

July 7, 2019

Galatians 6

Prayer: Dear God, We welcome you into this sanctuary this morning. Please open our eyes to your Scripture, and help us to understand its meaning. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Bearing Burdens

About three blocks from Triune is the Southernside community. The community got its name because it grew up *beside* the Southern Railroad station. It's the community where the Greenville Rescue Mission resides.

At the corner of West Washington and Hudson will be the entrance to Greenville's new Unity Park. And marking that corner will be a bronze statue of Lila Mae Brock.

Southernside started out as a thriving black community, and back in the middle of the 20th century, Lila Mae Brock lived there with her family.

But for decades, the city planned to put a highway through the middle of it. Mrs. Brock and her neighbors went to City Hall and fought against it, arguing that it would divide a flourishing community and destroy the sense of

neighborliness. After all, they had seen it happen when six-lane Church Street was built in the middle of Haynie-Sirrine.

Unfortunately, just the threat of a highway through Southernside – perhaps aided by the ills of the 20th century – did that anyway. Drug dealers moved in. Crime became rampant. People threw trash all over the streets.

A day labor pool on West Washington attracted a lot of people. When there was no work, many simply hung out on the corner. Mrs. Brock, who was a lunchroom operator for one of the public schools, began making sandwiches and handing them out to people on the street.

She then founded the welcoming white house known as the Southernside Community Center so she could cook hot meals. In the early years the center was partially funded from her Social Security checks. It remains in operation to this day.

Mrs. Brock also began asking the men she fed to help her clean up the streets. And together, this energetic woman and some of the men began gathering the liquor bottles and hamburger wrappers and discarded mattresses and all the other trash that marred their neighborhood.

Then she decided that the neighborhood's seniors needed better housing. She worked to secure HUD funding, and Brockwood Apartments were built.

Mrs. Brock's husband, in his own quiet way, was much the same. When he died, the family learned that he'd been going over to shave an elderly neighbor for many years without telling anyone.

At some point amid Mrs. Brock's community activism and her trips to City Hall to plead on behalf of her neighbors, she decided that Southernside needed one of its own inside City Hall. That one was her daughter, Lillian Brock Flemming, one of the first black women to graduate from Furman.

Lillian got elected to City Council and for decades now, has represented Southernside and other neighborhoods in city government. In fact, she represents Triune, and you best not say anything bad about Triune in her presence.

Besides being on City Council, Lillian has a good job with the school district and could have moved out of Southernside long ago. But she and her family chose to stay – and be the neighbors her mother and father had been.

I remember visiting her home for a newspaper interview when she was running for mayor. And her entire living room had been turned into a bedroom

for all the nephews and friends of her children whom she and her husband had taken in.

The Brocks and Flemmings have borne their neighbors' burdens.

Bearing our neighbors' burdens. That's the topic of today's Scripture passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Last week, we talked about Paul's insistence on freedom in this same letter. He wrote to the new Christians of Galatia because preachers had come in after him telling them they must be circumcised – or adhere to Jewish law – before they could be real Christians.

Paul exploded over that. He wrote a fiery letter about freedom in Christ and how they were to balance it with love for their neighbor.

Let's turn now to Galatians 6, for his conclusion. **Galatians 6: 1-10.**

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.

²*Bear one another's burdens*, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. ⁴All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. ⁵*For all must carry their own loads.*

⁶ Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

⁷ Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. ⁸If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.

⁹So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. ¹⁰So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Let's pause here for a moment. First, Paul is telling these new Christians to be gentle with each other. If someone sins, let him know gently, lovingly. The

outcome they are to seek is forgiveness. Because tomorrow, the forgiver just might need that forgiveness himself.

And then, Paul writes what I think is the crux of this section: **“Bear one another’s burdens.”**

Bear one another’s burdens.

Paul is specifically addressing the fledgling Christian church. We see that in verse 10, when he says, **“Let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”** These new Christians had many burdens, and the very survival of their community depended upon their ability to support and care for one other.

But then in verse 5, he says, **“... all must carry their own loads.”** Well, which is it? Bear one other’s burdens or each carry his own load?

It’s both/and. It’s Scripture held in tension, as it so often is. Yes, we are to do our best to support ourselves. In other letters, we read that Paul has no use for idleness. But also, yes, we are to help our brother and sister on those occasions when they cannot help themselves.

Today, our Christian community is much larger and stronger than when Paul was writing. But many of our neighborhood communities are at risk.

In the face of drugs and crime, eminent domain and gentrification, neighborhoods like Southernside are threatened. On the other end of the spectrum – in the face of air-conditioning and fences and privacy -- wealthier neighborhoods are threatened.

