

Community: It Starts Here! Bear One Another's Burdens

Galatians 6:1-3

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I'm a huge fan of the Olympics. Throughout the years there have been so many moments that just stir the human spirit. The 1980 Miracle on Ice. Or the 1976 time when tiny Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci scored the first perfect 10 in gymnastics. But perhaps my favorite Olympic memory happened in the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio. During the women's 5000-meter semi-finals two runners – American Abbey D'Augustino and New Zealand's Nikki Hamblin – tripped and fell. What happened next was more stunning than any Olympic victory I've ever seen. Rather than simply getting up and running on, D'Augustino stopped to help Hamblin up. As they began to run together D'Augustino's knee gave out and this time Hamblin stopped and helped her up. They both eventually finished the race, but far behind the rest of the runners.

Like every Olympic athlete, these two women had trained for years for this moment. They had sacrificed more than we can imagine to compete in this race. But rather than pursuing the podium of Olympic glory, they set aside their agendas and pursued the highest of human virtues: love and compassion.

Their story reminds me of other stories. Like a certain Samaritan on a journey who allowed his agenda to be interrupted by another man, beaten and bleeding on the side of the road. Or the story of Jesus, who set aside heaven, took the form of a servant and gave up his life to reveal the depth of God's love for us. There's nothing wrong with pursuing Olympic glory, but the greater glory is pursuing love and compassion by setting aside our agenda and bearing the burdens of others.

We're in a worship series entitled, "Community... It Starts Here." One of the core directions of our life together is IN...through Community, and this series is designed to help us move further and deeper in that direction. How do we, as a faith community, live together in such a way that we embody the love of Jesus for one another? We've explored Jesus' command to **love one another**, and St. Paul's instruction to **encourage one another** in the last two

weeks. And today we're exploring what it means to **bear one another's burdens**. To get into that, let's read together these words from Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 6, verses 1-3:

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

What do we do when someone in our community falls short? Or how about when someone is suffering, struggling with something that is weighing them down? How should we handle that? If we follow the pattern of our culture we'll judge them, gossip about them and shun them. And if they happen to be a public figure we'll smear their reputation all over social media. That's the way of the world. But Paul says that that is not the way of Jesus. Paul says that it is our responsibility to restore that person and to bear their burden with them. The meaning of the Greek word translated "restore" means to set a broken bone. In other words, when someone in this congregation is involved in something that is harmful to them, perhaps something that breaks them, we are called to bring healing.

Now, maybe you're like me and you don't really like being told what you "should" do, at least not without knowing why. Why should we set our agendas aside and come alongside someone who has fallen, someone who has blown it, and help to put them back on the right path? Let me give you three reasons. First, we are one interconnected body. We may look like separate individuals, but the spiritual reality is that **we are one interconnected body**. If a part of your physical body is hurting you don't say, "too bad, so sad." Of course not! You tend to it. You do what's needed to heal it. If you sprain your ankle, you limp...which is really our good leg bearing the burden of our wounded leg. And that's true in the body of Christ, the Church. That's why we bear one another's burdens. We are an interconnected body.

Second, Paul says that this is how we **fulfill Jesus' great commandment**. What is that great commandment? It's this: **love one another as I have loved you**. Jesus once said, *"Come to me all who are wearied and burdened and I will give you rest."* Peter said of Jesus, *"He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right."*

By his wounds you are healed.” When we bear one another’s burdens, we share the load of life with and for one another and help set one another back on the right path. When we do that, we are loving one another as Jesus loved us.

Finally, when we set aside our agendas and bear one another’s burdens, rather than shaming and blaming one another, **we reflect God’s love**. People are hungry for a community that exercises grace. They are looking for a place where it is safe to be broken, to struggle, to question, to blow it and not be rejected and abandoned. There’s something highly attractive about that kind of community. If we deal with broken people in this way, the way that the world doesn’t know, then there’s nothing distinctive or attractive about us as a faith community. But we are called to be different. We are called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to reflect the love of God for the world, by treating one another with respect and love. And when we do, the world takes notice. That’s why no one remembers who won that 5000-meter race at the 2016 Rio Olympics. But everyone remembers D’Augustino and Hamblin. Gold medals may be uncommon, but the kind of love and compassion they showed is even more uncommon.

Paul doesn’t just tell us to bear one another’s burdens. He actually gives us some helpful advice. He says, *“If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.”* Another translation puts it this way, *“If you think you are better than others, when you really aren’t, you are wrong.”* In other words, I think Paul is warning us about thinking that we’re somehow better than a brother or sister who is suffering or struggling with some sinful pattern of behavior. That’s a problem, not only because it isn’t true, but because it makes it nearly impossible for us to restore someone and truly bear their burden. That kind of superior attitude just shames others. Instead, Paul calls us to bear one another’s burdens gently, with humility, knowing that we are every bit as vulnerable as anyone else.

So, let’s make this practical and tactical. How do we bear one another’s burdens in daily life? Here are a few things to consider. First, **notice**. Seek to be aware of those who, metaphorically or perhaps even literally, are lying beaten and bleeding at the side of the road. I confess that I so often race through life so quickly and get so consumed with my own agenda that I miss the subtle and not-so-subtle cues that someone right in front of me is hurting. And if I don’t even notice, I can’t bear their burden. Make a commitment to notice not just what people say, but how they say it. Notice their facial expression, their body language. You’ll soon discover that people all around us are crying out without making a sound.

Second, **pray**. Paul calls “those who live by the Spirit” to bear the burdens of others. And as people of the Spirit, we use the tools of the Spirit. And the most powerful is prayer. Pray not only for the one who is burdened but pray that God can use you to help you to carry that burden. If we’re honest we’ll admit that our “compassion tank” is running on empty for lots of different reasons. In those moments we can pray that God will fill our tank.

Third, **engage**. We can’t carry one another’s burden if we don’t engage with them. So, come alongside them. Listen more than you speak, and when you speak, be encouraging. Ask how you can help. And then follow through and follow up. Follow up with a phone call, an e-mail or a card, just to let them know that you’re thinking of them. Encouragement and kindness are not only healing to the Spirit but help lift the burden of those who are struggling.

If you’re carrying a burden today, please don’t carry it alone. I know it can be hard to ask for help. I know that it can leave us feeling so vulnerable. But allowing the community to come alongside you is as much a gift that you give as it is a gift that you receive. And it brings joy to both the giver and the receiver. So, let someone come alongside you and bear the burden with you. Our prayer team would love to pray with and for you, and our spiritual care team would love to walk the journey toward restoration with you. We can connect with you individually, or we can connect you to a support group or a small group as well. Just call the church office at 952-435-8102 or contact us through our website – popmn.org – and let us know how we can help.

Let’s be honest...this isn’t always who we are as individual followers of Jesus, or collectively as the Church. The Church has wounded and judged and disenfranchised a lot of people over the years. But our past doesn’t need to dictate our future. Given the divisiveness that we’re experiencing as a nation, and the broken relationships that too often litter our lives, Paul is giving us a needed and compelling vision of who we can become through the power of the Spirit. And it’s never been needed more.

Back in the 2016 Olympics, the judges graciously allowed both Abbey D’Augustino and Nikki Hamblin to run in the finals. Neither one earned a medal that year. But for one moment they exemplified what it means to bear one another’s burdens, and inspired millions of others to do the same. You and I may never compete in the Olympics, but we can show the world what it means to be the kind of community God created us to be. Whose burden can you bear this week?