

“Easing Burdens”
November 2, 2008

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13
Matthew 23:1-8, 11-12

In this morning’s readings, both Paul and Jesus are concerned about burdens. They’re concerned about the burdens people may have to bear as they try to hear and live the good news of God’s presence, grace, and forgiveness.

Paul is reminding the church in Thessalonica that he, Silvanus, and Timothy had tried *not* to burden the community while the trio worked and prayed and preached among them. As he did so often, Paul is urging those early Christians to trust him and his message partly because of his “pure, upright, blameless,” and *burden-less* conduct among them, while, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is warning his followers *not* to trust those who require of others what they do not require of themselves. Jesus is warning his disciples away from turning what can be the liberating, joyful discovery of a life of faith and faithfulness into a struggle filled with hoops to jump through, requirements to meet, tests to pass, and burdens to bear. Jesus is emphatically teaching his followers not to place burdens on anyone who’s seeking to walk the path of love, service, and humility.

So, at one end of the spectrum of how to share one’s faith, how to share the good news of a God who loves the forsaken, guides the lost back home, and forgives the seemingly unforgivable, we have Paul’s example – or at least his *perception* of his example – and, at the other end, we have Jesus’ description of the scribes and Pharisees. We have Paul’s attempts to avoid burdening anyone and, instead, to treat the Thessalonians tenderly, with guidance and encouragement. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the actions of Jesus’ opponents, the do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do folks who offer obstacles, not encouragement, to others who are seeking God.

It’s an important spectrum for any congregation and, indeed, any person of faith, to keep in mind. Does this church, do you, do I, ease or create burdens for our brothers and sisters who are looking for a sense of the holy, a community of faith, or simply a place to rest and be cared for? Where does this congregation fall on the spectrum of burdening or not burdening others when they come here to see if they can find what they need, if they can find what they’re looking for?

When someone appears in this sanctuary for the first or third or fifth time, which approach do you take – Paul’s tender, no-burden way or the Pharisees’ way of obstacles and obstructions? Is this a church that remembers, in everything it says and does, that it is called, always and forever, to welcome the stranger? Do you follow Paul in working night and day (literally or metaphorically) to ease the burden of anyone who might be seeking what God is offering through this congregation? Do you? *Is* this congregation faithful to God’s call to welcome the stranger, the lost, the lonely, the hungry?

If you’ve been doing what I’ve been urging you to do – if you’ve been sharing with one another your life stories and your stories of how you came to be at the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC – your answers to my questions this morning probably include, “Yes, this congregation welcomes the stranger, and, no, it doesn’t place heavy burdens on those who come here seeking a home,” but your answers may also include something else. If you listen to one another’s stories of coming to FCC, you will

hear about warm welcomes and genuine hospitality, *and*, my brothers and sisters, you'll hear about beginnings that were not quite so smooth, not quite so welcoming, not quite so burden-free.

This morning, the Spirit has thrown down the gauntlet, through the Revised Common Lectionary, challenging this church to be honest about the burdens it can sometimes place on people who may be seeking what God is offering through this congregation.

That Spirit-thrown gauntlet is filled with questions for this church, for you and for me. First question: The moment you walk into this sanctuary, are you looking for your friends, the people you already know, or are you looking for anyone who might be new to this church or simply new to you? Next question: As we worship, do you, do *I*, stay attentive to what this time and place might be like for someone unfamiliar with this church or with any church? Are you ready to help someone with a hymnal or to share your bulletin during the Call to Worship or the Lord's Prayer? At the end of worship, do you offer your hands to the people on your left and on your right and let *them* decide whether to join this congregation's closing ritual, or do you simply grab those hands whether their "owners" want them to be taken or not?

And after the service ends with hand-holding and Shalom-ing? Do you focus on someone you already know or on someone you've seen before but don't yet know, or do you focus on someone who's new to you? (If you're afraid of introducing yourself to someone you've actually met before or someone who's been a member of this congregation longer than you have, here's a helpful hint, thanks to the Rev. Paul Nickerson: try starting with, "Hi, my name's _____. I'm not sure if we've met before.")

The Spirit is also asking if this church places on newcomers the burden of figuring out where we gather for fellowship after the worship service. If this were your first time here – if this *is* your first time here – would you have any idea what or where Burlingame Hall is? Think about someone still new to this congregation and its worship and fellowship ways – if that person actually makes it to Burlingame Hall for food and conversation, will he or she end up standing or sitting alone, while church members chat with each other?

