

Nov 11 – Help Each Other

Galatians 6:2-5

What is one of the best ways to really get to know someone? Work beside them on a project. In the planning, doing the task and in talking during breaks you get to know someone. You see how they think, you begin to learn what type of worker they are, such as a leader or a follower, and you begin to know their values and what is important to them. If you are trying to create community, the best way for this to occur is when you roll up your sleeves and work together.

Paul was an astute examiner of the human condition. As he begins the conclusion of his letter to the churches in Galatia he was trying to heal the wounds of division that had occurred in these churches over issues of Law and Grace. What could bring them together? Caring for one another. I can't help but believe that Paul understood the community building dynamic of helping another and this was behind these words: "Carry each other's burdens and in so doing you will fulfill the Law of Christ." In the Good News Bible they have these wonderful line drawings used to illustrate parts of the scripture. From the day I saw it, I was struck by the one for Galatians 6:2. Everyone has a load they are carrying but also everyone is helping lighten the burdens for those around them as others are helping to lift their load. When this mutual sharing occurs, community happens.

Paul makes a distinction between burdens and loads. Burdens are the struggles we face. We are called to help each other carry these. What are some of the burdens people in this congregation are facing? Some of you are dealing with significant health issues. Some of you have recently experienced great loss and are striving to put your lives back together. Some of you are walking beside a loved one who is struggling with memory issues or health issues and the caregiving is wearing you down. Burdens are not optional. They are things that come to us because of life. We age, we get sick, we experience loss, we love and commit to being there for those loved ones. All of us need help carrying those burdens. Sometimes what is required of us to help another carry their burden is very little. Maybe it is sending a card, lending a listening ear or giving them some cookies.

Sometimes carrying a burden it is a major commitment that we have to carefully reflect on and discern whether we have the time and resources to take it on. This is particularly true in families. People will tell you that you have to carry that burden. Sometimes we do not have the resources, the space or the emotional tools needed to handle this particular situation. We do what we can but setting limits is not being uncaring. Boundaries, thoughtfully set are sometimes a sign of love. To try to take on things we are not equipped to deal with is not good for us or the one we are trying to help.

For a moment think about your friends and some of the burdens they carry. Is there anything you can do for them? As I said, often the support required in these situations is minimal. Yet, the importance of knowing people support you when you are struggling is immense. This came home to me anew when I recently had a bit of minor surgery that laid me up for a few days. I, as you can probably guess, am a pretty independent type. All of a sudden getting out of a chair to get a glass of water was a challenge. My Jenny was so sweet and supportive. I was overcome with gratitude when she brought me that glass of water. Even though my burden added to her load of stuff she needed to do each day she did it gladly. It was a gift, a welcome gift that reminded me I was not alone on this journey of recovery.

Paul has some other advice about burden bearing but before we get to that I want to jump to his last admonition in this scripture that we shared. We are also told to carry our own loads. These words seems to run opposite to what we have just been talking about. We sometimes need to give up our independence and allow others to help us. You can only bear another's burden if they let you. To go back to my example. Jenny could not have graciously given me a glass of water if I had chosen to do it myself, pain and all! But when Paul talks about carrying your own loads he is talking about those tasks that we voluntarily pick up. They are not the burdens life pushes upon us but the things we choose. To go back to my example. My recovery was my burden. Jenny helping was a task, the load she chose to carry. Paul says once you agree to carrying the load, don't quickly set it down. Now we all understand in the realm of caregiving loads we willingly pick up can quickly spiral into burdens. This is why we

have to continually discern whether a load has now become our burden and if so can we realistically help carry it alone or do we need help. This is particularly the case with couples. They help one another but then one's health begins to decline it becomes both of their burdens and instead of doing it alone, ask for help in dealing with the situation.

Paul in talking about carrying your own load is talking about building community. If you agree to do something you should do it. Don't volunteer and then force someone else to pick up the ball that you dropped. And when you accept a load to carry, do it in the Spirit of Christ. But a caution here. Some people are so determined to carry their own loads that they make it a burden for everyone around them. Or they volunteer for so many burden carrying jobs that they wear themselves out. When we choose to volunteer, to help bear a burden we are following the Law of Christ, which can also be seen as the Imitation of Christ. It is a call to live the same self-sacrificial pattern of Jesus. And here Paul's words come back to us. He said to not think more of yourself. Sometimes we think we are too good for that project, it is beneath us. We need to remember how Jesus washed his disciples' feet. I recall the bank manager in one of my churches working side by side with others in the kitchen of the church when we had a fund raising meal. Someone mentioned that it isn't often you get someone like her serving you your potatoes. She just laughed and said, "We are a team."

We are also to be happy with our work. I have experience people who willingly volunteer to help bear another's burden but then complain to everyone else how they feel put upon. I recall once at church mentioning a need someone had for a ride twice a week to therapy. This would be for a month when they could not drive. Their wife had her own major medical issues and they had no children living nearby. A woman volunteered. She assured the man that it was no problem. Yet, that entire month everyone was hearing from her how taking him twice a week to therapy had fouled up her schedule. She whined about not getting to go to lunch with her friends, having to miss her club meeting and on and on. When someone else volunteered to help out she sighed and said, "No, it's my problem." I hope the person she was helping never heard what she was saying. This woman had a martyr complex and her helping may have

gotten the job done but it did nothing for building community. In fact, it probably made things worse for all. So take up a load, Paul would say, and do it cheerfully.

He also admonishes us to not compare. He didn't want people to decide only to help on visible stuff where they got thanked. Or when we volunteer to do something and then see someone else doing something that looks like a whole lot more fun become grumpy because of what we are "stuck" with. Be happy, do your work and find satisfaction in it.

In my last church there was a woman who walked every morning. She got up early to get in her miles before breakfast. One day she was visiting with a neighbor in the development where she lived. This neighbor talked about how hard it was for her to get her newspaper. She had had a mild stroke and was using a walker. Walking clear out to the curb and back was a challenge. The carrier was not willing to get out of his car to put the newspaper on the porch. She immediately said, "I will put it in your screen door each morning." For her it was a little thing but for the neighbor it was a big deal. She then started asking around and found out several others could use this service as well. For the next few years this became her routine. When she was on vacation she got another to do it for her. She never mentioned it, she wasn't looking for recognition. It was a way to show love. I only learned about her ministry at her memorial service when one of those people she had helped stood to praise the "paper lady."

Burden bearing and load carrying, keeping these in balance is hard. We sometimes try too much to carry our load when we need help from another. We sometimes try too hard to carry too many burdens. We will probably never get it quite right but when we strive to carry and be helped we see how a community comes together, supports one another and grows in love.

So today think about burdens you can carry for those around you. Think about where you might need to ask help in carrying a load that is becoming too burdensome. How can you ask for and give help with love, with humility and with joy? This is being an imitator of Christ. The more we can do the better our community will be.