

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

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BURDENS

Galatians 6: 1-10

At the end of Paul's letters there are always ethical admonitions-imperatives urging Christians to demonstrate their faith in their daily lives. Encouraging words about our deeds, our attitudes, our words, our relationships-the way our faith in Christ shapes our character. In other words, the fruit or the consequences of our convictions about Christ. But we need to remember that Christian ethics is always the caboose and not the engine.

What drives us and motivates us is what God in Christ has done for us. The engine that gives us energy and life is God's grace offered in the face of Christ our Lord. As Paul says, "Christ loved me and gave himself for me." That is what empowers the Christian life-God's astonishing love and mercy shown in our crucified and risen Lord.

In that sense, the form of Christian ethics is identical to Jewish ethics. Remember the Preamble to the Ten Commandments? "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." God liberated Jewish slaves from bondage and then gave them the law. Exodus first, then Mt. Sinai. Grace first then demand. As they say in German: Gabe then Aufgabe, gift then obligation.

In the Galatian letter Paul repeatedly reminds his readers of God's grace, what God has done for us. We do not deserve or merit what God has graciously given us. We receive God's gift in faith, trusting God as Abraham did, that God is for us and with us and will never leave us. Thus, our sins are forgiven and our life is renewed. In Galatians 5 Paul describes the gift of the Holy Spirit that transforms our lives with this amazing fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It is God's Spirit that generates and sustains our ethical lives. In short, it is all gift and it is all grace.

In the imperatives in Galatians 6, I hear what Christ wants from me. So I am motivated to give my life to Christ. I want to be transformed. I want to bear fruit. I deeply desire to serve Christ with all that I am, without reservation. That is Christian ethics. It has nothing to do with achieving merit. It has everything to do with gratitude and thanksgiving. My life is not my own. I have been bought with a price and I belong body and soul to Christ my Lord. And so I give my life in service to Christ freely and joyfully.

So Paul urges us, as sisters and brothers in Christ, to bear one another's burdens even as we bear our own burdens. Our order of service has a lovely drawing of people carrying heavy burdens even as they assist the one in front of them with their burden. I am never in this alone. In our journey of faith, we travel as a community. We need each other and we help each other along the way. For we all are wounded in some way; we all struggle. That is our human condition, what binds us together-my burdens and your burdens.

In Galatians 4 Paul tells of his first visit to somewhere in what is now central Turkey. He reminds them: "You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you, though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus." This is an astonishing comment, unique in all of Paul's letters.

When Paul first met the Galatians, he was suffering from a physical infirmity. We are not sure what it was. Was he sick with malaria or an eye condition? Was this the famous "thorn in the flesh", a persistent condition that had flared up like epilepsy? Or was Paul recovering from literally being stoned in the town of Lystra in southern Turkey?

Whatever the cause of his physical infirmity, Paul said that the Galatians were so concerned for him that they would have even "torn out your own eyes and given them to me." They welcomed him and cared for him. In short, the Galatians bore Paul's burden, his physical infirmity. In that era physical infirmities were often seen as God's punishment or worse a sign of demon possession. Despite all that, these folks nursed him back to health and listened gladly to the good news he preached. In fact, they treated him as though he were an angel, or even Christ himself. Amazing!

Sometimes you need to move out of your normal routine to see the burdens that others carry. It happened to me this past weekend when I went to my 56th high school reunion in the piney woods of East Texas. There in Tyler I gathered with about 80 of my former classmates at a large barbeque restaurant. In a private dining room there were five AR-15s mounted on the wall, I suppose, as décor. No one there thought it was odd. Texas. Now this is what I discovered early on in my four hours with former classmates. When you go to a reunion where everybody knows you are a minister, you go to work. That is, it seemed that every one of my dear friends wanted to share something-usually painful-with me.

At the registration desk was Carol (I have changed their names) a lovely woman that I had invited to our senior prom. I chatted with her and told her how glad I was to see her and that I would always remember our prom night. She looked at me quizzically and rather blankly. A friend pulled me aside and said that Carol was now almost deaf, in the beginning stages of dementia. That was the opening act which was replicated throughout the evening.

There was Dennis the all-state basketball star whose knees have forced him to use a walker. There was Fred dealing with the tensions of a blended family and a stepson whom he could not stand. There was Annette whose daughter had accidentally rolled over her grandchild in her car and killed her. There was Austin, a lifetime church friend and budding evangelist whose public scandal landed him on the front page of the local paper and reduced him to sitting at a corner table with a few old friends, snubbed by the Bold and the Beautiful. Our class Jimmy Swaggart. There were more broken marriages and bankruptcies than I can remember. And plenty of depression, anxiety, and alcoholism plus a few suicides along the way.

So many friends dealing with a myriad of illnesses and conditions-heart disease, cancer, Parkinsons, paralysis, and of course Covid. After sharing so much with my friends, I was glad to find out that some of them are still relatively happy and relatively healthy. And at the end of the evening we read aloud the names of the 71 classmates we have lost, concluding with a prayer of thanksgiving for their lives and our lives together through all these years.

These were but 80 or so 74-year-old friends in a small town in East Texas. Now extrapolate from my experience and imagine if you gathered 80 or so people from anywhere in

the world and they shared their burdens with you. Imagine if you were with mothers in Guatemala lamenting their children lost in that sweltering trailer outside San Antonio. Or with a Ukrainian family being shelled by Russian artillery or with Brittney Griner in a Moscow jail cell. Or with a frightened teenager in Alabama who has been raped, now carrying a child and not knowing where to turn. Or with a child in South Sudan facing imminent starvation. Or with a grieving family here in Albuquerque whose son has been murdered. Or with an old veteran on a VA ward nursing the physical and psychological wounds of war. These are real and pressing burdens, so crushing in their own way. These are sisters and brothers reaching out, who need someone to help carry their load.

But all of you here today know about burdens. Your own or those borne by people close to you. That is what it means to be human. You know about your own hurts and the pains that others endure. And that is why we need to hear Paul's admonition to us all: "Bear one another's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." "For all must carry their own loads."

Sisters and brothers, on this Independence Day weekend as we consider how to help our church and our country, let me encourage you to care deeply about others-their struggles and their scars. In reaching out, your own pain may begin to be transformed. Your own heartaches may be seen as part of a larger tapestry of need. Now yours belong to the burdens of the entire human family. You are not alone.

There are burdens that Christ alone can ultimately bear. "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." In Christ, through Christ, and for Christ, we share our mutual needs and our mutual burdens. And in so doing, we find community and we find hope. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.