew writer uses this term nine times in these 8 verses.

It is the basis of pedagogy, or the science of education, and pediatric medicine. It is where we get the sense that Christian formation or discipleship is important.

It is the idea of training, as in for a marathon; only it is training in faithful living.

It is the idea that, yes, now that we are saved, we are called to grow and become, imitating Jesus in the world. We are called to become his hands and feet, doing what he would do.

Frankly, it is a complicated idea.

(This passage has been misused to condone abuse, as if it were God's idea.)

I kept asking myself: what exactly does this author think is God's discipline?

Is it their "struggle against sin" the author mentions in verse 4?

Is it the result of their forgetting the word of God addressed to them (in verse 5)?

Here's what I can tell you about it:

First,

Hebrews and Proverbs offer the warning with a push and a pull:

Do not regard the discipline of the Lord lightly.

Do not lose heart in the face of correction.

We must look to verse 7 to get what we are called to do. Instead,

endure the discipline of the Lord.

Second it is for those who belong. The discipline of God is for those he loves, accepts and delights in. Instruction in virtue and values is the work of parents. (I'm not trying to make a political statement here, but point out that the relationship and care includes deep interest in the character formation of children.)

But, Proverbs and Hebrews go further.

Now that we- fully grown adults with agency and responsibility for ourselves and others- we are in the family of God

and therefore are subject to God's spiritual development program.

And, we are called to embrace it.

As one commentator put it: "The Son had to sacrifice his life to establish the family, and His offer will demand a great deal from the brothers and sisters."

How do you respond when you find out you are wrong about something?

Or when you face a situation that demands more of you than you thought you had?

Or suddenly, have less than you'd hoped?

Let's be real: the advantage of being an adult is that we can choose to learn or not.

And, often, we suspect the Lord's training is something we'd like to avoid:

The Hebrews (and recipients of Proverbs) were tempted, first, to “regard lightly” the discipline of the Lord.

To brush it off. To dismiss it and move on. Some of us do this, thinking we need to keep things positive. Or we zone out with a work out or work.

We make God’s discipline a smaller, less important thing than it is.

On the other hand, some of the Hebrews sound like they were tempted to, as v.5 says, “lose heart” when they faced the punishment or correction and instruction of God. Their will is crushed.

They become emotionally devastated, unable to be empowered by the situation and God’s presence in it.

Whatever God’s plan for our formation, it is tempting to avoid it by making it less weighty than it actually is, or by making it too oppressive than it needs be.

First, we get sidetracked by hunger, thirst and sleep deprivation. You know, the hangries.

It’s simple, and almost astounding given we live in a time and place of abundant food and water and beds.

The hangries open us to the temptation which says: “I don’t need much of anything. I can power through it.”

Of course, there are all kinds of ways our bodies cry out to let us know that we were fearfully and wonderfully made with limitations. And, so, our relationship with God is reflected in our we treat our bodies.

But, the hangries are not troublesome to all of us.

Some of us, instead, grow weary when we face things in the world we cannot control- like melting glaciers in Nepal flinging themselves where they ought not to be. We live at a time when the non-human, created world is experiencing tremendous change. What does faithful endurance look like in the face of climate change, especially for the younger generation looking ahead to the rest of their lives?

But, I told you there were DO NOTs and Dos. What is the Do? In this situation?

Verse 7 reads: “Endure trials for the sake of discipline”

The trials are not the punishment. Faith invites us to see trials differently. Life with Jesus opens up the possibility that we can learn in the midst of life’s great struggles.

Endurance is not putting up with pain or difficult situations, but choosing faith, hope and love in the midst of them.

To hold on with faith is to tap into the power and love of God to sustain us through what life throws at us.

Whether it is the intimate location of our bodies that present trials or the expansiveness of the whole globe, or something in between...

See, that’s when most of us get caught off guard by a spiritual weariness: in the ordinary moments, like when the technology fails, or the appointment is cancelled, or the money is shorter than we needed.

If I weren’t telling you about this word in Hebrews, I’d look you in the eye and say:

Do not take the trials and challenges of this life too lightly. They are real. And, they are an opportunity to experience the presence of God.

Do not be crushed by them, either. We are children of the Living God, who is powerful to do good in this world, and chooses to do it day in and day out. This living God, gave his living Son- resurrected and alive- and speaks his living Word to sustain us.

Keep standing. Hold fast. Endure, brothers and sisters.