

Bears to Cross; Burdens to Bear

Galatians 6: 1-5; 9-10

Our message this morning, is not so much about bears we must cross, but it is about the crosses, the burdens that we, as God's people, all carry and how we can help one another with them. Paul, the author of Galatians, is writing to the church at Galatia, a southern province of the first-century Roman empire that was in the region of what would now be near Turkey. He writes about human burdens, and how, when we help one another to bear them, that we fulfill Christ's law of love;

Paul writes to the Galatians for a pretty specific reason, and it's not a real happy one. Many of the believers and adherents at Galatia were Jewish Christians, strict believers in all the Jewish customs and rituals, including circumcision for new believers, and even though most Galatian folks were descended from ancient Celtic tribes, some are very intolerant of the Gentile Christians among them. These intolerant Jewish Christians are firmly set in their beliefs and insist that salvation and justification are earned through "works", or following "the letter of the law", including the kosher dietary rules which are not at all familiar or natural to Gentiles. Paul's not happy with what they are teaching, and calls their instruction "false teachings", so a great deal, especially Chapters 1-2 of Paul's letter to them is concerned with the topic of justification, or salvation only by faith in Christ. Interestingly enough, it is Paul's argument for justification by faith, that Martin Luther centuries later to develop his statement of faith. From his statement, sprang the foundation of the development of the entire Reformation and development of the Protestant churches. So, based on use of Paul's formula of justification by faith by Luther, the book of Galatians, is often called "Luther's book".

In Luther's book, Galatians 6: 1, Paul gives a case scenario that might occur within a church and suggests how it might be best handled. Paul says: If someone, gets caught up in a sin, you who are (more) spiritual, should restore him or her gently." Most scholars who examine this passage also link it with chapter 5: 25-26:

“If we live by the spirit, let us also be guided by the spirit.” The term *sin* can also be interpreted as a word which means *misstep*. In light of being guided, as on a pathway, *misstep* is a word that makes sense. So if a believer, has *mistepped*, those who are *spiritual*, wiser, more mature in the faith, are to help that one, to gently respond to the misstep, with the gentle intention to forgive. Paul mentions a key word in our response, *restoration*. He says that we are to restore the one who has *mistepped*, and to give them the opportunity to start anew. The word *restore* means “to bring back into original condition” or in this case, “bring back into the correct pathway”, as within the boundaries of a walkway. Another way to consider the word *restore* would be “to bring into original fellowship with others and with Christ”. So, through gentleness with one another, we help to bring each other back into full fellowship of the community and wholeness.

The tendency to “miss the mark” is one of the burdens that we all carry because we’re human; we’re imperfect. In the NIV, in verse 2, the Greek word *for carry* replaces *bear*. So, Paul tells us “Carry each others’ burdens, and therefore, fulfill the law of Christ.” The word *burden* is used in a time-specific way, here, and refers to the pack an ancient soldier would wear on their back, filled with survival needs and job-related objects. So, the term *burden* means something akin to our term backpack. A soldier of the 1st century would carry things to assist him or her. Some things might be light: others, heavy. Paul remarks that Christians should help one another with heavy burdens, just as soldiers might assist each other in moving heavy equipment. Paul says of spiritual helpfulness: “Carry one another’s burdens.”

So in our spiritual backpack, is our tendency to sin, to miss the mark, to stray from the path. That’s one burden we carry. A soldier might carry a compass to stay on the path, or maybe a map to re-direct her path....what might we carry to re-direct our path? Let’s see..... A great device! God’s Word.

Another burden we all carry are challenges, or problems. We all have them. We may become ill, suffer an injury, lose a job or income, suffer from property loss from flooding or an accident, lose a friend or loved one to death or our vitality to major

disability, or experience other types of crisis. Even Jesus, in his anxiety at Gethsemane,

Suffered a crisis, and revealed his problem to his friends. He was anxious at Gethsemane and asked them to stay with him as he prayed. That's one way we can help another bear, or carry their burden, if we are open enough to ask for prayer when we need it. We can also pray specifically for those among us who are shy or reticent, which is so human. As they silently struggle. You know, we may all feel isolated or disconnected from time to time. Silent prayers for unstated reasons are good.

