

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 8/19/07
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Hebrews 12:1-14

Some of you know that I've begun working at Phelps Hospice as a chaplain. I listen while patients and their families struggle to come to terms with the reality of impending death and to figure out how to live the remaining months, weeks, or days as fully as possible. While the hospice medical team is committed to alleviating patients' physical pain, those they care for are suffering in the broader sense. They're burdened with serious limitations and losses related to their declining health. They're grieving what will never be. Many of them are trying to find meaning and purpose in the midst of their suffering.

Over and over again, people ask me, "Why is this happening to me or to my loved one?" More than a few of them seem to believe that God has devised and orchestrated a plan, involving this particular terminal illness and all of its consequences, to teach a lesson that couldn't have been learned any other way. When I sit with people who are struggling with devastating illness and countless losses taking upon themselves the responsibility for their difficult situation, believing that God sent it because they needed to learn something from it, I just want to cry. I wonder where they got such ideas about God.

And then I hear a passage from Scripture like today's epistle. "The Lord disciplines those whom he loves," the author of the letter to the Hebrews writes, quoting Proverbs 3. "Endure trials for the sake of discipline," the writer continues. "God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ... [God] disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness ..." I have a very hard time with such an understanding of God's involvement in our trials and our suffering.

If we consider the Bible as a book containing God's words to and for us, a kind of rule book for our lives, handed down from on high from God to people, we must, it seems, regard suffering as a means by which God disciplines us. That's what this passage from Hebrews says. The problem is that this passage is taken out of its broader context and that there are other passages in the Bible that say something different. Other texts describe human suffering as the natural results of our own actions, the consequence of blatant disobedience, leading to divine punishment, even the work of demonic forces, and none of the above. This raises a couple of questions for us. How are we to appropriate and integrate the words of our sacred text as God's word to us when a plain reading of one text says one thing, and a plain reading of another text says something completely different? And how do we understand God's part in our suffering?

The Bible – our sacred text – is a collection of writings spanning centuries and arising from diverse faith communities. These texts are the product of people who, inspired by God, spoke and wrote of their very real encounters with God in many circumstances, through stories, poetry, and narrative. As such, these gathered texts differ, sometimes drastically, in their portrayal of God, the ways of God, and what relationship with God looks like. Those who collected these writings and prayerfully determined which would

be included in both the Jewish and the Christian traditions had no problem holding seemingly contradictory texts side by side, because the experience of God is different among unique human beings and among diverse communities of faith at different times and in different places. It may be helpful to us, when listening to the words of Scripture, to hear them as descriptive rather than prescriptive. Our Scripture texts describe peoples' encounters with God and their reaction to and interpretation of those encounters. The words of Scripture are not pronouncements directly from the mouth of God that are to be passively and uncritically received.

If I preached thirty-minute sermons, I'd go on to talk about the background of the letter to the Hebrews, from which today's difficult words about our trials as God's discipline come to us. We'd explore together the struggles facing that particular group of people at that particular time in the early church's history to help us understand why the author of that letter might have written what he did. But I preach twelve-minute sermons, and I'd like to look further at the issue of suffering. So, I'd encourage you to dig deeper into our sacred text either by signing up for Education for Ministry, which starts its academic year next month, or by attending an organizational meeting on September 23, at which the formation of a Bible study group is being considered. Thoughtful and prayerful engagement with the Bible, especially within community, enriches and deepens our journey of faith, both individually and corporately.

All of us experience suffering, some more often or to a greater degree than others. Our suffering may be the natural consequences of our own actions or the effect of someone else's actions - or not. So often, it seems that suffering simply is, as a result of life in this world, with no discernable reason. We can tie ourselves in knots trying to get at the "why" of suffering. Most of the time, we simply won't know. A more helpful question to consider might be the "how" of suffering. And from that angle, we might be able to discover a relationship between suffering and discipline.

Every moment of every day brings opportunities for us to turn to God, to recognize and embrace the presence and the love of God, to draw upon God's strength, wisdom, and peace. In those seasons when we're not experiencing sorrow, loss, or pain, we tend to stride right past those moments of possible connection with God, with our concentration elsewhere. So we incorporate spiritual disciplines into our lives to help us remember that God is with us. We take on specific practices to open our hearts and our lives to the loving presence and work of God. We pray or meditate; we read Scripture and other devotional writing; we study together in small groups. We worship together; we make retreats and pilgrimages; we serve those in need. We walk labyrinths and observe moments or hours of Sabbath. We deliberately set aside times and places to turn our focus to God, the source of our life, and to respond to God in gratitude and in need.

But life is different when we're suffering. In the midst of pain and chaos, those moment-by-moment opportunities for connection with and response to God that we usually overlook become more obvious, more precious, and more crucial. The very experience of suffering itself can become for us its own spiritual discipline or practice. When we're struggling - physically, emotionally, financially, relationally - doesn't that experience, in

and of itself, strip away the clutter upon which we too often focus our attention? Doesn't our pain in those circumstances help us re-define what's really important and meaningful in our lives? Doesn't our experience of suffering turn our attention to God more often, more deliberately, and more intensely than when things are easier?

No one wants suffering in his or her life. Few of us can relate to a God who would deliberately impose suffering upon us for the purpose of discipline. But regarding and living through our times of suffering within the framework of a spiritual discipline or practice may help us negotiate a way through the pain. God is with us at all times and in all circumstances. Our spiritual disciplines are intended to remind us of that reality. Our suffering, then, held gently as its own spiritual discipline, can become a path by which we draw ever closer to God.

When our season of suffering comes, may it be so. Amen.