

"DEALING WITH LIFE'S BURDENS?"
November 4, 1990

TEXT: Galatians 6:5 "For each man will have to bear his own load."

Between services this morning, it will be my privilege to talk to the ninth grade covenant class. That is one of the reasons we shifted that class from nine o'clock to ten: so they could have more access to the ministers. I do not know whether they consider that an advantage, but the ministers do. This morning I will be telling them about parables, those wonderful little stories Jesus told to help people understand and remember his teachings.

But Jesus did not invent the parable. We find them in the Old Testament, too --most notably in Nathan's story of the one little ewe lamb. (II Samuel 12:1-4) And we know that the rabbis of Jesus time often made use of them. So, whether Biblical or not, any story that is told in order to make a point can be legitimately considered a parable.

With that definition in mind, one of my favorite parables is the story of a woman who was telling her pastor about her many troubles. Trying to encourage her, the minister said, "Yes, but you know, Sister, God never sends us more than we can bear." "I know," she replied, "but sometimes I wish he didn't have such a high opinion of me."

I am sure most of us have felt that way from time to time. Problems, and troubles, stresses and frustrations --sometimes little in themselves-- sometimes have a way of piling up until we wonder how we can possibly stand them. In some respects it has always been that way, but the pressures of life today may be greater than ever. W. H. Auden called this the "Age of Anxiety"; Albert Camus speaks of it as the "Century of Fear." And psychologists have coined a new term for the mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion many people feel today. They call it "burnout."

Whether or not life creates more anxiety and frustration today than it did in earlier times is a question I will leave to others. My concern is to share what the Christian Gospel has to say to those whose lives are twisted and squeezed by stress and frustration. To that end I offer this verse from this morning's scripture: "For each man will have to bear his own load." (Galatians 6:5)

I realize that those words might not sound very helpful at first, but there is more to them than meets the eye --or in this

case-- the ear. Each of us has to bear his or her own load. but let us make sure it is a real load, for sometimes it is not. Mark Twain once said, "I am an old man and have know a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."

And who of us has not worried and fretted about something that never happened? Very often it is the unnecessary worries that make the difference between a load we can carry and one we can not. That is why Jesus said, ". . . do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day." (Matthew 6:34)

When I was teaching history in college. I always gave my exams during the last class session of the week, graded them over the weekend, and returned them on the first session of the next week. I remembered how eager I had always been to find out how I had done.

And almost always some student --usually one of the better ones-- would come in and say, "I just know I flunked that exam. I was miserable all week-end thinking about it." And I would check my gradebook and say. "Well I have you down here for a B+. but I can change it to an F if that is what you think you deserve." That student wasted a whole weekend worrying about an F that was really a B+. We all have to bear our own load, but we do not have to carry loads that do not even exist.

And let us also make sure that it is really our load. One of the first things a counselor does when clients bring up problems is to help the client determine who really owns the problem. Very often we are stressed and frustrated by problems which really belong to our children, or to our friends, or to who knows whom. But the only problems we can do anything about are the ones that belong to us.

That is one of the hardest lessons a parent has to learn. We want so much to spare our children the mistakes we have made, but we can not. We can offer advice, but you know how much attention they usually pay to that. We can establish rules. but rules sometimes just make children more eager to taste forbidden fruit. We can read them the riot act, but how much attention did we ever pay when our parents did that to us?

In the end, about the only helpful thing we can do is to provide a good example, a loving home, and an attitude of trust. That will not always prevent our children from making mistakes, but it may help them as they deal with the mistakes they have made. Not because we lecture them ad nauseam, but because we show them that we care. Knowing someone cares has a way of helping us get in touch with strengths we never knew we had.

So, first, make sure it is a real load, not an imaginary one. Then, make sure it is really your load. If it is, then bear it.

But how you bear it depends on the kind of a load it is. Except for the one that Jesus taught, there is probably no better known nor more oft-repeated prayer than the Serenity Prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr: "God grant me serenity to accept the things I can not change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

If it is a real load, and if it really is yours, then ask yourself, is it something I can change or not? If it is not, then you will just have to put up with it. Even a spiritual giant like Paul had to learn that. In II Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 7, he writes, ". . . to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated."

Life has a way of doing that sometimes. And, like the rest of us, Paul did not like it. So --again in Paul's own words-- "Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me. . . ." Perhaps he pointed out that his debility was getting in the way of his ministry. Perhaps he felt sorry for himself and said, "Look at all I am doing for You, God. Can't You just grant me this one little favor?" Perhaps he got angry and said, "All right, God, if that's the way You want it, I've had it. I can't do the things You want me to in all this pain."

But somewhere along the line he learned a very hard lesson. God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you. for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) Sometimes we can not avoid the load; sometimes we can not even change it; sometimes all we can do with a load is carry it.

But we do not have to carry it forever. One of the brilliant insights of Alcoholics Anonymous is their slogan, "One Day at a Time." We do not have to carry our loads forever. Just one day at a time. Or one hour at a time. Or just a few minutes at a time if that is all we can handle. Anyone can carry a load for a few minutes. It is when we try to carry today's load, and tomorrow's, and next week's and next month's all at the same time that the burden becomes too much for us.

When we learn to do that and to trust in God's Grace, a strange thing happens. The load we thought so hard to bear somehow becomes easier. Thus, St. Paul writes, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10) "God grant me the serenity to accept things I can not change"

But Niebuhr's prayer does not stop there. It also asks for "courage to change things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." Sometimes a load is not meant to be carried; it is meant to be dealt with. And putting up with something we are able to change is not brave: it is just plain foolish.

Of course, we do not have to change it all at once. Sometimes that is what makes a problem seem unbearable. We look at the whole problem and think it is too much to handle. But there is a simple way to deal with that. Do not even try to do everything at once.

Break your problem down to its component parts. Do not try to clean the whole closet, for instance. Just clean up the stuff on the floor. Leave the shelves and the clothing rods for another time. But, before you quit, write down on a piece of paper when you are going to take that next step.

Do not try to write the whole term paper at one sitting. Just choose the subject or write the initial outline. That is the way I wrote my three hundred fifty page doctoral dissertation: first the subject; then the outline; then the first draft, one chapter at a time; and finally the finished copy for the library. Fortunately for me, each step had its own deadline, and I just kept meeting one deadline after another until it was finished. If I had allowed myself to think about the whole three hundred fifty pages, that might well have overwhelmed me.

Each one has to bear his or her own load, but it is not as hard as it may sound. First, make sure it is a real load and not a figment of your imagination. Second, make sure it is really your load and not someone else's. Third, determine whether it is something you can change or not. If you can not change it, carry it --one day at a time, always remembering that God's grace is sufficient for us. If you can change it, do so. A little bit at a time perhaps, but change it. "And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart." (Galatians 6:9)