

THE ART OF ONE-ANOTHERING

“BEAR ONE ANOTHER’S BURDENS”

First in 2009 Stephen Ministry Month sermon series
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, CA
January 11, 2009
Galatians 6:2-5

*Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.
For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself....
For each one must bear his own load.*

A young mother was confined to bed recovering from surgery when suddenly her nine-year-old daughter walked in, quietly unfolded the blanket at the foot of the bed and tucked it around her.

"You know," said the mother, "it wasn't long ago that I was tucking you in just like this. And here you are doing the same for me."

The girl bent over, kissed her mom on the cheek, and whispered, "We take turns."

Without knowing it, the girl verbalized one of the most important dynamics of church relationships.

How often this dynamic is referred to in the New Testament. We take turns when we *love one another* (John 13:34); *care for one another* (1 Cor. 12:25); *forgive one another* (Eph. 4:32); *serve one another* (Gal. 5:13); *encourage one another* (Heb. 10:24,25); *bear one another's burdens* (Gal. 6:2). Someone has thought of a clever new term for this dynamic: "One-anothering."

This month we want to take a closer look at the "one-anothering" principle, beginning this morning with Galatians 6:2. "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."

What is this law of Christ? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself."

And how do we fulfill this law, according to Paul? By bearing one-another's burdens! It's that simple.

But take a closer look at this morning's Galatians passage. There appears to be a contradiction. "Bear one another's burdens," says Paul and then a few phrases later, he says "for each one must bear his own load."

When you think of it, it's true that we all must, to a certain extent, bear our own load. No one can get inside our skin and bear our disappointment or sorrow or pain or worry in our stead.

A certain man was checking into the hospital for surgery. His friend came in to visit him. "Can I go with you down to the operating room," he offered. "No, I want you to go *instead* of me," he smiled. When you face some crisis, others can accompany you; but they can't go in your place. "Each must bear his own load."

The playwright, Tennessee Williams said it well.

"We are all sentenced to solitary confinement within our own skins for life," he said.

It's true. No one else but we can live within the boundaries of our own skins. When you have a headache, no one can have that particular headache but you. When you're facing crisis, no one can face it for you. There are times when we are quite reminded that we are alone in our skins.

So how do we lighten that sentence of solitary confinement? We do it by coming up close to each other. By listening to each other's troubles. By caring for one another, praying for one another, showing care and kindness to one another.

There's something else in this passage that is hidden by the translation from original Greek into English.

The two words for "burden" and "load" are different in the original, though translated into the same English concept. The first in, "Bear one another's *burdens*," is *baros*. It is the picture of a something bearing oppressively down. The second word in "each must bear his own *load*," is *phortion* which is a cargo you carry like a purse or back-pack.

We see some of this same distinction in Jesus' famous words:

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My **burden** (not *baros* but *phortion*) is light."¹

So how does this relate to us? Well, have you ever heard a person who is sick or depressed or over-wrought or overstressed say something like, "This is my cross to bear, my burden from God?"

The way I read my New Testament, it is not Christ who sends our worries, burdens, anxieties and oppressions. Those come from other sources: from the troublous world we live in, from the unreliability of other people, from our own want of faith and confidence in God. God comes to liberate, not to bind; to encourage, not weigh down; to heal, not to afflict; to give rest, not unrest.

And how does God do that? Not always by taking away the source of our trouble. Not always by changing the landscape of our lives. Most of the time we face the same troubles after we've prayed to Jesus as we did before we prayed to Jesus—the same disappointments, the same sorrows, the same burdens.

But here's how God does it. When entrust ourselves and our situations to Christ, we're no longer under the yoke alone. Yokes were always made for two, not one. When Jesus says, "take my yoke upon you" He means "Let me get under the same yoke with you and share it!

The same burdens that were crushing you before now become manageable; the same troubles that daunted you before you now become faceable; the same worries that upset you before now become less worrisome? Why? Because now you're not in it alone. You're not pulling alone, looking into the future alone, bearing your pains alone. Now you bear your burdens *with* Jesus, the all-wise, all-loving, and all-powerful God.

