

BEARING OUR BURDENS

1 John 4:7-12; Galatians 6:2-5

First Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, Texas

Dr. Michael A. Roberts June 6, 2010

1 John 4:7-12

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Galatians 6:2-5

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

"Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Today in worship we focus on the ways we care for one another in our congregation.

As a congregation of over 700 members, we have many needs in our church. There are many, many people who struggle with grief, illness, and depression. There are many, many people who face challenges in their marriages, parenting, relationships, and in their careers. As a church, we seek to come alongside and help by providing care for one another. It is my hope today to describe the ways that we engage in caring for one another in this church and to discuss the essential qualities of Christian care-giving.

Before we do that, though, we need to step back and think about why we care for each other. Why do we care in the church? Our motivation for caring is an important part of the care-giving process. More important than people realize.

We care, first of all, because God cares for us. *"We love"*, the first epistle of John says, *"because (God) first loved us"* (4:19). The Christian is conscious of what God has done for us. We realize that God has always loved us, has sought us out, and is merciful towards us. God loved us so much that God was willing to become one of us in the incarnation of Jesus. We see Jesus' example of caring throughout his ministry, especially for those who were often forgotten or

ignored in that society. God loved us so much that God was willing to die for us in the person of Jesus. The scripture says, *"In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins"* (1 John 4:10). When we sense that love, truly, when we sense God's care; we not only want to respond to God with love, we also want to love people as well. This is the call of 1 John: *"Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another"* (1 John 4:11). We care because God cares for us.

We also care because the church is an extended family of mutual responsibility. "Life in the Spirit is not a life of lonely striving, not a life restricted to a zone of privacy; rather, it is a life lived in community. The church, like an extended family of brothers and sisters, is characterized by the interdependence of its members" (Richard Hays *New Interpreter's Bible* XI p. 338). We are all members of the body of Christ, a family with different roles and responsibilities. Families care for one another. When one member has needs, the other family members seek to help that one. Our view of church in this country and in this time is still excessively individualistic, just me and God. Biblically, the church is intended to be a community, a family where individuals support one another. We are to *"rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep"* (Romans 12:15). *"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it"* (1 Corinthians 12:26). We care because the church is a family of mutual responsibility.

We also care because in the church we are called to bear one another's burdens. In Galatians 6:2, we are encouraged to *"bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."*

Burden-bearing entails far more than the practice of mutual admonition here; it also entails the sharing of stresses and sorrows, sharing our time and resources with each other, and all kinds of imaginative ways of serving one another (adapted from Richard Hays *New Interpreter's Bible* XI p. 333).

By bearing each other's burdens, we fulfill the law of Christ. What is that law? Earlier in Galatians, Paul tells us that the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* (Galatians 5:13). Jesus, of course, said essentially the same thing when he spoke of the most important commandment- to love God with our whole being and love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-34). The law of Christ seems to be a reference to the command to love our neighbor. When we help bear each other's burdens then, we are obeying and fulfilling the command to love our neighbor.

To bear each other's burdens "does not merely mean to put up with each other or to tolerate each other, but rather to jointly shoulder each member's burdens. Everybody should put their shoulder under the burdens in which individual members are groaning, whatever those burdens may be. They must be carried jointly" (*Galatians & Ephesians* by William Hendrikson p. 232).

This section also speaks of carrying our own loads. Is this a contradiction- bearing each other's burdens and carrying our own loads? Not really.

There are two different words used in this passage. In verse 2 the burden refers to a very heavy burden. In verse 5, the word "load" refers to a backpack, what each individual is able to carry. Every single one of us must carry our own backpack. God has given each one of us particular abilities and gifts for which we are accountable. God calls each one of us to love God and people. We each have our own work to do, we each have individual accountability before God.

We all carry our own loads of responsibility before God. And we all help bear the very heavy burdens of life. Think about the implication of this verse- there will be times in our lives when our burdens are too much for us to carry. God is telling us that there will be times in our lives when the load is too heavy for us to bear alone. I think of those heavy 100 lb. bags of concrete mix. A very few can whip those on their shoulders but most of us are weighed down by them. And we can't carry them alone.

The burdens we carry are heavy and they are often many. Not only are there times when our burdens are too much for us to carry alone but the second implication is that God never intended for us to carry them alone. That's what it means to be a family- to share the load, to share the lifting. We all have heavy burdens at times and God doesn't intend for us to carry them alone.

We care, then, because God first cared for us. We care because the church is an extended family of mutual responsibility. And we care because we were intended to bear one another's burdens.

This is why we care. But what does it mean to care? What are the most important characteristics of the person who provides care? What are the essential qualities any person who seeks to provide care in the church? As a short-hand way of responding to those questions, open up the Stephen Ministry brochure where there is a diagram of the Caregiver Compass. We all know what a compass does, it guides us on our journey. The Caregiver's Compass lifts up the most essential qualities of any person who provides distinctively Christian care in the church.

At the center is the Chi Rho, the first two letters in the Greek word *Christos*, which means Christ. The Chi which looks like an X and the Rho which looks like a P- have been used as a symbol for Christ. The caregiver is **Christ-centered**- following Christ in serving others, seeking Christ's guidance in their caring, and praying to Christ for those who are hurting.

Compassionate- the caregiver feels or suffers along with another person. They seek to listen and care to help bear the burden of the one who is hurting. They're also passionate about caring ministry, they want to bring Christ's care to a hurting person.

Full of faith- they have faith that God is able and willing to be present in a person's life struggles. A Christian caregiver trusts that God is the Curegiver as Stephen Ministry says, while we are simply the caregiver. A caregiver also shares their faith in ways that the care receiver will welcome.

