

Fulfilling the Law of Christ

Galatians 6: 1-6

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First Federated Church

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Several years ago I was officiating at a graveside service of a woman who served in the Armed Forces during World War Two. Because of her service to her country she was given military rites at the cemetery. Now, in the small towns of Iowa military rites are accorded by aging veterans who are either members of the V.F.W. or the American Legion. Many are very feeble but they serve out of a sense of duty and honor. Sue and I often worried about them, especially on extremely hot or cold days, windy or rainy days.

Military rites are usually the final act at the graveside. On this particular windy fall day I stepped aside and joined the color guard standing next to a very small, slight man who couldn't have possibly weighed over a hundred pounds even on a rainy day. As the chaplain read the military ritual a large gust of wind blew up and out of the corner of my right eye I noticed something move. I turned around just in time to see the color guard standing next to me, still holding tightly onto the American flag being picked up by the wind like a kite.

At this point, everything switched into slow motion as the other color guards and I reached for the man. He was already airborne, though, and the wind gently carried him back over a waist high marker behind him. He dropped on the other side of the marker. The chaplain and those gathered in the tent did not realize what had happened. Meanwhile we knelt over the man and told him not to move, but of course he ignored us. He slowly got to his feet and another color guard took his flag.

When the service was over, and we all knew that he was all right, though a bit embarrassed by what had happened, I clapped him on the back and whispered in his ear, "You know you gave us quite a scare. You may want to visit your doctor just to get checked out. And by the way, don't worry about any of this. You've given us something to laugh about for years to come!" He grinned and winked.

If anyone "slips," you who have received the (Holy) Spirit should restore that person with a spirit of gentleness. (And) take care that you yourselves are not (so) tempted. Bear one another's burden, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6: 1-2)

In life we all slip. We all fall. Sometimes we are carried away by the sudden winds of life. Sometimes we simply trip on the uneven sidewalk of life. Sometimes we lose our balance.

This month our theme is "Disciples Care." Pastor Hofmann reminded us last week that caring means that when one member of Christ's body suffers, we all suffer; when one member is honored, we are all honored.

This week we are reminded that *caring* means to bear one another's burdens in life.

Burden bearing involves essentially three things.

First, we don't waste time playing the Blame Game. Initially it doesn't make any difference *who* is at fault. Someone's down. Someone needs help. Someone needs comfort. Respond. It's as simple as that.

Second, learn from *their* mistakes. In a commencement speech it was either Stephen Colbert or Bill Cosby gave the following advice to a graduating class: “Listen to your parents. They’ve lived a long time. They’ve had time to make more mistakes.”

Our text reminds us not to “take care so that we are not (so) tempted.” In other words, learn from the mistakes of others.

The “Preacher” in Ecclesiastes once commented that there is nothing new under the sun.

President Harry Truman, an avid student of history, said that there is nothing new in this world except for the history that you don’t yet know.

We’re not lemmings. Learn from the mistakes, the stumbles and the foibles of others. Don’t be like a group of kids who tempt one another how close they can get to the fire without getting burned. Learn from the mistakes of others.

Third, “*Bear one another’s burdens and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.*”

I’m going to unpack this a little bit.

When Paul referred to *burden* he was talking about a bone crushing, soul crushing load, something that cannot be born alone.

The Creation stories of Genesis remind us that we were not made to go through life as rugged individuals but as a community of faith. **Life is meant to be shared.**

When tragedy strikes words are not nearly as important as being surrounded by others who are willing to share the burden with you. When death intrudes sometimes people stay away because “they don’t know what to say.” Sometimes it’s better to say nothing. But it is never better to stay away. We want someone to share our loss with us.

And joy, one of the loneliest times in life is when you have some really good news and have no one to tell.

We live in an increasingly isolated world. Front porches are almost non-existent—except in the oldest of neighborhoods. Fewer and fewer people know their neighbors. Neighborliness is becoming a lost art. Families are scattered from coast to coast and even around the world. All but a very few of our relationships last only a few years. We are increasingly hesitant to commit ourselves fully because we know that people move in and out of our lives more and more frequently.