Here's something else important to remember, that this morning's Galatians reading reminds us of: How Christ actually gets under the burdens of our lives with us. Not by some miraculous spine tingling injection of inner fortitude. But by sending in people. A listening friend. A caring husband or wife. A compassionate church member. A doctor or nurse. The support of an AA, OA or PFLAG group.

Question. Where is Jesus right now? If you say, "In heaven," you are correct. But Jesus is somewhere else too, right at this moment. "Wherever two or three of you are gathered together in my name," he said, "there I am in your midst." Not in the air, but in the dynamic of our caring relationships.

When we love one another, Christ shows up; when we pray for one another, forgive one another, show kindness to one another, bear one another's burdens, *there* the Spirit of Christ is right at work.

Know why so many burdens in this life overweigh us, overstress us, overwhelm us? I have a theory. Because we're not designed to bear our burdens alone, though we keep trying.

Here's this big heavy object. You try lifting it alone and what do you do? You strain your neck and back and put yourself in traction for three weeks. What could you have done differently? You could have gotten some people to lift with you and then it becomes manageable.

¹ Matthew 11:28-30

That's how God works and life works the whole idea of this morning's passage works. "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing," continues Paul, "he deceives himself." In other words, if we think we're so self-sufficient, so strong, so smart, so put together, that we can make it on your own without other people, good luck!

I love that old hymn:

I must tell Jesus all of my trials;
I cannot bear these burdens alone;
In my distress He kindly will help me;
He ever loves and cares for His own.

And how does He love and care for His own? By sending people.

There is one more thing to be said here. Something very important. Who better to help carry a burden than one who is familiar with that burden? Who better to help us lift than someone who knows what it's like to be under the burden? Who better to walk with us through sorrow or sickness or disappointment or distress than one who has borne it themselves?

God doesn't send us our sorrows but God uses them. How so? By making us a friend and support and advocate and compassionate listener to someone else going through the same thing!

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," said Paul, "who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may comfort others in their afflictions with the same comfort we ourselves has received."

Which brings me to the whole point of our church's emphasis this month: our church's *Stephen Ministry*. How many of you know what *Stephen Ministry* is? Take that bookmark out of the pew rack in front of you. Hold it in your hand while I talk a bit about it.

At its heart, Stephen Ministry is "bearing one another's burdens." Stephen Ministers get thirty hours of training in listening and caring skills. Stephen Ministers are assigned one-on-one to stick close with someone through the kind of life's troubles or crises or losses that we all get a share of. Stephen Ministers are folks who have "been there" themselves, who know what it is like to feel the support of Christ through another human being and want to offer that same support to others.

I want to ask you two things.

First, are you getting worn down and worn out bearing your burden alone? Could you use a confidential friend to walk with you through the coming weeks and months? Talk it over with Andrew or me. We would be happy to think with you about the possibility of linking up with one of our trained Stephen Ministers who knows from personal experience what you're going through. All inquiries and referrals are strictly confidential.

Second, I wonder if some of the burdens you've carried in your life may have actually equipped you to be an advocate and friend to someone else who is presently going through the same thing. I encourage you to explore the possibility of taking our Stephen Ministry training and joining our Stephen Ministry Team. Talk to Andrew Rock or me or one of our Stephen Ministry leaders, whom you will find standing right under the Stephen Ministry banner in the courtyard. If you want to explore becoming a Stephen Minister, one of our Stephen Leaders will contact you.

I once read the story of a well known pastor on beach vacation who saw a man sweating with his two sons trying to push their car uphill off the road and into their driveway. Two voices went off in the pastor's head. "You should help these guys," said one voice. The other voice said, "Nah, that's none of your business. You've just had a nice swim in the ocean. You're on vacation. You'll get yourself all hot and dirty. Let them handle it." The pastor decided to listen to

his better impulse. He joined the party and put his shoulder to the task. Together, the foursome got the car up into the drive.

Then something happened that the pastor would never forget. The father stuck out his oily, dirty hand and said, "I'm glad you came along. You had just enough strength, added to ours, to make the thing go."

That's the spirit of this morning's verse. "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." Who are the people in our lives that struggle under a burden or strain at a heavy load that might "make the thing go" if only *we* would yield to the voice in our heads, the call in our hearts, to get step up to get involved?

Think about it.

Let's pray.