

July 7, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

## Love in Community: Burden-bearing, Load-carrying, and Doing Our Own Work

Galatians 6:1-10

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

There are two important dimensions of our life as a Christian community. There is our outward work, the ministries and missions to which we feel called as mission groups or as persons. These are our expressions of God's love for the world. The church does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. The second dimension is our life together. Jesus did not call disciples only to outward work but also to live together in the way of God's love and what that love means for our relationships with one another. We find the truth and joy of our life when we make our living an expression of our love of God. And we love God by loving the world through service and loving others in community. When we make a commitment to membership in the Church of the Covenant, we commit not only to discerning the work of God's love to which we feel called and gifted, but also to being in community with others in the love of God. So Paul's teachings on life together as Jesus' community are important for us to consider.

I will offer some reflections on just the first five verses of our reading. Paul seems to say two contradictory things. He calls on the Christian community at Galatia to *bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ*, or the law of love. A bit later he writes, *For all must carry their own loads*. Are we to bear each other's burdens, or carry our own loads? I think Paul's words point us to a deeper, more mature meaning of love in community. We are to accept, nurture, and support each other. That is the "bearing one another's burdens" part. We all come to the community in varying conditions of being banged up, messed up, mixed up, or fed up. The love Jesus teaches and embodies lets us know that we are not alone, and that we are accepted regardless of the condition of our lives. Every human being longs for and needs such a community. As Jesus' community, we are called to be

an antidote to a society that alienates us from each other, from the world as God's good creation, and from ourselves by empty and false values and perceptions—money, power, competition, and many other superficialities, illusions, and distractions. In a community of God's love, we find the support we need to begin touching and living out of our true selves. We learn how to love unconditionally, without laying on others our own expectations and demands. This is bearing-one-another's-burdens. Learning how to do it is a never-ending process and journey.

What, then, 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. That is important. There is always work to be done in our community's own life and in our outreach to others. Each person has a contribution to make and needs to make it. When we enter the community, we may do so on the basis of getting our own needs met. Remaining in and committing to the community means moving on from there to giving what we are able and called to give, to share in the responsibility for the life and work of the community.

I think there is something deeper here that leads us to a more mature understanding 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. Neither can love mean taking away the struggles that the other person needs to work with in order to grow and learn. Burden carrying does not mean feeling sorry for someone, a sentiment that in reality robs others of the sense that they have strength within them. Being merciful does not mean pitying someone, which is really a form of looking down on a person. I grew up in a very loving and compassionate family. Yet there was the tendency to feel sorry for people going through a difficult time. It took me many years to realize that feeling sorry for others gives them the message that they are powerless in their own situations.

The person who shows us the greatest love does not try to take away our struggles, or give us answers that we need to find for and within ourselves, or do for us what we need most of all to do for ourselves. The life of faith becomes real within the struggles and challenges 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. And we are probably acting out of our own need to feel needed rather than discerning what is truly helpful. This robs others of the dignity of their own lives and of discovering within themselves

the strength and peace God gives each of us to live our own lives in faith. Paul is saying, in essence: Care for one another, but do not take care of each other!

Our community was born with the vision of offering people the unconditional love of God (bear one another's burdens), while at the same time inviting people to take responsibility for their own lives and faith (carry our own loads). The one completes and balances the other. Knowing the unconditional love of God for us, we are empowered to embrace our own lives and our relationship with God. Working with our own faith, carrying our own load, so to speak, we find within us the love with which we can love others, bearing their burdens. In our community we talk about ultimate responsibility and accountability. This recognizes the importance of each person's carrying his or her own load. The unconditional love of God calls and enables us to grow up into maturity of life and love. Working with the spiritual disciplines or practices we commit to, each of us can discover and grow in our own relationship with God and live more fully out of that love. When I was with Kayla McClurg of the Church of the Saviour recently, she recalled some words from Gordon Cosby: The problem with the church as it exists today is that it is structured for infancy. In other words, the church has tended to keep people dependent and superficial when it comes to the life of faith. The vision of the spiritual life that we offer and work with ourselves is a "structure for maturity", a life that can help us grow in love that is both burden-bearing and load-carrying, all of it rooted in and nourish by God's love for us and the world.

Paul then says that 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. And God's spirit works in diversity, not uniformity. God calls each of us to some expression, some work 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. It is a sign that we are not doing our own work, carrying our own load. 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. If we are staying clear about what we feel called to do, as persons, as mission groups, then we will take pride in that, as Paul says. We will cease our efforts to criticize what others are working with and become encouraging toward and appreciative of what God is doing through them. This, I think, is what Paul's words can mean for us--test and take pride in your own work, your own 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 unconditional love, yet carrying our own load in terms of responsibility for our own lives, our own faith and faithfulness. Not getting caught in comparing ourselves with others, but testing, paying attention to our own work and life, what God has called us to do and created us to be. We live for the sake of the whole of life, yet we do 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. Sometimes we get too caught up within ourselves and forget that our own life and our life together are for the sake of the world. But as long as we keep coming back to the things 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.