So bearing one another's burdens is every bit as necessary today as it was in Paul's day, as it was in Lila Mae Brock's day.

As I have mentioned before, when I was growing up, our family got together *at least* once a week with four other families. We grilled out together every Saturday night. We vacationed together. We shared picnics, baseball games, graduations, weddings, lake houses, beach houses, campsites and theme park trips. For the 12 kids in those families, it was like having five moms and five dads.

One day, my little sister came home from first grade, crying, because another girl had picked on her. When one of the other "moms" found out, she asked Lori why she hadn't told her immediately so she could march up to the school and take care of that mean ol' girl.

Lori looked at her very seriously and replied, "I forgot I knowed you."

That became our line, forever after. Whenever one of us would say, “Why didn’t you ask me for help?” we’d reply, “I forgot I knowed you.”

Good friendships can and do exist anywhere. But the church is the place where we really need to foster those friendships, to foster that burden-bearing.

Because it is scriptural.

I remember in the past being rather cynical about one or another church’s theology. I’d think, *Goodness, they are teaching some conservative doctrine over there.*

And then I’d witness a crisis or a death in that church and the outpouring of casseroles and meat trays and jugs of iced tea that made their way to a family. It sounds clichéd and more than a little Southern – but it is an authentic way in which we bear one another’s burdens. When my dad died those other moms were so insistent on helping my mom that she finally let them change the sheets on her bed.

We say, “Can I do anything for you?”

But what we mean is: “Won’t you let me carry that burden for awhile?”

In the second part of this passage, Paul links his practical admonishments to Judgment Day. “... **(Y)ou reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own**

flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we don't give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all...."

Paul is speaking of the final judgment here. And this isn't just a case of him slipping back into Pharisaical mode.

This notion that we will be judged upon our actions is present in other of his letters as well.

He tells the Corinthians: **"... all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil."** (II Cor. 5: 10)

He writes the Thessalonians: **"No one (should) wrong or exploit a brother or sister ... because the Lord is an avenger...."** (I Thess. 4: 6)

And he writes the Romans: God **"will repay according to each one's deeds."** (Romans 2: 6)

In other words, those in verse one who sin and continue to sin, those who are gently rebuked and then continue to sin, are going to finally face God, not us.

There is a limit to what we humans can do when someone stalwartly refuses to behave in Christian brotherhood.

One of our great heartbreaks here is when someone continually comes in drunk or abusive or cursing or combative. We recognize there is probably pain behind it, but we can't keep everyone else safe with that kind of behavior going on. So we put people out of the dining hall.

But it's not us they need to worry about.

“Do not be deceived,” Paul warns. **“God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.”**

God's grace is real and true and merciful. But Paul knows there is always the danger of taking it for granted.

Therefore, he warns that our obedience through our works, through our deeds, through our lifestyles, will ultimately be held up to judgment. There's that tension again.

What we do, how we behave, is fully as important as what we believe.

After Paul finishes with this practical part of the letter, he returns to the theme that has occasioned the epistle in the first place – the fact that the Galatians were listening to preachers who told them to get circumcised. And

Paul has about had it. He's already worked himself into a state a couple of times during this letter, and he's not going to close without getting in a final word.

Let's read his ending: **Galatians 6: 11-18.**

¹¹ See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! ¹²It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised — only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh.

¹⁴May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

¹⁵For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! ¹⁶As for those who will follow this rule — peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

17 From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.

18 May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

This circumcision thing had riled Paul up because he saw it as a threat to the gospel. He saw it as a watering down of Jesus' radical message of grace by forcing followers to "do" something to earn it.

Now he says the people who were trying to force circumcision upon the new Christians in Galatia were doing so only to tally statistics. They were counting cut foreskins just as some churches count professions of faith.

We have seen street ministries crow about how many professions of faith they had during their parking lot crusades, how many people they "saved."

I don't have the heart to tell them the same person saved over their plate of ribs was saved the week before over bacon and eggs.

A close friend is a minister who came to Greenville as a young woman. She cringes when she recalls going to her senior pastor after five years to tell him she'd accomplished everything she set out to do.

And this wise minister told her: “Now it’s time to go deeper.”

Discipleship was not about cut flesh back then. Discipleship is not about tallies in our membership books now.

Discipleship is about bowing our backs to take on the burdens of our neighbors.

After Paul has said all he has to say about how we are to live in this new creation, he finishes with a comment that cracks me up: **“From now on, let no one make trouble for me.”** In other words, *Don’t make come back there. I better not hear about this silliness again.*

Lines like that remind us that Paul was a flesh-and-blood human being who got angry, who got annoyed, who got sarcastic. I love it that God can work through someone like that.

Someone like us.

Amen.