The Spirit of the God of extravagant welcome is also asking deeper questions, questions that are not simply about how someone is welcomed here. The Spirit is asking questions about how much of yourself you share. The Spirit is asking whether you *risk* sharing who you are with the newcomer or the stranger and whether, by risking yourself, you ease someone else's burden.

Do you have the words to describe why you do this very counter-cultural thing of coming to a church, of all places, on a Sunday morning, when there are so many other things you could be doing? And if you have the words, do you *speak* them? Or do you instead place the burden on the newcomer, the stranger, your family or your friends, to figure out why you or anyone would gather here on a Sunday morning? Do you place the burden on those who are not yet here to try to discover, all on their own, what gifts, grace, and blessing are possible in this congregation, or do you talk about what *you* have found here?

Do you place the burden on the gay men and lesbians you may know to investigate whether this church is a place they will be condemned as sinful, diseased, disordered, or a threat to families? Or do you *remove* that burden by explaining that this

is an Open and Affirming church, which specifically means it welcomes and celebrates all of God's people without regard to sexual orientation?

In your relationships with people who've been wounded by churches in which questions were blasphemous and doubts were condemned, do you place the burden on them to find out for themselves that there are congregations in which questions are asked and doubts are embraced? Or do you *ease* their burdens by letting them know that this church welcomes questions and considers doubts an integral part of faith?

Do you share your faith, or do you keep it an intensely private thing, never telling someone else how you make sense of a world filled with beauty and brokenness, joy and pain, birth and death? Do you place the burden on the people who might need to hear about your faith to muster their courage, violate that sense of privacy, and ask you about your faith, your religion, your spiritual journey? Or do you ease their burden by talking about how your faith guides and nurtures you?

* * * *

In the months ahead, this congregation will be grappling with these and other questions that take us into the heart of what it means to be a gathered people of God. With support and resources from our conference, we'll have a chance to deepen our sense of who we are and how we're called to share that in a way that eases burdens. In prayer and conversation and work and play, we'll have the chance to come to a greater understanding of how we are called to be the body of Christ in this time and place, how we can love with a heart that knows no bounds, see with eyes that behold the beauty of God in everyone, and serve with hands that are both strong and gentle. We will be graced with Spirit that says, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

In the months and years ahead, we will also explore the answers to the question, "Why does any of this matter?" We'll find many answers to the question, "Why do we need to welcome strangers, ease their burdens, and share the story and stories of our faith?"

For now, though, I want to offer *one* answer to the questions, "Why does any of this matter?" It's an answer I encountered not long after I experienced a call to ministry, and it's an answer that has repeatedly eased my burdens when I've started to wonder why in the world I'm doing what I'm doing. This answer comes from a poem by Samuel Shoemaker:

I stand by the door.
The door is the most important door in the world --
It is the door through which people walk when they find God.
And all that so many ever find
Is only the wall where a door ought to be.
They creep along the wall like blind people,
With outstretched, groping hands.
Feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door,
Yet they never find it ...
So I stand by the door.

The most tremendous thing in the world
Is for people to find that door – the door to God.

The most important thing anyone can do
Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands,
And put it on the latch – the latch that only clicks
And opens to that person’s own touch.
People die outside that door, as starving beggars die
On cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter –
Die for want of what is within their grasp.
They live on the other side of it – live because they have not found it.
Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,
And open it, and walk in, and find God ...
So I stand by the door.

This congregation has been called into being to help people find the unique door latch that opens the door, the pathway into the heart of God. You and I have been called into this congregation to help one another find and turn that latch. And we are called to stand by that door, telling people what we’ve found, telling people there is a latch that will work for them, and easing their burdens as they reach out for it.

It is no exaggeration to say that people die outside that door, unaware of a God who beckons them into a life of love, grace, and healing. People die the death of the body, and they die the death of the soul, unaware that the Holy One creates places like this congregation, places that work to remove the heavy burdens of heartbreak, loneliness, injustice, and despair.

This congregation has been and is called to be a burden-lifting community. For all the ways we have not yet responded to God’s call, let us pray, “Please show us the way.” And for all the ways we have responded, let us say, “Thanks be to God!”

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
November 2, 2008