The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
10:00 a.m.
July 6, 2025

"He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother"

Lately, as I read the scripture assigned for each Sunday, I get taken by a verse or a phrase. Everything else around it fades into the background, and I am captivated by a few words. If I choose to preach on that phrase, I feel like a Baptist minister. The Baptist preachers of my youth could take just such a phrase and weave a twenty- or thirty-minute sermon from it. It is quite a gift to be able to do that. Although there is the temptation to take that phrase out of context and read much more into it than the context bears. As I have said before, context is like a location in real estate. It is essential. Also, I do not preach thirty-minute sermons (aren't you lucky?).

What grabs my attention in this week's readings is a phrase from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, "Bear one another's burdens." Before I get into why this is so compelling to me, let me put it into context. The letter to the Galatians, like most of the genuine letters of Paul, is written to a Christian community that he established. The communities are often in one town or city. The letter to the Galatians is written to a group of Christian communities in the region of Galatia, a Roman region of what is now modern Türkiye. He writes to these communities to encourage them. He also usually must set the communities straight as they have taken something he said and twisted it around or fallen back into old ways.

The central issue in the letter concerns how Gentiles can become Christians. Do they have to convert to Judaism in order to then become Christians? Many of the first Christ followers were Jews and saw following Jesus as a sect of Judaism. They thought one converted to Judaism to accept Christ. They argued that a convert must follow Jewish dietary laws and men must be ritually circumcised. Paul argues that Gentile proselytes do not need to adhere to the tenets of the Mosaic Law.

Today's reading is the concluding chapter of the letter. We heard sixteen of the eighteen verses, which serve as a summary of the letter and were written in Paul's own hand rather than by an amanuensis which is a fancy word that means a literary assistant or scribe.

The chapter begins with Paul exhorting the people to restore anyone who has been found to be in transgression by "a spirit of gentleness." Unfortunately, when people cherry-pick scriptures for phrases to live by, this is not one of them. How would you say Christians treat those who are found in transgression? [listen for shunning, outcast, gossip, shame, excommunication]. That is right, we shun them, gossip about them, shame them, and even excommunicate them. What is the one exception to this? [Listen for money, power, prestige, family] Unless, of course, they are "pillars of the community or the church," and their financial support is critical. Then we look the other way. Neither of those ways of treating a transgressor is restorative or forgiving. They are punitive or hypocritical.

Then comes the passage that grabbed me. "Bear one another's burdens." Paul is telling us that not only must we show gentleness to the offender, we are to help them carry their burden. Rather than leaving the transgressor alone in her or his wrongdoing, we should help them carry their load. We should also take care that we are not tempted to participate in this misbehavior and thus find ourselves joining in the transgression. But we are to help our fellow Christians (and I believe anyone) to

carry the burden just as Jesus carried the cross for us and admonished us to pick up our own cross and carry it.

When our first instinct is to shun another for their transgression or ignore them because they have failed in our eyes, we must instead reach out in compassion. The aphorism "But for the grace of God go I" comes to mind. While that phrase is often followed by an expression of sympathy, it is seldom followed with assistance. That phrase feigns compassion without any follow-up action. God's grace may have blessed me, but far be it from me to share that grace with an offender.

What kind of follower of Christ stands by and watches without offering help? What kind of follower of Christ acts more like the priest or scribe than the Samaritan in the parable of the Good Samaritan? Who can claim to be a devotee of Jesus and ignore or outright deny the two commandments that he said were the greatest? That is to love God and love your neighbor.

There is an African parable that bears hearing. The story goes,

> On a steep and rocky path, I encountered a small girl who carried on her back her little brother. "My child," I said to her, "you carry a heavy burden." She looked at me and said: "I carry not a heavy burden. I carry my brother!" I remained speechless. The words of this child sank deep into my heart. When people's troubles seem to weigh me down to a point that I nearly lose heart, the words of the child come back to me: "I carry not a heavy burden. I carry my brother!"[1]

We who truly seek to live a life that follows the teachings of Christ do not look at other people as burdens. We see them as fellow children of God. Paul says that by doing so, we fulfill the law of Christ. As fellow children of God who are, like us, made in the image of God, they are worthy of our compassion, understanding, and care.

Paul goes on to point out that we cannot deceive God. The sins of the flesh lead to corruption and death. Do you remember what those sins of the flesh were that we talked about last week? In Galatians chapter five, Paul list of sins of the flesh, including sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and carousing.[2] In chapter six, he is adding to this list how we care for those who commit these transgressions. If we do not treat them with the "spirit of gentleness," we too are transgressors. If we do not assist them in carrying their burdens, we have failed to show the gifts of the Spirit.

The call to discipleship is not easy, and grace is not had on the cheap. If Jesus can carry the cross for us, then we can carry the cross for each other. Love God and love each other even when it is hard. Even when the other transgresses. Love is the way of Jesus. Follow where love leads. Remember, "if it is not about love, it is not about God."[3]

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[1] Leach, Michael, et al, editor. *The Way of Forgiveness* [Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2019]. A version of this parable inspired the song "He Ain't Heavy He's My Brother" sung by The Hollies

[2] Galatians 5:19-21a NRSVUE

[3] Bishop Michael Curry.