

Bearing One Another's Burdens

Galatians 6:1-10

July 4, 2010

The last time we considered this text from Galatians was four years ago. It was the Sunday after we held a memorial service for a young mother and wife in our congregation who died while on a bell choir tour overseas. I started the sermon with the comment: "This sermon has already been preached."

I went on to reference the numerous occasions where I had observed the community of faith carry, share, and bear the burden of the Childers family. Some carried it physically as they called and planned and worked. Some carried it by offering support – some by offering prayers – some by simply being a part of the community of faith who felt the pain of it all even though they may not have even known any of the Childers or bell choir members.

The church is at its best when we are bearing one another's burdens and celebrating one another's joys. The world cannot help but notice when we live out what we say we believe – when we put into practice what we say ought to be our behavior – when we walk the talk – when we live out our calling as the resurrected physical Body of Christ.

I've seen it happen on numerous occasions over the years. And sadly, there have also been those times when we've failed – when we've not done it as well as we could have or should have. I've had to apologize more than once the last few years when we as a staff, I as the senior pastor, all of us as the church haven't quite measured up to who we are. But I was reminded this week of another one of those occasions where the community of faith has put skin and muscle on the skeleton of faith. I call it to our attention this morning, not because the persons involved are unique or more important than any other in the life of the church but only because it is happening now and to simply hold out a vision of who we are or can be in the community of faith.

Four or five years ago a woman started to come to church after the unexpected death of her husband. He died of a heart attack on a plane while on a business trip. She stopped in because she knew me from a previous church. She started to attend the 8:30 service and sat out in that general area. A couple people recognized her as a former neighbor, but for the most part no one sitting near her knew her. But, over the weeks of sitting near one another and introducing ourselves after worship – a church within the church developed and that group of pew-sharers began to minister. The staff received a phone call when the woman wasn't present – the little church wanted to know what they could do to help as she struggled with recurring cancer issues. They've helped her move – they've taken her to doctor's appointments – they've visited her – they've called her – and they continue to do so while she is now in a nursing home dealing with treatment related memory loss and tiredness.

Her son called me this past week to provide me an update on what was going on with his mom. When he was finished sharing with me about the physical and medical condition of his mom he said something like: "Bill, I can't tell you how much it means to us what the people of your church continue to come around and visit mom. Please tell them thank you for us and would you share with them what's going on with mom. I don't even know who all of them are." Bearing one another's burdens is witnessing – it's evangelizing – it's a presence ministry – it's bringing Christ into the situation.

Olga Wetzel shared a story in *Eternity* magazine about a time when she was traveling by Greyhound bus from Flagstaff, Arizona to Albuquerque, New Mexico. She wrote: "The Greyhound bus slowed – then stopped. It

was just a wayside stop with a garage and a small store. A young Indian stepped aboard and, after he had paid his fare, he sat down behind me.

“It was February. The night was cold. In the warm bus, the tired youth was soon asleep. But after about twenty minutes he got up and walked to the front of the bus to ask if we were near his destination.

“‘We passed there a long time ago,’ the bus driver snapped. Acknowledging he had known the boy was riding beyond his stop, he asked angrily. ‘Why didn’t you get off?’

“The quiet passenger’s shoulders dropped. He turned and came back to his seat. Barely had he sat down, when he rose again and went to the driver.

“‘Will you stop and let me off?’ he asked. ‘I’ll walk back.’

“‘No! It’s too far and too cold. You’d freeze to death. You’ll have to go to Albuquerque and then take a bus back.’

“Disappointment showed in his walk as he came back to his seat.

“‘Were you asleep?’ I asked him.

“‘Yes, and my sister was waiting for me there.’ He dropped into the seat behind me.

Olga then went on in her article to explain why she was where she was: “I was returning to Wisconsin after serving a quarter term as a volunteer teacher in an Indian mission school. This experience had taught me the hard living conditions of the Indians in the area – the small adobe houses with earth floors, the lack of privacy in those little one-or-two-room houses.

“The role played by teenagers was very hard. There was no room for them at home, yet they were not really ready to go out on their own.

“All the while we were nearing Albuquerque, a large and strange city. I thought he must be wondering what he would do after he got there. I turned to him and asked, ‘Are you afraid?’

“‘Yes,’ he said, in a ‘hate-to-admit’ way.

“‘Stay with me,’ I said, ‘and I’ll help you get on the right bus back.’

“I asked the driver, ‘Will you please check with the return driver, so he need not pay return fare?’

“‘Okay,’ the driver reluctantly agreed.

“‘Everything will be all right,’ I told the boy. ‘You need not worry about anything.’

“His eyes said, ‘Thank you!’

“We rode on for possibly ten more minutes. Then a hand tapped my shoulder. I turned to see my young friend leaning toward me. In a reverent voice he asked, ‘Are you a Christian?’”¹

There are simply times in our lives when we can’t do it alone – when we need others to come alongside us to lighten the load – when we need burden-bearers and when we need to be burden-bearers. Paul referenced in his letter to the Galatians twice this idea that there are burdens we all have to face. One time he notes that we should “carry each other’s burdens.” Another time he notes that “each one should carry his own burden.”

