

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ²Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

⁴In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. ⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

¹²Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³"Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Cinderella. She grew up, married a handsome prince, and they lived happily ever after. The end.

Somehow the story isn't quite the same without the wicked stepmother, the evil stepsisters, the floor scrubbing, the glass slipper . . . After all, who needs a prince charming if one's life is already charmed? And yet, sometimes we seem to think that life is supposed to be like this—that we're supposed to go from *Once Upon a Time* to *Happily Ever After* without any suffering in between. I'm not sure how we get to thinking this way. But for some reason, when we face hardships, the question we ask is "Why me?" This question stems from an assumed immunity from challenges and difficulties. Perhaps it would be more reasonable to ask, as a former parishioner who was dying of cancer in the church I served in Rhode Island asked, "Why not me?" After all, Jesus made it clear when he said, "Take up your cross and follow me." He didn't say, "Take up your golf clubs and follow me" but rather, take up your cross, take up that thing that burdens you and weighs you down and holds you back and sometimes even haunts you—take up that thing and follow me. Jesus—Emmanuel—God with us—the Messiah—never assumed that life would be easy, so why do we?

Perhaps it's because we want it to be easy—and of course we want it to be easy. None of us wants to suffer and we certainly don't want to see others suffering either. And in addition to our innate tendency to avoid suffering, we also, many us, live under the illusion that we are in control of our lives. Therefore, if we abhor suffering and are in control of our lives ergo, we should be able to avoid suffering. If we're in control then we should be able to go from *Once Upon a Time* to *Happily Ever After* with nary a tear shed.

Or, in the case of this morning's scripture passage, we should be able to go from *therefore* to *therefore*—from Hebrews 12:1 to Hebrews 12:12 and just avoid all that messy stuff in the middle. And wouldn't it be nice—to go from ¹*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.* To ¹²*Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.* ¹³*"Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.* But that's not how it goes. We don't get from one *therefore* to *therefore* without first passing through this bit on discipline and hardship. ⁷*Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?* ⁸*If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons . . .* ¹⁰*Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.* ¹¹*No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

"If you are not disciplined then you are illegitimate children of God". Basically what the author of Hebrews is saying here is that God disciplines God's children because God loves us. Well, now, discipline, yes.

Discipline as in “training or conditions imposed for the improvement of physical powers, self-control, etc.” But let us take a moment here to differentiate between discipline and suffering. Being disciplined can cause suffering but all suffering is NOT a form of discipline from God.

And here in lies the rub—on the one hand, if we believe that God causes suffering, perhaps we can at least find some meaning or purpose for suffering. And yet, belief that God causes suffering is at the root of the “Why me?” question. After all, if someone thinks that suffering is a form of discipline from God, it is implied that the suffering is somehow deserved. And yet, most of the folks I meet who struggle with a belief in God struggle because they wonder how a loving and merciful God could cause us to suffer. These issues and questions are at the heart of Rabbi Harold Kushner’s classic book, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. One of the things I most appreciate about this book is that Rabbi Kushner did not write it as a theological or academic exercise. Rather, Rabbi Kushner writes from a place of deep suffering and questioning. His son was diagnosed with rapid aging disease at the age of three and died from old age when he was but 14 years old. This intense suffering led the rabbi on a journey of discovery as he asked the question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Here is a summary of what he found.

In place of the explanations [for suffering] which he dismisses, Rabbi Kushner offers the suggestion that God is limited by what He can do by the laws of nature, by human nature, and by human freedom. God does not cause our misfortunes as punishment for sin or to test us; instead God is as outraged by our misfortunes as we are because God is indeed good, kind and just. [Kushner] further suggests that perhaps God permits misfortune because, by refraining from intervention by miracle, God is leaving room for human beings to act.

Instead of asking why bad things happen, Rabbi Kushner quotes Dorothee Soelle who said that “why” is the wrong question to ask about suffering. The correct question is, in fact, what we can do about our suffering to confer meaning upon it, to create good from the evil we must each endure .

And here’s where I have found serving as the minister of this church, having the honor of ministering alongside all of you, especially our nonagenarians, to be infinitely meaningful and rewarding. You have taught me, you teach all of us, how to create good from the evil you have endured—for surely one does not reach the distinction of being a nonagenarian without having suffered. You have made meaning of your suffering, you have kept on keeping on, you have not become bitter and withdrawn, constantly asking “why me?” though you have all undergone hardships that merit asking such questions. Rather, you have all, in the words of the author of Hebrews, you have “thrown off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and run with perseverance the race marked out for us. [With your] eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³[You have] considered him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you [have not] grow[n] weary and [lost] heart.

You have not gone from *Once Upon a Time* to *Happily Ever After* and you have not skipped from *Therefore* to *Therefore* without a good deal of both discipline and suffering in between. Indeed, you have “produced a harvest of righteousness and peace”, a harvest that nurtures all of us who are gathered here. And God has strengthened your feeble arms and weak knees, your paths have been made level, you have helped the lame, healed the sick, comforted the grieving, inspired the young, taught the ignorant, and loved us all. You are running the race set out before you by Jesus, you inspire us all to do the same, and so we thank you, but more importantly we thank God—we thank God that we are surrounded by you—you—so great a cloud of witnesses. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God for each and every one of our nonagenarians, thanks be to God for each and everyone here this morning, thanks be to God for being with us in the celebrations and the sufferings, the joys and the concerns, the Once Upon a Times and the Happily Ever Afters and everything that comes in between. Thanks be to God.