

## In the Struggle. God helps us Grow

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey  
at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, February 10, 2019  
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (year 1), Hebrews 12:1-6 (John 7:37-46)

*Hebrews 12:1-6 (NRSV): Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children-- "My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts."*

*John 7:37-46 (NRSV): On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*

*When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, "This is really the prophet." Others said, "This is the Messiah." But some asked, "Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" So there was a division in the crowd because of him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why did you not arrest him?" The police answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!"*

Some of you know that my younger son, James, is currently on Parris Island, South Carolina. He is in Basic Training with the United States Marine Corps. Marine Corps boot camp is a very challenging and rigorous thirteen-week experience. They tell parents that no news is good news, but we did get a letter a month ago. James seemed to be very challenged by boot camp, but also very motivated. He described his Drill Instructors as incredibly intimidating. And yet he also holds them in extraordinarily high regard. He knows that his Drill Instructors are pushing him and challenging him because they want to bring out the best in him. In the struggle of Boot Camp, the Drill Instructors want their recruits to grow.

So why would the military put their recruits through such hardship? And why would recruits who know that life will be hard decide to sign-up anyway? Part of the reason for challenge in boot camp is that war is hard, and a Marine needs to be ready to function well in situations of incredible stress. Part of the reason for challenge in boot camp is training recruits in high ideals over personal impulses. Boot Camp re-trains one's instincts to value others over self, to set aside the impulse for self-preservation and run toward the gunfire to protect others. The motto of the Corps is Semper Fidelis: Always Faithful. Faithful to God, to country and to the Marine Corps (in that order). In the struggle, the Drill Instructors help recruits grow.

We value boot camp in our culture in part because many people have gone through it. In part, the values of Boot Camp lead to heroism in service to our country. And yet, our culture also clashes with the values of boot camp. Americans rebel against that kind of training and discipline. We value independence and individualism and rebelling against the rules.

We see the same sort of thing in raising kids, especially as kids get older. Instead of always fixing things for our kids, we let them stumble. We help them learn to fix things for themselves and get back on their feet, with a love that is both challenging and supporting at the same time, in order to help them grow. We don't have to invent hard knocks for them to experience. We know that life will bring plenty of hard knocks on its own. So we want the best for them, and we want them to be the best for others too. In the struggle, we help our kids grow.

The writer of the New Testament book Hebrews writes about training and hard knocks. Hebrews reads more like a sermon than a letter, and in chapter 11, the preacher is gearing us up for the climax of the sermon. Just before tonight's reading in the beginning of chapter 12, the preacher recounts a list of heroes from God's people. Abraham and Joseph and Moses and David and others. He's reminding us of this great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us, kind of like Drill Instructors teaching recruits about Marine Corps history. Each person by faith struggled to be always faithful to God. And yet they did not live to see God's promised Messiah. Now, like graduates on the parade deck at Parris Island, they are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses as they finish their race.

The image that the preacher gives is of a marathon—a competitive race that comes to its finish line inside a great stadium filled with spectators. Only in this stadium, instead of spectators and Caesar at the finish line, the stadium is filled with this great cloud of witnesses, this sea of the heroes of God's people who themselves struggled in faith, yet did not live to see Jesus' glory. And there at the finish line is Jesus himself, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith—the one who gives us faith and who helps us grow in faith until our faith reaches its completion—its perfection.

This is an incredible image for those who heard it for the first time. This is about as good a pep-talk or graduation speech as one can find in the Bible. Those who heard it for the first time were weary and under stress and persecution. The Jews rejected them. The Gentiles rejected them. They could hardly buy food in the marketplace without being connected to the worship of pagan gods. Being a Christian was illegal. They were subject to persecution by the government. They were rejected by society and family.

So the preacher of Hebrews doesn't just give them a pep-talk about victory. The preacher also encourages them to see value in their hardships. The preacher encourages them to view their hardships like discipline—an opportunity to grow and to persevere by faith. I don't think that the preacher is suggesting that God purposefully gave them hard knocks. Hard knocks will surely come to those who are faithful to God. God doesn't need to afflict us. But when those hard knocks come, God can teach us in and through those hardships. In the struggle, God helps us grow.

The preacher makes the case that discipline is something that parents provide for their children. They don't discipline someone who is not their own child—they don't discipline those who are not heirs in the family. No, discipline is for beloved children. And that is what we are to God, beloved children. And in the struggle, God helps us grow.

How does this work? You might be wondering: does this mean that all my suffering is really God doing something to me? Well, sometimes, perhaps God gives us challenges. But I think that we tend to blame God too much for our struggles. Most of our struggles come from being human and from the brokenness of humanity, and from the illness and mortality and frailty of human life. As with children growing up, however, so with us. Life will dish out plenty of struggles on its own without God or anyone else intending any challenge for us. The difference, however, is that God can and does use those struggles when we let him.

Recruits who push against boot camp eventually don't make it. Those who try to embrace the challenge and learn from the struggles gain a lot of moral and emotional strength to adapt and persevere. In the midst of our hardships and struggles, we can find blessing. The hardships may not themselves be good, they may come from true tragedy and even true evil. But in the midst of the struggle, we can find God at work, and the more we seek God and embrace God's presence with us, the more God helps us grow and find incredible blessing. In the struggle, God helps us grow.

The reading from John actually connects to this theme. Jesus preaches to the people at the temple. He tells them "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Jesus is speaking about the Holy Spirit. Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to his followers. The Holy Spirit is like a river of living water—a spring that doesn't dry up in the summer. The Holy Spirit comes from Jesus and fills the life of the believer. Then the Holy Spirit spills over into the lives of those around us. "Out of the believer's heart flow rivers of living water."

The Holy Spirit is God's presence and power with us. The Holy Spirit guides us, teaches us, helps us grow and mature. He gives us grace to persevere through the challenges and the struggles, always faithful, full of life enough to give life to others. The Holy Spirit also speaks and acts through our brothers and sisters in Christ. The Holy Spirit speaks through those who have persevered and still run the race, looking to Jesus. With Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the presence and power of God strengthens us not only to endure struggles, but to persevere and to run toward the victory—to run toward the finish line where Jesus awaits us. In the struggle, God helps us grow.

"Therefore," as the preacher of Hebrews writes later, "lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed." (Hebrews 12:12-13)

And, he writes in tonight's lesson, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart."

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