

Life in Community: Some Teachings from Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Galatians 6:1-10

The reading from Paul's Letter to the Galatians is a collection of teachings about life together as a community of Jesus. He is writing to a troubled community that has drifted into forgetfulness and conflict. Paul is reminding them of who they are and what kind of love is to characterize their life.

In the first sentences, Paul seems to say two contradictory things. First, *Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.* A bit later he writes, *For all must carry their own loads.* Which is it, bearing each other's burdens or carrying our own loads? I think Paul is offering an important insight about being a truly loving community. We are to nurture and support each other in living the life of faith. That is the "bearing one another's burdens" part. This kind of love tells us that we are not alone and accepts us whatever the condition of our lives. Every human being longs for and needs such a community. Here we can find the antidote to a society that tends to alienate us from ourselves and each other by emphasizing profit, power, competition, superficiality, and distraction. In a community of the love of God as we know and experience it in Jesus, we can find the support we need to discover and live out of our true selves. We offer one another the gift of listening and non-judgmental presence. We learn how to love unconditionally, without making each other prisoners of our own expectations and demands. This is caring for and about one another in a bearing-one-another's-burdens way.

What does Paul mean by *all must carry their own loads*? He might mean that each person needs to contribute to the life and work of the community, pull their weight, so to speak. And that is important. A community of love needs to identify and call forth the gifts of each person. It is precisely our unique gifts and callings that shape our community's life and work. Each person has a contribution to make and needs to make it.

I think Paul also says this to avoid a misunderstanding of love. Bearing one another's burdens does not mean *taking care of each other* in the sense of trying to fix each other's lives or presuming to know what is best for another person. Sometimes our lives become so difficult or painful that we wish someone else would do it for us, give us the answer, or take away our struggle. And yet, we discover in such experiences that the person who shows us the greatest love does not try to take away our struggles or give us the answers that we need to find for and within ourselves.

No one can live our life for us. No one can live our discipleship to Jesus for us. The old spiritual says: "You've got to walk that lonesome valley/You've got to walk it by yourself/Oh, nobody else can walk it for you/You've got to walk it by yourself." This song came out of the migration from the poverty of rural and mountain regions of this country to the fast-industrializing cities. Dreams of prosperity and an easier life encountered the lonely struggles of urban poverty and exploitation. So people found strength and courage in Jesus who made his journey by himself. If he could do it, with all the suffering he faced, then so can I.

We find the life of faith within the struggles and challenges, as well as the blessings, of our own lives. When we try to solve someone else's problems for them or take away their struggles through a wrong kind of love, we are not doing them any favors. We rob them of the dignity of their own lives and discovering within themselves the strength and peace God gives us to live our own lives in faith. There are times when we need people to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, to bear our burdens. Yet we do not need for people to do for us what we can and need to do for ourselves. Paul is saying, in essence: Care for one another, but do not take care of each other!

Paul also says a related thing. We need to "test" our own work so that we take pride in what we ourselves do. I think Paul is saying that we are to pay attention to our own work, the things we feel called to do, and not get caught up in measuring others' work or measuring ourselves against others. The life of faith is not a competition. God calls each of us to some expression of love, through the use of our gifts and the uniqueness of our lives. Our "work" is our own faith, our own life, and not someone else's. Comparing ourselves with others, needing others to agree with us or approve of us--all of that is a waste of time and a distraction. There is nothing more destructive of community than demanding that others mirror our own thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and commitments. When we find ourselves engaged in such, it is a sign of our insecurity about our own lives and faith. If I feel that I am doing what God has called me to do, not measuring it against what others are doing, if I

am accepting my own struggles and growth in faith, then I feel no need to try and tell others what to do or think. If we are each growing in gratitude for our own lives, embracing the blessings and the struggles that are a part of our own lives, then we feel no need to always be getting into other people's business, the loads they are carrying. This, I think, is what Paul's words can mean for us--test and take pride in your own work, your own life.

