

Bearing One Another's Burdens

Galatians 6:1-5

Expressing Christ's Mission Through Caring

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Sunday, November 10, 2002

"All must carry their own loads," Paul writes in verse 5. Generations of parents have said something similar when their sons and daughters strike out on their own. "From now on you must stand on your own two feet." "No one is going to hand you life on a silver platter." "We've done the best we can for you; now it's up to you." In other words, "From now on you will have to carry your own load."

That's the American Way, isn't it? Rugged individualism, self-sufficiency, the spirit of John Wayne. People are telling me that Washington is not only the capital of our nation but the epicenter of self-reliance. I'm told that people who work here must project a can-do aura, that you must at all times be upbeat, that you must never show fear, and never, never appear to be weak or vulnerable. You must carry your own load or be trampled by people behind you, pushing relentlessly to get ahead. If you've bought into that scenario, Paul seems to be your patron saint. "Carry your own load," he writes in verse 5.

But then I read verse 2, "Bear one another's burdens." Isn't that at odds with verse 5? If all of us are carrying our own loads, why should anyone have to bear another's burdens? The answer lies in the difference between a "load" and a "burden" because the two are not the same.

The term "load" refers to one's vocation, to one's job, to one's reason for being. Back in Paul's day the word "load" was often used of a soldier's pack or a ship's cargo. How effective would a soldier be without the pack that contains his food, clothing, ammunition, maps, and medicine? And what good is a cargo ship if it plies the seas with an empty hold? The point is, God has given each of us a load to carry, a purpose to achieve, a work to perform. And for most of us the load is manifold. We are parents, employees, and neighbors all at the same time. We have commitments to dependent children, to elderly parents, to friends across the country and across the world. We work on church committees, raise money for charities, tutor youth. Our loads are diverse and complex, and sometimes very heavy. But like the soldier's pack and the ship's cargo, that's what life is all about. It is our many-faceted vocations that make life the adventure that it is.

On the other hand, a soldier may be wounded and can no longer carry his heavy pack. A freighter may be crippled in a collision or disabled by an engine breakdown, and then it can no longer carry its cargo. And Christians are sometimes side-tracked by jarring disappointments, or bent under a weight of grief, or crippled by wrongdoing. Those are the "burdens" Paul speaks of in verse 2, "burdens" that make it difficult if not impossible to "carry our own loads." Then we discover what John Wayne denied: we need someone to help us bear our burdens. When misfortune rips a hole in our hull, we need a tender to come alongside to nudge us gently into dry dock. When our health breaks down, we need a Samaritan to pour oil on our wounds, and then swathe us in the folds of a caring relationship. That's what restores our hope, someone who will help us bear our burdens so we can once again carry our own load.

Unless I miss my guess this congregation contains people who are hurting big time. You've been hit on, you've been laughed at, you've been put down, and behind your self-assured Sunday morning facade there cowers a frightened child. How can I convince you that it's okay, even essential, to talk about it with a friend? Would it help you to remember that Jesus, in the dark hours before his arrest, asked three friends to pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane? Would it encourage you to know that the great Apostle Paul who seemed to be a man for all seasons, was at one point in such distress that he implored his friend Timothy, "Do your best to come to me soon." In fact, so great was his misery that a few lines later he repeated himself, "Do your best to come before winter" (2 Timothy 4:9, 21). And I invite you to come before another hour passes to our chapel where you will be met by a minister and one or two deeply caring lay leaders. Risk telling them what's going on in your life. There may be no instant miracle, no quick fix, but I can almost guarantee that your internal pressure will diminish, like steam escaping when the

petcock opens on an overheated furnace.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen conducts retreats for cancer patients. When her patients share their pain with just seven others in a retreat setting, healing often begins at the deepest level. Here is what she writes: "When someone speaks, everyone present simply listens generously and no one asks for explanations. No one needs to. So, in the end, people find they are able to belong just as they are. A place that can accept your suffering without dismissing you is a safe place. A place where you can become whole again." Our chapel is a safe place, for the people you will meet there will listen generously. They will bear your burdens so you can have a shot at walking with dignity and confidence.

There is an encouraging word here also for those who, having been wounded and healed, can now serve as wounded healers. You needed help and got it. You were depressed and were uplifted. You fell short of God's will and were forgiven. You now are uniquely qualified to bear others' burdens so they may once again carry their own loads. How long has it been since you read Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"? I remember it as a harsh commentary on Puritan legalism, but in a recent book Don McCullough argues that it's really about the quiet courage of an extraordinary woman. Hester Prynne, condemned for adultery, must for the rest of her life wear a scarlet A upon her breast. But while in prison she surrounds the A with elaborate embroidery, and with flourishes of gold thread. She is not flouting her sin, but owning it, claiming it, saying in effect, "Yes, this is who I am." And as the years go by, something amazing, even miraculous occurs. The letter, which had initially set her apart from others, becomes a passport into the lives of others. According to McCullough, "People knew she had suffered, and they trusted her the more; she became a servant so skilled in her ministrations that some came to think the A stood for Able." And, says Hawthorne, "the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too."

Can you admit that you have been steeped in grief and found hope, disheartened by failure and were forgiven, overwhelmed by depression and were uplifted? Have you, by God's grace, found your way to some measure of healing? Then that's all the qualification you need to be a wounded healer. This week I want you to be Christ's eyes to spot a hurting friend, Christ's ears to listen generously, Christ's lips to speak with understanding, Christ's arms to bear another's burdens.

Listen again to Rachel Remen: "Sometimes the deepest healing comes from the natural fit between two wounded people's lives. It makes one wonder about the source of such healing." Dr. Remen may wonder about the source of healing, but we don't, do we? For when we stoop to bear another's burdens it is the Great Physician, the living, loving Christ who enables them to stand straight again, to face their future with courage, and to carry their own load. But he can do it only because you are willing not only to sing but to say, "Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart."