

*Bear One Another's Burdens*

The French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre said, "Hell is other people." What he meant by that, I believe, is that we are each the center of our own universe. Our inclination is to do what makes us happy, regardless of its effect on others. That, of course, makes living in communities or families or even with only one other person difficult because other people don't always share our opinions, our emotions, or our way of life. What makes us happy frequently makes others unhappy. We often find it hard to deal with others, to negotiate agreements with them, to simply all just get along. Wouldn't the world be so much nicer if only everyone would do things the right way, which, naturally, is our way!

St. Paul tells us that, contrary to our inclinations, we are to bear one another's burdens. We can do that, at least sometimes, for the people we love. Parents take care of their small children; adult children care for their elderly parents; and so on. We make allowances for those we care about, accepting attitudes and behaviors from them we would normally not accept from strangers. But it's harder to bear the burdens of someone we don't know, or someone who is different from us, or, especially, someone hostile to us. Yet scripture commands us to bear their burdens as well, which often means exercising a degree of tolerance, compassion, and restraint.

Bearing another's burdens can be especially hard when that person is what is called an "irregular person." "Irregular Person" is a term coined by author Joyce Landoff to describe someone with a pathological insensitivity to the feelings of others. Irregular people frequently ignore the feelings of the people closest to them. Irregular people seem to just not "get it." One example Joyce Landoff cited in her book was a woman with cancer telling her mother for the first time about her condition and her fears. The mother, as if she hadn't heard a word her daughter said, changed the subject and started talking about how to cook the Thanksgiving turkey. I'm sure in your life situation there are similarly irregular people, people wrapped up in their own worlds, with no room in them for you and your feelings. Irregular people often hurt us and make impossible demands on us without realizing it.

The situation St. Paul was dealing with was a group of people in the church in Galatia who, kind of wrapped up in their own religious world, were demanding that Christians be circumcised. That may not seem like such a big issue to us today. In fact, it kind of makes sense that a new Christian convert should participate in the ritual that originally marked men as God's people. But Paul had the deeper revelation from Christ that such a ritual was unnecessary because we are saved by grace, not by works. To require circumcision was to in effect nullify the message of justification by faith and make circumcision a good work necessary for salvation. Paul's counsel to the divided Christians in Galatia was to continue to contend faithfully for the truth of the gospel, but to do so with gentleness, compassion, and restraint.

There is a great danger and temptation we face when we detect faults in others and we try to correct them. The Bible tells us that scripture is given for reproof and correction, but the danger is that we can be too harsh in our censure. We can become smug and self-righteous in our knowledge, and unjustly angry and punitive in our zealotry for the truth. When dealing with the sins of others, we can frequently be blinded to our own sins. It's the old speck in our neighbor's eye when we have a log in our own. And the means we sometimes go to expose and correct sin are often not justified by the ends. The goal of reproofing another is always to restore that person to the faith. In extreme cases, excommunication is used as a sanction of last resort, but even that is only a temporary measure with the idea that the person excluded from receiving Holy Communion should receive a double helping of the ministry of the Word to lead them to repentance, confession, and amendment of life.

We said that each of us probably has an irregular person in our lives, a person who can really push our buttons and make us miserable. But could it also be true that, without even knowing it, we might be the irregular person in someone else's life? We might be oblivious to our own insensitivities, and to how we are a source of pain and consternation to others. You might not know just how others actually perceive you and what they really think of you. No one is going to tell you to your face and you probably wouldn't believe them if they did. Therefore we should be reserved in our judgments, measured in our criticisms, and charitable in all our actions. As they say in sports, "What goes around comes around." We should not be more critical of others

than we would want anyone to be critical of us, or more punitive of others than we would want others to be punitive of us, because someday we are likely to be on the receiving end rather than the giving end. Like the reading from Galatians said last week, “Be careful when you bite and devour one another, that you do not consume one another.”

The main point in this, a point Paul makes over and over again in his writings, is that our actions have consequences. We reap what we sow. The things we do today might come back to us as a blessing tomorrow, or they might haunt us as a curse somewhere down the road. So be careful what you do. Watch what you say. God’s Word will not return to him empty, we are told, and if we cast our bread on the waters it will return to us after many days. But if you sow the wind, you will reap the whirlwind. It pays to be nice to the people you meet on the way up because you might see them again on your way back down.

Given that we reap what we sow, a profitable way to invest our time would be in spiritual disciplines. Think about how much time and money we spend taking care of our bodies: we floss, brush and rinse twice a day; we see our doctor for an annual check up and our dentist twice a year; we exercise regularly, and take vitamins and other supplements. But how much time do we spend in prayer and scripture reading? Is time alone with God a daily habit? Do we read God’s Holy Word as much as we read the newspaper or the latest best seller? How much time do we put into helping others when no one will know about it and there is no other tangible reward in it for us? How can we know what God’s will for us is if we don’t read His Word? How we can expect God to lead us if we never ask Him for His guidance? What kind of relationship do we have with God if we chose to neglect and ignore him? To some degree, we all treat God like those annoying “irregular people” treat us. God has every reason to be peeved at us, but He loves us anyway.

Our relationship with God should be our first priority. A good place to start, if you aren’t into a regular spiritual discipline at this time, is just making some regular time for prayer. It could be when you wake up, or when you go to bed, or when you shower, or when you commute to work, or whenever. There is no bad time to pray. The prayer could be as simple as reciting the Lord’s Prayer. That’s the perfect prayer. Or you could recite the Creed. God will not turn a deaf ear to

any heartfelt prayer, and the more you pray, the easier it will become. Likewise, you could begin by setting aside just a few minutes a day to read the Bible. We have daily devotions in our library, and there are all sorts of guides to help you read the Bible in a year. You can even, with just a tiny bit of research, get daily Bible verses in your email or on your Blackberry. It's easy. And I know a lot of you do things for others are good Christian ministry without even realizing it. Cutting an elderly neighbor's lawn, or shoveling snow in the winter, or sending an inspirational card to a sick friend, or any "random act of kindness" can be more than just random, it can be Christian mission and ministry if done in Jesus' name.

Paul says, "Let us work for the good of all, especially those of the family of faith." Christians sometimes act as if helping other Christians or others close to them is somehow less worthy than helping strangers. We see that actually we do have a responsibility to first help those of the family of faith. Charity begins at home. Just as you have a responsibility to care for your own children first before you care for others, so do Christians have a responsibility to support other Christians in need. Recently, I got a letter from a pastor on the Gulf Coast talking about how the oil spill disaster has negatively impacted his congregation. He said it has been worse than Hurricane Katrina. His is a ministry worthy of our support. Did you know that the ELCA Board of Pensions is under funded and that current retirees are going to have their pensions cut by 25% over three years? We tried to do something about that at the Synod Assembly but failed. The struggle will go on though. Our congregation has a Calendar of Caring that raises up each month a vital Christian ministry that doesn't receive funds through regular channels. These are all worthy of our support.

In the end of course, as Paul acknowledges, our salvation is not based on circumcision or uncircumcision, or on what causes we support or what we don't support. It is the cross of Christ that saves us, and we boast in him, not ourselves. But given that are heirs to salvation, we can grow in holiness and grace. God is blessing us with peace and mercy. Let us rejoice. Amen.