

No Pain – No Gain - 1/15/12 - Beech Mennonite Church

Scriptures: Psalm 91 Hebrews 12:1-13

Since last Sunday's "Name That Tune" contest was a flop (my fault), let's try something different: a *Jeopardy* question. Which of the following exercise gurus first popularized the phrase "No Pain – No Gain"? A. Jane Fonda B. Richard Simmons C. Jillian Michaels. Wikipedia tells us that this well-known phrase "...came into prominence when actress Jane Fonda, began to produce a series of aerobic workout videos in 1982." Jane used that term to push people to keep working out "...past the point of experiencing muscle aches." "No Pain No Gain" implies that strong bulging muscles are the result of excruciating workouts, and conversely, that "those who avoid pain will never reach a professional level as bodybuilders." It was interesting to discover on that same website, however, that a very similar expression can be found as far back as the second century...less than a hundred years after Jesus. It was a Jewish rabbi by the name of Ben Hei who wrote, "According to the pain is the gain." However, he was not talking about building big muscles, but about spiritual growth. The lesson he was trying to teach was that if a person experiences "...no pain in doing what God commands, there will be no spiritual gain." (1) Which is exactly our theme for today.

Last Sunday we covered, very briefly, 10 basics of our faith that could be considered the "milk" of a new believer's diet. And I asked the question, "Where's the beef"? What are the deeper, more mature indicators of spiritual growth? I'm sure there are many correct answers to that question. But I've chosen five in particular to look at over the next several weeks.

Today we will look at the issue of how we deal with suffering. How do we respond to those difficult times that knock us off our feet? The death of a loved one. Diagnosis of a terminal illness. An accident that leaves us crippled. Betrayal from our best friend. Ridicule on the job because of our faith convictions. Suffering, although it comes in many shapes and sizes, is universal. And followers of Jesus are not exempt. Furthermore, just as Jeanette's tests on children indicate their developmental level, so also the way we respond to suffering and pain is a good measure of our spiritual maturity.

When difficult times come our way, what are our options? Though there are more, we will look at three possible responses. The first is **Denial**. "I am just imagining this. It's not real. It will soon go away, like a bad dream. God wouldn't allow this to happen to me!" Sometimes religious leaders encourage this denial. "Just pray, have faith. God will heal you. Just claim God's blessings. It's a tough one, because God indeed can, and does heal. And there are incredible stories of people who refused to accept their situation and their tenacity took them much farther than one would imagine possible. But trying to deny or minimize the pain you are experiencing will not bring about growth. At our Pastor-Spouse Retreat in November, Ervin Stutzman said, "What you do not feel you cannot heal."

A second, and opposite response, a grim acceptance of suffering, can lead to **Depression**. When a person realizes that his/her pain is not going to go away, it is only natural to become depressed. Before going further, however, a disclaimer is needed. Depression comes in many forms and has many causes. To struggle with depression is not necessarily a sign of spiritual immaturity. Having said that, it is still true that depression can become a roadblock to growth if a person stays in that condition for too long a period of time. Maybe a little humor helps us realize that everyone has struggles. Like last Monday's "Born Loser" cartoon. The guy is sitting on the park bench, talking to his friend: *They say you can't win them all, and that is obviously true. However, as my life clearly proves, you can lose them all.*" Reading that cartoon, my mind went way back to a certain song on the *Hee Haw* show. Looked it up on *YouTube* to refresh my memory. There they were, four old guys with bib overalls, sitting in the middle of a pile of whiskey jugs, singing, "*Gloom, despair, and agony on me. Deep dark depression, excessive misery, If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all, gloom, despair, and agony on me.*" (2) Some of David's Psalms border on this "why me?" kind of complaining, though he usually comes around in the end to affirm God's goodness and love.

