



The Word...

"Do not disdain the discipline of the Lord
or lose heart when reproved by him...

At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain,
yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness
to those who are trained by it.

So strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees.

Make straight paths for your feet,
that what is lame may not be disjoined but healed."

(from Heb 12: 5-7, 11-13)

Pondering the Word...

I recently finished a round of physical therapy for a slight ligament tear in my knee. The goal was to strengthen the surrounding muscles so the tear doesn't get worse. These sessions were very gentle and easy, nothing like the therapy I endured years ago when I tore my Achilles tendon. I still remember how painful and exhausting those months of work were, but I am thankful I saw it through...and thankful for the therapists who put up with my whining!

Now that my PT sessions are over, I need to continue the exercises at home so my knee stays strong. The tear will not mend completely, but if I keep with the program, other ligaments and muscles can pick up the slack.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews advises us to strengthen ourselves so that what is lame, i.e., what is wounded or hurt or weak in us does not get worse. We may suffer from past mistakes--those we have made ourselves or the sins others have committed against us. We may suffer regret over lost opportunities, a love not realized, or physical or emotional limitations. These hurts and regrets can cause us to lag behind, to suffer with each step we take. They may never be mended completely or erased from our memories, but we can in fact do things to strengthen ourselves.

The word discipline often has negative connotations, but remember, the Latin root means "to learn." Yes, some of our most important lessons are learned the hard way, but let's not lose heart and allow the fruit of our years to turn bitter. Instead, let us find joy in the lessons God has taught us and reap for ourselves and for others a harvest of righteousness.

Living the Word...

So how do we strengthen ourselves? A regular program of prayer is essential; it doesn't have to be hard or grueling. Quiet, gentle times sitting in God's presence can do wonders. At times, we may need professionals to help teach us ways to heal. And let's not forget the importance of gathering strength from the community that surrounds us. Engaging others to bolster us when we too hurt or too tired to move forward is part of the value and beauty of living in community.

If your knees are weak, your hands are drooping, and your path seems more like a maze, don't travel alone. Enlist the help of a counselor, a minister, or a spiritual guide to build you up and get you back on track.

Personal Reflections and Ideas... _____

Aug 26: *"The Lord takes delight in his people."* (Ps 149)

Really? I don't know...I'm having a hard time believing that right now. Praying with this psalm brought me to reflect on our human history and the countless times we have fallen away from God. But God is always faithful. God is always merciful, not only willing to take us back, but delighting when we do return, even though it's a sure bet we will fall away again. The message of this psalm for me, at least for today is that if God takes delight in his people, well then, darn it, I should too. Instead of focusing on the negatives, I should adopt a God's-eye view and delight in the countless untold and unseen mercies and kind acts his people bestow on each other every day. Let's turn off the newsfeed and turn on awareness of the delight that surrounds us!

Aug 27: *"With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the Gospel of God, but our very selves as well."* (1 Thes 2:1-8)

It's good for us to share the Gospel of God through our words and charitable works. It is, in Ignatius Loyola's words, the *Magis* (the "more") to share ourselves as well. It reminds me of the quote from the late Maya Angelou: *"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."* When we reach out to others, is our giving perfunctory or is it done with a welcoming, nonjudgmental heart? When we share our "time, talent, or treasure," do we also share our very selves?

Aug 28: *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You build the tombs of the prophets, and you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have joined them in shedding the prophets' blood.'" (Mt 23: 27-32)*

It's "Hypocrite Week" in the Lectionary cycle. Chapter 23 of Matthew's Gospel enumerates several deficiencies Jesus sees among the elders. Just to set the record straight, there were many leaders in the Jewish community who were good and honorable men, just as there are good men and women among our leadership now. And, as it is today, there were also those who went along with the status quo, who avoided the hard moral choices in favor of the path of least resistance. And of course, there were--and are--morally corrupt leaders, only it in for themselves and their own wallets and egos. To whom is Jesus speaking here? It's not just the bad guys, it's the weak ones as well. And haven't we all been there? Looking back in judgment on the sins of others while at the same time ignoring the injustice right under our noses. Of all the sinful people Jesus engages in his ministry, it is the hypocrites he chastises the most. I'm taking this to prayer today. Care to join me?

Aug 29: *Herod feared John, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man...When he heard him speak he was very much perplexed, yet he liked to listen to him.* (Mk 6:17-29)

Have you ever encountered an author or a poet, or met someone who seemed to speak to a place deep inside you? It can be disconcerting, even frightening, but you are called back to the encounter. Herod Antipas experiences this with John the Baptist. Herod is weak in both character and power, and folds when confronted with a choice to follow what is moving him or to save face in front of the visiting dignitaries. I can't imagine any of us dealing with the ramifications of the choice Herod makes, but it is wise for us to look at those subtle tugs at our heart we encounter every so often. If it's uncomfortable, enlist the companionship of a spiritual guide. There may be an important message of salvation waiting for you.

Aug 30: *"The foolish (virgins) said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' The wise ones replied, 'No, for there may not be enough for us and you. Go to the merchants and buy some for yourselves.'" (Mt 25:1-13)*

The message of this parable is, of course, be prepared for we "know neither the day nor the hour." But something has always irked me: Wouldn't God be pleased if the wise ones shared their oil with those who didn't have enough? Like the widow of Zaraphath, wouldn't their generosity be rewarded by an ample supply of oil, enough for all of them? (I have a long list of parable questions to ask if I ever get the chance!) One way to think about this is yes, we are called to share our gifts and our wisdom. But we must also take care of ourselves, making sure not to get caught up in the world's foolishness only to find ourselves running dry. Good advice.

Aug 31: *"We urge you to aspire to live a tranquil life, mind your own affairs, and work with your own hands."*

(1Thes 4:9-11) I wonder what a reality TV show based on these words would be called? Mission Impossible, perhaps? The media bombards us with drama, spitefulness, and celebrities using others and shirking responsibility. Let's make sure our kids know these words from Scripture are the ones by which we are to live.