I suspect that this increased isolation is what has partly fueled the plethora of “blogs” and on-line journals like Facebook. We *need* to share what is going on in our lives.

We *need* burden-sharers, someone with whom we can share our lives.

Paul wrote that when we share one another’s burdens we are “fulfilling the law of Christ.”

That is an interesting phrase, if you stop and think about it. In the early Christian community “the law of Christ” superseded the Ten Commandments.

When Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” he replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind and soul.” But he didn’t stop there. He went on. “There is a second like unto it; you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

We will look into that passage a little more deeply in a couple of weeks, but for now suffice it to say that Jesus said that it was upon these two things—the love of God and the love of neighbor as we love our self—that all of the Law and the prophets are based.

People said that Jesus did not teach at the Pharisees and other teachers taught. He taught as one who had authority. He taught simply and directly. This stood in stark contrast to everyone else.

Disciples *care*; that means that we are willing to submit ourselves to the law of Jesus. It's quite simple. Love God; love others as you love yourself.

Now, if you take this seriously, you will find that submitting to the law of Jesus can be quite uncomfortable.

The Ten Commandments were simple. They were an act of God's grace telling a people who had been slaves for 300 years how to live into freedom. But because of the human tendency to wiggle and to parse—to quote a former American President testifying before a grand jury, “It depends on what the meaning of the words ‘is’ is” and “It depends on how you define ‘alone’”—the Commandments became an unbearable burden and an end in and of themselves.

Our text really invites each one of us into self-examination. Do we really need to have someone else tell us if a certain thing is wrong? The chances are, if we have to ask someone else if it is okay to do something, we know that we shouldn't probably be doing it in the first place.

I'm sure that most of you have heard the old expression, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Jesus didn't say it; Socrates did at his heresy trial.

Socrates was on trial because he encouraged his students to challenge the accepted way of doing things and to think for themselves. In other words, to use the gray matter that God had placed between their ears. Socrates was sentenced to death but he was given the option of suggesting an alternative punishment. He could have avoided death by commuting his sentence to a life in exile or prison. In a bit of what I think satirical whimsy he suggested that he be rewarded for his service to society, instead. The courts did see the humor, and the rest, as they say is history.

Self-examination used to be an essential Christian spiritual discipline.

In all of Jesus' parables there is an invitation to see ourselves and the world through the eyes of God. There is an invitation to ask ourselves if we are living “Kingdom” lives, and if not, why not.

People who examine their lives, who think about where they've been, how they got here, and where they're going, are much happier people. No one has all the answers. And no one's life is free from trouble and strife. But those who have some sense of where they belong in the universe also have a context for understanding how all the elements of their life fit together.

Examining your life brings about a great deal of freedom. It helps you determine the path you should take. (Karl W. Palachuk, “The Unexamined Life is Not Worth Living”, <http://www.relaxfocussucceed.com/Articles/2003010002.htm>)

In his short lifetime Jesus challenged that status quo. He touched the untouchables, he ate with the outcasts, he forgave those broken by sin. He called his disciples to a new way of life; to a life of God-reflected love.

He knew that if we live self-centered, self-satisfied, provincial lives that we would become like Crabby Appleton—rotten to the core—become spiritually dead.

That is, in part, why he told those who would follow him, who would pick up his cross, submit to his yoke and live under his law, “Those who seek to save their life will lose it, but those who are willing to lose their life for my sake and the gospel will save it.”

If we chose to live life small, a life confined to “I”, “Me” and “Mine” we will spiritually die. But if we live large and generous, returning no one evil for evil, or reviling for reviling, if we forgive as freely as we have been forgiven, if we love without strings attached to our love, we will discover a life that can never die even though our breath may leave us.

Caring for others as Christ cares is truly a matter of life and death. Paul understood this. That is why he wrote: *“Let us not lose heart and grow weary and faint in acting nobly and doing right, for in due time and at the appointed season we shall reap, if we do not loosen and relax our courage and faint.”* (v. 9, Amplified Bible)