

“Bearing one another’s burdens”

July 8, 2007

Text: *Psalm 30:1-7, 11-12, Galatians 6:1-10*

I.

It’s virtually impossible, friends, to read the Bible, to hear the gospel message without realizing that, hey, *we gotta give up stuff*. There’s no getting around it. At some point, we have to make sacrifices; indeed, the gospels call us to *deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow Jesus*.

A short time before going to bed at night, a man steps on the scale ...

Darn, he says to his wife. *I started this diet yesterday but the scale says I’m heavier.*

Here, he says, *hold my robe. It still says I’m heavier! Here, hold my pajamas. Geez, I’m still heavier!”*

Finally, in desperation, the man says, *Okay, okay ... here, honey, hold my Twinkies.*

This is an innocuous, cute little story ... but at the same time, we’re reminded that our Christian faith asks something of us. Our faith journey is never just about us as individuals; it’s about us, as community. At the end of the day, *we’re all in this life together*.

And part of what that means is that—always, day after day ...

- we have to make sacrifices ...
- we have to work together with a cooperative spirit ...
- we have to lift up the common good.

That’s how we make community life work.

II.

Our reading from **Galatians 6** reminds us of the tremendous challenge Paul had to provide leadership in these *first Christian churches* and to interpret the meaning of Christian faith in ways that helped build up the Church.

- welcoming new people into the faith communities ...
- developing guidelines for Christian conduct and practice ...

These were diverse communities ... and as is always the case in community life, there were temptations ... and challenges; there were competing groups, rival voices and tensions.

We need to keep in mind that, for Paul, there was no manual on how to do this. There are no creedal statements, no statements of faith. There are no by-laws or constitution. There's no *vision* statement.

In his letters to the churches, Paul wants to inspire these evolving Christian communities to be *alive to the fruits of the Spirit* (as noted in Galatians 5) in their interactions with one another (which means, treat each other with **love, patience, kindness, generosity, and gentleness**) ... knowing that, in the end, the whole church will be lifted up.

Paul knows that for the churches to survive and to grow, more than anything they need to be *communities of grace and love*.

What that means and acknowledges is that *life happens*. We're not perfect ... we're not robots. We say things and do things ... and we all have our own ways, our own dispositions, our own biases and idiosyncrasies.

1. And when a person gets a little off track ... or is perhaps guilty of some excess or some error of their ways, Paul is saying: *respond to them in a spirit of gentleness*. In other words, **bear one another's burdens ... find ways of restoring the relationship**.
2. *In this way*, he notes, *you will fulfill the law of Christ* ... which is to love your neighbor as yourself.

III.

The truth of our lives is that we all need a little *wiggle room* now and then. Isn't it true? How often do we say about one another, *she's having a bad day*, or *he's having a bad moment*. I have bad moments all the time. Thus, the need, as Paul suggests, for love, patience, kindness, generosity, and gentleness ... the need to **bear one another's burdens**.

Bearing one another's burdens can mean many things.

1. It can mean lending support of any kind ... moral and spiritual support ... financial support; it can mean being generous towards one another, particularly towards those who are destitute and deprived in whatever way.
2. And, to reiterate, it can mean cutting each other some slack now and then when we're, perhaps, not at our best and exuding a spirit that conveys compassion and sensitivity.
3. It can mean helping out with tasks and responsibilities when unanticipated tough times are at hand.

But the immediate point Paul makes about such **bearing of one another's burdens** is: this is what it means to be a Christian: *love your neighbor as yourself*.

Bearing one another's burdens is what LOVE does. It's what connects us to God. It's what gives our lives meaning and purpose.

IV.

In 1991 an Air Canada flight ran into big trouble. Passengers were enjoying an in-flight movie on the Boeing 767 when the jumbo jet's massive engines abruptly stopped. Soon the pilot came on the speaker system announcing that the flight would be making an emergency landing. As it turned out, due to human error, they had run out of fuel. Imagine that!

Suddenly an utter silence came over the entire cabin. Wow! We've been there, haven't we? Wondering, when the turbulence is excessive ... as a thousand thoughts go through our minds. Fortunately, in the end, no one was injured and they were able to safely land.

So check it out: we have a multi-million dollar airplane, headed in the right direction, but running out of fuel.

Isn't that what's happening to lots of us today? We're sailing along in life ... things seem to be going well. We have a nice home, reliable transportation, a good job, some good and loyal friends ... and yet, one day we run out of fuel. And at the center of our lives there's an emptiness, a yearning to be connected to something more.

And the emptiness prompts in us the feeling: *what's it all about? Where am I going in my life? Where am I headed? And finally, in what ways am I connected to something bigger than myself, something outside myself?*

V.

The never-ending challenge in the church, and in all of life, is to try and persuade people to look beyond themselves. Our inborn tendency (indeed, our nature) is to take care of ourselves.

But—always—LOVE asks more of us. You see, there's a cross at the center of our faith.

One of the core affirmations of the gospel, alluded to earlier (it's in each of the *synoptic gospels*, Matthew, Mark and Luke), is that if we want to be followers of Christ ...

- we have to ***deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him***. That's a mouthful, isn't it? Self-denial ... and looking at every human situation through the eyes of love.

- Yet, we can't avoid the emphasis on personal sacrifice that runs throughout the gospel of JESUS.

This sacrificial LOVE asks us to **bear one another's burdens** ... and to look upon one another with patience, kindness, and generosity.

In the last couple of verses in this Galatians' reading, Paul says,

*So let us not grow weary of doing what is right ... for we reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, Paul says, going on, *whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all ... especially for those of the family of faith.**

Bearing one another's burdens ... working for the good of all with a sacrificial spirit. This is what Christian LOVE asks of us. This is God's will for every human being.

VI.

Interestingly enough, according to research conducted by the Gallup Poll, **12% of Americans** have a notably *high spiritual commitment*. The poll suggests that these 12% are folks who take seriously Jesus' words on *self-denial and taking up their cross and following him*.

Gallup says that the members of this group (these 12 %) have some notable characteristics in common:

1. they are happier.
2. their families are stronger and more resilient.
3. they tend to be more tolerant of people of different races and religions.
4. and finally, they're community-minded, involving themselves in service to others.

In other words, when we **bear one another's burdens**, we're happier as human beings ... we're more fulfilled ... our lives have more meaning and purpose.

This is a compelling affirmation, isn't it? It's certainly good news for the Church and its highly committed spiritual Christians.

It's just a few days after our July 4th celebrations. And as we reflect on the history of our great nation, in these times where there's serious debate on a whole range of important issues: immigration reform, education, the environment, health care and always, the war in Iraq, we're reminded that, invariably, when we've been at our best as a nation, we've been sacrificial and giving.

Galatians says that if we *do what is right, bearing one another's burdens*, we will *reap at harvest time*. However, apparently, if this Gallup poll is correct, we won't have to wait

until then. Living the Christian life has rewards right now.

The rewards are the joys of the Spirit ... of feeling connected to something larger than ourselves ... of making a difference in the lives of other human beings.

When we deny ourselves in whatever way and honor our most hallowed commitments to God and to *neighbor love*, our spirit is alive with meaning and purpose. It is then that we feel like rejoicing with the **Psalmist ...**

*You have turned my mourning, O God, into dancing;
You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,*

*So that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O Lord, my God, I will give thanks to you forever.*

Bearing one another's burdens ... one day at a time.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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