What Paul had in mind were two different kinds of burdens. If we could read and understand Greek, the difference would be obvious. When Paul says in verse 5 that each of us has to carry our own pack – or, backpack, as one commentator translated it – he was referencing those things that to expect someone else to shoulder would be irresponsible on our part – things like our personal conduct. Some things we do have to bear ourselves. Some things no one else can do for us, no matter how kind a person they are or how much we may want to push them off onto someone else.²

But the primary emphasis in this text is on those kind of burdens that come our way from the “chance and the changes of life.”³

Paul references at the beginning of this segment of his letter the slip ups that happen to us all. One commentator likened it to what sometimes happens to us when we are on an icy road or path. They aren’t deliberate acts, mistakes, on our part or the part of others, just risks we run going through life. And Paul’s concern here is that we Christians who are trying to live the Christian life aren’t too hard on one another when these slip-ups occur. He says that our real work is to get persons who mess up back on their feet. The stress is on curing the situation, not punishment.⁴

The last time we dealt with this text was following a course utilizing the study The 11th Commandment: Experiencing the One Another of Scripture by Don McMinn. In McMinn’s book he notes several other of the “one anothers” as similar to the “carry one another’s burdens” one. For example: encourage one another. While they are similar, there is a significant difference. Encouragement usually only requires some emotional involvement on our part, whereas carrying or bearing one another’s burdens involves some physical participation on our part. McMinn put it this way in the study: “For instance, if I’m discouraged about a relationship, I may need you to simply pray with me or write me a note of encouragement. But, if my task is to move a grand piano, I need more than your prayers and notes of encouragement – I need you to roll up your sleeves and help carry the weight. Indeed, when we need support but only receive encouragement, the encouragement may seem inadequate – if not downright offensive.”⁵

Then McMinn referenced the story we’ve all heard of the rabbit being chased by a dog. Onlookers were shouting words of encouragement to the rabbit to run hard and escape. And the rabbit was heard to shout, “Thank you for your kind encouragement, but for goodness sake shoot the dog.”⁶

Burden-bearing is different than encouraging. It requires a different kind of commitment. It involves us on a more physical and personal level. It means identifying with the burden of another to the point that we own the burden as well. Burden-bearing involves hanging in there until there is some resolution and that can sometimes take years and more energy and resources than we can imagine.⁷

Booker T. Washington shared a story in his autobiography Up From Slavery about how his older brother's love provided him a first-hand experience for this bearing one another's burdens idea. He told about how the shirts worn on the plantation by the slaves were rough because of the inexpensive flax fiber out of which they were made. He wrote about how the garment was so abrasive to his tender, sensitive skin as a young boy that his older brother would wear Booker's new shirts first to break them in and make them smoother to the touch. Burden-bearing sometimes costs physically, mentally, spiritually, or emotionally.⁸

Gordon McDonald tells about a time he and his wife were on an airplane when they witnessed burden-bearing that was really quite amazing. The two of them were already on the plane when a woman with two small children took the seats in front of them. A second woman followed the children and took a seat in front of them as well. The two women sat in seats A and C and one of the children sat in the middle seat. The second child sat on the lap of one of the women. The assumption the McDonalds made was that the two women were the mothers of the two children. Gordon noted that he hoped the children wouldn't be too noisy.

Such was not the case. In McDonald's words: "The flight started, and my prayer wasn't answered. The air was turbulent, the children cried a lot – their ears hurt – and it was a miserable flight. I watched as these two women kept trying to comfort these children. The woman at the window played with the child in the middle seat, trying to make her feel good and paying lots of attention to her.

"I thought, *Boy, these women get a medal for what they are doing.* But everything went downhill from there. Toward the last part of the flight, the child in the middle seat got sick. The next thing I knew she was losing everything from every part of her body. The diaper wasn't on tight, and before long a stench began to rise throughout the cabin. It was unbearable!

"I could see over the top of the seat that stuff you don't want me to describe was all over everything. It was on this woman's clothes. It was all over the seat. It was on the floor. It was one of the most repugnant things I had seen in a long time.

"The woman next to the window patiently comforted the child and tried her best to clean up the mess and make something good out of a bad situation. The plane landed, and when we pulled up to the gate all of us were ready to exit that plane as fast we could. The flight attendant came up with paper towels, handed them to the woman in the window seat, and said, 'Here ma'am, these are for your little girl.'

"The woman said, 'This isn't my little girl.'

"'Aren't you traveling together?' the flight attendant asked.

"'No, I've never met this woman and these children before in my life.'"⁹

We are to bear one another's burdens – and it won't always be easy – it can at times be a little messy – take a toll on our emotions – cost us some time – but it's how it is for those of us who want to follow our savior who paid the price for us and bears our burdens. This meal is a reminder of the price – his burden-bearing nature and that to which we've been called.

1. Olga Wetzel. "Bus Ride," *Eternity* (February, 1977).

2. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), pp. 58-59.
3. Ibid., p. 58.
4. Ibid.
5. Don McMinn, Ph. D., The 11th Commandment: Experiencing the One Another of Scripture (Irving, Texas: 6Acts Press, 2000), p. 90.
6. Ibid., p. 90.
7. Ibid., p. 91.
8. Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery.
9. Gordon McDonald, from sermon "Pointing to Jesus: Generosity," preached at Grace Chapel, Lexington, Massachusetts (February 22, 1998).