Paul then talks about planting and sowing and harvesting. Don't be fooled, writes Paul. What we plant, the kinds of seeds we sow, determine the kind of harvest we get. Paul's words have been taken as a grim determinism: you reap what you sow! You do bad things, you get back bad things. It's your own fault. You deserve what you get. I don't think that is what Paul had in mind. What he says is more profound and positive than that. Yes, our actions produce results according to what sorts of actions they are. Violent responses to violence do not end violence; they only perpetuate and increase it. Self-centered actions may bring an appearance of success or fulfillment, but the rewards are fleeting and empty. These are the kinds of things Paul meant by *sowing to our own flesh*, living in ways that perpetuate violence, greed, hate, and hostilities in ourselves and in the world.

There is another side to it, though. When we *sow to the Spirit*, writes Paul, we reap a harvest of eternal life from God's Spirit. And eternal life does not mean only life beyond this earthly life. It means that quality or depth of life that has to do with life's true meaning and purpose—life in relationship to God. That kind of life is experienced now as well as forever. Paul says that we can sow seeds in the field of *the flesh*, that is, self-centered existence, or we can sow seeds in the field of God's Spirit, our interrelatedness to all of life. Our sowing is very important. It matters. Each action, each word, each intention, each desire and commitment that we make has an effect beyond our own lives. We all carry within us seeds of hate or fear, anger or cynicism. Yet we also have seeds of love, joy, compassion, understanding, gratitude, and generosity. The work of our inward journey is not to drive out or attack the seeds that cause pain and suffering to ourselves or others. This turns our inner life into a battlefield and we are doing violence to ourselves. Our work is to feed and water those other seeds, the seeds that are of our true humanity, the original goodness with which we were made by God.

Every day we can plant and water those seeds in ourselves and in others. By treating ourselves with compassion and the unconditional love of God's grace, we nourish the seeds of the Spirit. By treating others in the same way, we nourish in them the seeds of the Spirit, the seeds of their true humanity. What we give our attention to will grow and flourish into a harvest of goodness. And over time we will find that those other seeds shrink and wither so that at least they do not cause us as much trouble as before.

I think Paul is saying that we can live with confidence that comes from knowing that what we sow we also reap. All of our actions, all of our inward work, all of the feeding and watering we do of those good and life-giving seeds--it all makes a difference, no matter how seemingly small and insignificant. *So, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up*, writes Paul. There are opportunities every day to do those things that build up and nourish life. None of them is unimportant and every one of them has an effect. We can be assured, because our lives are related to all of life, that even the smallest of good seeds that we sow will bring about a harvest beyond the time and space of our own lives.

Paul finally writes: *So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith*. Live your life for the sake of all human beings, the whole of creation, but especially for the family of faith. He didn't mean that we are to be exclusive and closed in on ourselves as a community. Yet I think Paul knew that the only way we can love all humanity, all the world is to love within a particular community. We are to practice with one another, with those closest to us, the kind of seed planting we are to do in the wider community and world. If we are not doing it among ourselves, then it is neither believable nor effective. Our concern for justice, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace in the wider world must be lived out in the concrete reality of our life together. And yet we remain aware that our life together is in the context of and for the benefit of the whole of life.

Paul's cluster of teachings gives us a great deal for fruitful reflection and learning. Bearing one another's burdens in a community of love, yet each carrying our own load in terms of responsibility for our own lives. Not getting caught in comparing ourselves with others, but testing, paying attention to our own work and life. Sowing good seeds whenever and wherever we can. Living for the sake of the whole of life, yet doing so within the particularity of a community. I think that this has been the vision of community we have as the Church of the Covenant. We do not always live it out faithfully. We sometimes get burden bearing and load carrying mixed up. Sometimes our attention drifts from our own lives and spiritual practice, and we start measuring and judging others. Sometimes we feel full of love for all humanity and the creation, but are neglectful of the ways

we relate to each other. But as long as we keep coming back to what Paul is talking about, we will continue to grow in awareness, understanding, and practice of the kind of love that truly manifests God's love as we know it in Jesus.