

Disciples Need Discipline

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab

12th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 15, Year C. August 15, 2010. (Text: Hebrews 12:1-7, 11-14)

There are certain simple words, phrases or expressions that quickly evoke in us particular thoughts or feelings. For example, if somebody says “warm chocolate chip cookies,” you might feel like you’d like to have one right now. (I would!) But if somebody says “tax audit,” we’d all probably have instant acid stomach. If I say, “tell me about your Grandma,” many of you will have a quick, sweet twinge of nostalgia and maybe feel all warm and happy from the memories.

Let’s try another phrase. How would it feel if somebody pointed to you and said, “You need discipline”? Unless you’re a Navy Seal or an endurance athlete, when you hear anyone talk “discipline” your gut ties in a knot. You tense up. You cringe. *Discipline* is not a “feel good” word for most of us. Discipline has all the appeal of a five-day fast. Discipline sounds like punishment: unpleasant, unattractive —and probably painful. Oh, yeah, we all know that discipline is “good for us,” but so is broccoli. So is plain yogurt. But we’d rather have a large order of fries and a Big Mac. With a supersize shake.

I’ve enjoyed more than my share of chocolate chip cookies over the last few decades, but for a number of years back when I was a skinny guy, I was a runner. I was never good enough to be in the elite group, but I got out there and ran with the pack. One time I won a red ribbon for placing third in the men 35-to-40 age group. That was my one big achievement. The rest of the time I was just an also-ran and collected a t-shirt at the finish line. Truth is, I never would have even bought myself a pair of running shoes if it hadn’t been for a friend in college named John who once dragged me out to the college track and alternately either pulled me along by the arm or pushed me from behind to get me through just four laps, one mile. He was a scrappy little guy about two-thirds my size, but he had discipline and commitment, and he believed I could be like that, too, if he could just inspire me. Later on he dropped out of college, enlisted in the Marine Corps and went to serve in Vietnam where he became a master sergeant, so you can guess what kind of person he was.

That brings me to what we can learn from the Bible today. We don’t really know who wrote the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. But whoever the author was, he was clearly an athlete, probably a runner. He knew the value of discipline, commitment, and endurance. And he offers Jesus as an example of those virtues to his readers, to inspire them.

Hebrews gives us a “roll call of the heroes and heroines of faith.” The author lists one after another, starting with Abel, Enoch and Noah, then going on with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets — all of whom endured hardships, achieved great things and won strength out of weakness *through faith*.

He paints a word-picture of those famous men and women of faith assembled the way runners are who have finished a punishing race but stay at the finish line to cheer each successive competitor who makes it all the way. He says, “*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.*”

Today the Bible invites us to answer the question, “*What are you living for?*” I hope it’s not just for pleasure, or creature comforts, or personal security, or prescription drug benefits when we retire. Each of

us has a race to run, a course to finish. There *is* a glorious goal to the life God has given us. There's an end, a purpose, an ultimate point to it all. Don't be misled by the nihilists and the atheists and the materialists who see no meaning to human existence. They're the ones who coined the expression: "*Life is hard and then you die.*" —What a lousy outlook that is.

Today we're told to keep *our* eyes on Jesus —who kept the faith, who ran the race, who endured the cross, and who tells us, "*In the world you will have troubles. But take courage. I have overcome the world!*"

In "the race that is set before us" — our great life work, the personal mission that's given to each of us (and, yes, I said "EACH of us," bar none) — God will judge us at the finish line not by our quantifiable achievements, not by our ribbons or trophies or monuments, but by our *faithfulness*. By our "sticking with it." We can't compare ourselves to other people. They have their races; we have ours. They have their possibilities; we have ours. They have their challenges; we have ours.

As disciples of Jesus Christ we're participants in what the author of *Hebrews* calls a great *agōn* —the Greek word for a painful struggle or a strenuous contest. From it comes our word *agony*, which is what even a tough, trained athlete feels coming down to the finish line — lungs burning and legs aching with every step. We are followers of the Christ, and we need to accept his *disciplines for disciples*, or we'll never finish our race. Jesus is the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith." That means he's the one who has gone before us to *break* the trail we're now running on, and he's following behind us to *keep* us on it. He's like my college buddy who took my hand and pulled me around the track, or got behind me and pushed me along to keep me moving. He's the one whose life gives us the perfect example of faith, courage, perseverance, patience and discipline.

About ten years ago, I noticed that quite a few high schoolers in my youth confirmation class were wearing "W.W.J.D." bracelets. (In case you don't know, "W.W.J.D." means "What Would Jesus Do?") I told them I was proud of them for wearing those bracelets, especially considering the anti-religious attitudes that can show up in some schools. But I said to them, "A better question for you to ask yourself is '*What does Jesus want ME to do?*' We can speculate about what Jesus might do if he were here in the flesh right now. He might well do something we couldn't do. But what would Jesus want *you* to do right now, in whatever situation you're facing? That's the decision you have to make as a believer."

The author of *Hebrews* doesn't picture the Christian life as a cake-walk. He doesn't see it as sweet and easy. It's not just a matter of coming to church and bringing some canned goods for Loaves and Fishes Sunday or donating money to the capital campaign. The Christian life is an *agōn*. It's a wonderful, great and sacred enterprise —but it's also a struggle. It isn't easy; it's demanding. And Jesus expects us to get in shape for the race. Prepare for it. Train for it. Get tough. "*Lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely.*"

So let's lay off "spiritual Twinkies" and drop some weight. Let's discipline ourselves to fill up on the Bread of Life first thing every morning by prayer and reflection on God's Word. (It's amazing how many Christians have no disciplined life of prayer.) Let's decide right now to do whatever it takes to get ourselves spiritually healthy.

The "*sin that clings so closely*" is the kind we won't admit to —usually because we're taking so much pleasure in it. Jesus, the one who broke the trail for us to follow is always going to be there to take our hand and lift us up when we fall, to coach us, inspire us, and cheer for us. He's going to point out our own

personal, private “sin that clings so closely,” if we’re teachable and willing to cooperate with him. He’ll point it out, and he’ll cleanse us of it too —if we’ll let him.

The long-distance runner who wrote *Hebrews* said: *“Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”*

Only parents who really love their children are willing to discipline them. Every good child psychologist will tell you the same thing. Discipline isn’t a dirty word; it’s a *healthy* word. As a disciple of Jesus, you need to embrace the *disciplines* that go along with being a disciple —the disciplines that will enable you to stay the course and run your race. If you’re running with Jesus as your guide and your coach —looking to him, trusting in him, setting your goal to be as much like him as you can be — you’ll keep running all the way to this life’s end. And you’ll cross the finish line in faith, while all the heavenly cloud of witnesses stand around and cheer. Keep running!