A Christian caregiver is also **skilled**. We believe in education to help develop those skills. A Stephen Minister here learns about listening, understanding and dealing with feelings, using Christian resources like scripture and prayer, maintaining boundaries and has had specialized training for depression, grief, and in older adult issues.

A Christian caregiver is **trustworthy**. They honor their commitment. They're reliable, they show up, they are faithful, they keep their promises. They are committed to their care receivers for the long haul. They keep all that is said to themselves. We emphasize this greatly with our Stephen Ministers- that they must maintain confidentiality. For this is what it means to be trustworthy.

Christ-centered, compassionate, full of faith, skilled, and trustworthy. These are important qualities or characteristics of all those who care within the life of the church.

Today's focus is on the care ministry of our congregation. We have considered why we care for others and how to care for each other. In our time remaining, I want to describe the ways that we're involved in care ministry in this congregation.

We care, first of all, through member to member caring. This is an informal way of caring but it is one of the most effective. It is our hope that every member in this church would have friends who could provide support for them and help them bear burdens when they need it. It is our hope that every member in this church would be a part and belong to a group in this church so that when a need arises, the group can mobilize to help. It is our hope that every group in this church- circle, Bible study, Sunday School class, committee- sees themselves as an arm of the care ministry of this congregation. That is the ideal. We know the reality is something different. There are members who do not know others, do not belong to a group, and there are groups which do not always take action in caring. But we see the ideal and the importance of that ideal and strive in many ways to make the ideal the reality.

Member to member caring is essential for churches of all sizes. Member to member caring means asking how someone is and waiting for the response, it is making a phone call or dropping food by or babysitting the kids. It means making a commitment to see someone on a regular basis or sit with a loved one so that person can get out of the house for a few hours. Member to member caring is the first line of care ministry in this church.

We also care in our congregation through the ministry of the church staff. All of our staff members provide care. In their respective areas, as many of you have discovered, all of our program and support staff provide a listening ear and support in the caring ministry of this church.

In addition to the broad caring reach of all the staff, we have some staff that focus on care ministry and visitation. In particular, our Parish Nurse Penny Leone who joined the staff in 1997 and Jenny Carswell our Pastoral Care Assistant who joined the staff in 2007, together devote 35 hours per week to the care of our congregation. I am grateful for both of them and know you share my appreciation for their ministries. We care in our congregation through the ministry of the church staff.

Another way we care in this church is **through the Care Team**. The Care Team is an intentional way of caring for our members and extended family who are not able to come to worship. The Care Team in this church includes a dozen individuals who make a commitment to visit people on a monthly basis. The Care Team receives training once a year. This is the perfect ministry for someone with caring gifts and yet because of time or interest does not want to be involved in other care ministries. The Care Team is always looking for people to help and is overseen by the Service Committee of the Diaconate and led by our Parish Nurse, Penny Leone.

Stephen Ministry is yet another way we're involved in care ministry in this church. Our involvement began in 1999, eleven years ago. Stephen Ministry is an interdenominational ministry begun in 1978 to provide quality training and a system of caring by and for lay people in churches. The Stephen Ministry is overseen by the Stephen Leaders who have specialized training and a call to caring ministry. In our church these Stephen Leaders are Jenny Carswell, Debby Jones, Penny Leone, Melissa Pilcher, and Karen Rayburn. The Stephen Leaders organize, coordinate, teach, and lead the Stephen Ministry program in our church.

Each Stephen Minister undergoes 50 plus hours of intensive training in care ministry including reading, classes, and practice sessions. After commissioning, the Stephen Ministers are assigned to a care-receiver in our church who has special needs at this time in their life. The commitment is to meet for one hour with the care-receiver every week. The Stephen Minister is especially trained to help bear the burdens and be constructively helpful in the person's life. The Stephen Minister makes a two year commitment and during this time they engage in continuing education and small group peer supervision throughout the course of their caring ministry.

The congregation's role in Stephen Ministry is to let us know when you know of a need in our church and most importantly, when you sense in your own life, the need for a Christian friend to come along side to provide care and support, please do not hesitate to let one of your Stephen Leaders know.

We are called to bear one another's burdens. The challenge from that verse is two-fold. One is for those of us who have heavy burdens. Is someone helping you carry the load? Being a member of the church means you will allow others to serve you, you will allow others at times to care for you. If your load is heavy, you need help. Find a friend, a pastor or staff member, a fellow member, a support group, a Stephen Minister, a counselor, a medical professional. Open up and allow someone to help you carry the load and bear the burden.

The second challenge is to all of us- whose burden are you helping to bear? This is the ministry of all Christian believers. There are times in our lives when we need help and times when we need to provide the help. There are many burdens in this church, among your fellow members. Which burdens are you helping to bear?

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

O God of Comfort, you are the true Caregiver. You have cared for us from the very beginning of time. You have sent your Son Jesus Christ to bring healing and redemption. You have equipped many within the church to care for others. We are grateful for all you have done to bring meaning and care into our lives.

We call upon you to help us bear the burdens that weigh us down in our lives. We are mindful today of those who are ill, those struggling with loss, those who are confused about where to go next in their lives. These are burdens, Dear Jesus, and there are many more.

We pray that you would provide your nurturing and sustaining presence. Give your guidance and wisdom for important decisions to be made. Call a friend to come along side to provide support when we need it. Thank you, Loving God, for all those moments, week after week, day after day in this church when true caring takes place and someone feels supported. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.