Another way we can assist someone with their burden, is to "care, not cure". In a backpack, a soldier might have tinctures and bandages to help heal wounds. Our healing device in our pack might be a little book of healing prayers, or this book, One Anothering, by Richard Meyer, a Presbyterian minister. One Anothering is a book that teaches regular people in congregations how to do really effective pastoral care for one another, using Biblical principles. A colleague, Ken, another Presbyterian pastor and chaplain, trained a team of us in Ft. Worth using this book. One of the ways it teaches, is the "care, not cure" method. This method refrains from attempting "fix" how a person might feel, and emphasized truly caring for them by being present with them. I'll provide an example: About ten summers ago, now, Pat began to have real trouble walking on her repaired "bad" knee > she was in terrible pain. Her knee was shattered in a running accident twenty-five years previous in Spain. Doctors determined she needed a complete knee reconstruction/replacement; it would be dicey since she had experienced 13 previous surgical procedures and survived a stubborn bone infection in the femur. The hour of her surgery was fixed and could not be changed, as she had UTSW's best orthopedic surgeons on her case. Unfortunately, my schedule got all messed up, and also, could not be changed. My Dean, at the college, forgot that my request to be off that day so I could be with her, and he scheduled me for three classes instead of one, so I was hopelessly stuck at the college. I had to teach my classes, and then, drive to the hospital after her surgery had already begun. I felt terrible that I couldn't be with her; I cried all the way to hospital. When I arrived in the waiting room, several hours after surgery

started, much to my surprise, 6 or 7 of our friends were already there. They kind of nodded my way, didn't even get up, didn't say "keep a stiff upper lip" or "don't cry, it'll be OK"; they just handed hankie, and continued to sit with me. They didn't try to cure me, they cared for me. They didn't even talk much. They shared the burden of anxiety with us. Our friend, Rev. Lisa Berry, has prayed a blessing over her and had seen Pat off to surgery, they all prayed out loud for her. Pat was fine and so was I. Our friends helped both of us to carry the burden of our spiritual and emotional need.

The third type of burden we all happily carry is the responsibility to do good. An early soldier usually carried seeds to help people in a community to grow food after crops were destroyed by fighting. So in our backpack we carry seeds of hope and goodness, paired with the responsibility to do good acts that spread the goodness of God. In Galatians 6: 9, Paul says : "Let us not grow weary in doing good." St. Francis of Assisi said it this way: Preach the good Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words."

Someone overseeing rescues in recent flooding in said the "kindness is the greatest wisdom". Saint Teresa said "miss no single opportunity of making some small sacrifice, here a smile, there a kindly word." Jesus said this of doing good: "If someone thirst, and you offer a cup of water, you do it in my name."

The great Mother Teresa spent her entire life caring for the poor and the outcasts. She said this of the Christian mission to do good: Our mission is to convey God's love in acts of kindness, and goodness in words and actions of hope with others In other words, sharing the burden of doing good with others is our job as we are doing with our food drive today. (Don't forget your food contribution.), as well as many other worthy projects we accomplish.

God told the prophet Jeremiah "I have plans to prosper you.... plans to give you hope and a future. God restored Israel to when they were exiled, and God is always faithful to restore God's children. Our job is help with the restoration by spreading seeds of hopefulness through encouraging and uplifting one another, in both words and deeds.

God is all about hope and restoring lives. That's why God sent us Jesus---to restore us through faith in Christ. As we trust and believe in Christ, we are restored into relationship and reunited with God. Paul told followers that their restoration in Christ would bring strength. So, as we are restored in Christ, and help to bear one another's burdens, as individuals, we are made firm and strong in our faith. As we help each other bear physical and emotional needs, we are soothed and made whole. As we gently correct and guide one another, we are made whole. When we work on sharing one another's burdens as a community, trusting in Jesus, firm and steadfast, our unity will surely be restored and maintained. Amen.