

Like all children, I was far from the ideal when it came to my behavior. Even if my mother insists that me and my brother and my sisters were all little angels from the first moment of our birth to the present day- as most mothers do- the reality is somewhat different. Yes, we all did what we were supposed to do with chores and homework and all that, but we were kids and like all kids, we sometimes acted like little demons instead of little angels.

Fathers seem to be more realistic about what their children are doing, or not doing, and I remember my own father occasionally getting the belt to punish me- very rarely, granted- but he did punish me that way when I did something egregiously wrong. In other words, when I did something stupid- like when- and I've shared this story with you years ago- like when me and my friends every day would take the "five-finger discount" at the grocery store on the way to school and relieved the owner of the store of pretzels and Mountain Dews and Milky Ways without paying for it. And when we finally got caught and the owner notified my parents, my dad rightly set me straight, and with more than just words. I couldn't sit down for days...

Now I'm not advocating violence against children, or anyone else for that matter, and I know very well that there are clear limits in what should be done in punishing a child for what he or she has done wrong. But of course discipline of some sort is necessary if the child is not going to run wild, and instead is going to learn to take on responsibility for him or herself and to appreciate what it takes to be a virtuous and mature young person. It's a good thing that I'm not a parent, because I would be way too soft and way too easy as a parent, and that's not a good thing in the long run, even if the child might prefer that when he or she is getting that discipline.

And as that reading from the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, the Lord disciplines us because He loves us- because He wants us to not run wild and hurt ourselves and other persons

in the process, and because He wants us to manifest the goodness and the holiness that are ours by nature. The problem arises of course that even though we are made in God's image and likeness, and therefore good and holy by nature, we are also fallen and have this awful tendency to choose the wrong things to make us happy- what we call sin- and therefore we need to relearn time and time again all the basic things about living in this world that we know so well, but that we forget when we choose to turn away from God.

God does not discipline us because He is angry at us- that would be petty and the Lord is anything but petty. And that idea that God punishes us because He is angry at us seems to play right into the common criticism of religion that we blindly worship a vengeful and capricious God who is always looking to punish us for whatever we do, essentially for being human. No- the Lord disciplines us to help us to stay on the right path and to enter the narrow gate, and because the road itself is narrow- meaning that it so often goes against what we fall into in our moments of spiritual laziness and blindness- it takes strength to stay on that road.

And even though we don't like to even think about it, the lessons we learn from the suffering in our lives give us the fortitude and the wisdom we need to get through life in one piece and eventually reach our goal of union with God, in this world and in the next.

So there's much more to discipline than a person bigger than you scaring the living daylights out of you because you've done something wrong. That passage from Hebrews helps to give me a broader idea of what discipline is- not punishment for what was done wrong but an encouragement to do better as we go forward, and which has to go along with praise for what was done right.

I don't see the suffering in my life as punishment from God for what I have done wrong- I see it as part of the human condition which God uses to help us become stronger emotionally and spiritually. I'd rather not have to endure any suffering at all of course, and we can't explain why we have to suffer, but I trust God enough to help me to do something positive in my life with it.

What it comes down to is that the Lord is using whatever is in our lives to bring us close to Him and to stay close to Him. He uses the beauty of the created world and the goodness of the persons we know and love, and He uses the consolation and joy of prayer, and He uses the sacraments that flood us with grace if we allow them to, and He uses the suffering that is an integral, and I dare say necessary, part of the human condition. We may not like it, but if we allow it to, that suffering can strengthen our drooping hands and our weak knees- it can make us strong and it can make us tough and it can even make us holier than we already are.