Somewhere in the middle of these two extremes – between denial and depression – there is a third type of response that is more likely to bring growth: It's called **Discipline**. A word we see popping up often in today's text. Let's take a closer look at Hebrews 12. The author reminds us of Jesus, who endured great suffering because he was looking ahead to the joy on the other side. We are reminded of encouraging words from Proverbs 3 – "*Don't lose heart when God disciplines you, he does so because he loves you as his dear child.*" We understand and accept discipline from our parents, who do the best they can. But God does an even better job. Second half of verse 10 in NLT reads, "*God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness.*" Although it may be painful at the time, if we respond correctly to the Lord's discipline, it has a positive outcome: (again from NLT) "*a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.*" (v.11) We move beyond spiritual infancy to maturity when we accept discipline because we want to grow. Think of a toddler being sent to the "time-out" chair. Or a teenager being grounded for a week. A mature response in both cases is to humbly accept the punishment. An immature response would be to kick and scream and protest.

For all of us, an attitude of submission to God's discipline is important. In Hebrews 5 we read that God heard the "*loud cries and tears*" of Jesus when on earth because of his "*reverent submission.*" (v.7) But we should not think of submission as a weak, dishrag kind of response to anything that comes our way. There was the intense struggle Jesus had in the Garden of Gethsemane as he faced the possibility of torture and death. "*Father, is there some way I can avoid this? Yet, not what I wish, but what you wish.*" We see a similar struggle in the life of Paul. He wasn't happy about the "*thorn*" that God gave him. And he prayer three times to have it removed. But it wasn't meant to be. God said, "*No Paul. That's not the plan. You see, without any struggles, you would likely become proud and*

arrogant. But this thorn will keep you humble. In fact, my power will be seen more clearly in your weakness. (But) my grace is sufficient for you.” (2 Cor. 12:7-9)

At first glance we might think today’s passage focuses primarily on the corrective, punitive side of discipline. But take another look at the first few verses. There we see a marathon about to begin, with a huge crowd of fans in the bleachers. All of the spectators, by the way, have already run their marathon successfully. Look back at Ch. 11 to see who some of these fans are who are cheering us on: Noah, Abraham, Moses’ parents, Rahab the prostitute, Gideon, etc. The excitement is building, the adrenaline is begin to flow as we get closer to the send-off gun. We’re told to “*strip off every weight that slows us down*”. That’s positive discipline – getting rid of bad habits, distractions, and “*the sin that so easily trips us up*.” Many scholars think this is the sin of unbelief, or lack of faith. And when the pistol fires, we are told to “*run with endurance*” and to “*keep our eyes on Jesus, our champion,*” who is out there running in front of us.

I confess to being almost addicted to *Biggest Loser* on Tuesday nights. Another example of “*No Pain – No Gain*.” I become emotionally engaged as I watch them grunt and sweat and get screamed at by their trainers, then step on the scales to check their weekly progress.

And one more image of discipline we find frequently in scripture – that of a soldier on the battlefield. You recall Paul’s exhortation to put on the “*full armor of God*” in order to “*fight the good fight of faith*.” It seems like our denomination has shied away from that analogy in recent years. In our strong stance on peacemaking and God’s worldwide Kingdom, perhaps we have failed to make the important distinction between wars among nations and spiritual warfare. There are few if any hymns in our present hymnal with battle imagery, so we will sing one from the *Family of God*. The lyrics spoke deeply to me this week as I worked on the sermon: “*Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas. No I must fight if I would reign; increase my courage, Lord; I’ll bear the toil, endure the pain, supported by Thy word*.” Perhaps a greater number of people would become involved in the life of the church if we would present them with the challenges of advancing the Kingdom of God, a call to the disciplines of pain and sacrifice similar to those of *Biggest Loser* contestants and soldiers.

An 18 minute sermon is not enough time to cover adequately the question of how we respond to pain and suffering in ways that help us grow. It’s worth a much longer study. I found an excellent summary of this issue in the back of my NIV Study Bible. Like “*11 reasons why God allows pain*” and “*9 ways Christians should respond to pain*.” I’d be happy to share it with anyone...maybe a SS class would like to use it?

I like the positive ending in today’s passage as we hear it in the NLT – “*So take a new grip with your tired hands, and strengthen your weak knees. Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.*”

Credits: (1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_pain,_no_gain

(2) www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQ5ob9B9yDf