

*A Burden, or a Privilege?*

I must confess that when I first sat down with our scripture lessons for today, I had no idea what to do with them, since they seemed to have very little if anything in common. We've got the story of the Israelites crossing over the Jordan River and finally arriving in the Promised Land. We've got Paul writing to the Christians in Thessalonica about his fond memories of an earlier stay among them. And we've got Jesus harshly condemning the conduct of the scribes and Pharisees, a very common occurrence in the Gospel of Matthew. Each was an interesting passage in itself, but any theme common to all three of them was far from obvious to me.

But as often happens, after sitting with these texts for a while, some possibilities began to take shape in my mind, one in particular. I noticed that all three of the texts mention the bearing of burdens, either physically or metaphorically. In the Old Testament lesson, it's the priests of Israel who are literally holding up the Ark of Covenant, no small object, while the people cross over the Jordan on dry land. In our Epistle, it's the apostle Paul talking about having worked night and day in order to keep from being a burden on the Christians in Thessalonica while he was working there. And finally, in our Gospel, Jesus is complaining quite bitterly about the burdens that the scribes and the Pharisees had imposed on people, even claiming that the way they conducted themselves had itself become yet another burden borne by the people whom they claimed to be serving.

The more I reflected on these passages as the week went on, the more it struck me that there's a fundamental issue at work in all these passages, that being the question whether one tries to live one's life in such a way as to help bear the burdens of others, or in such a way as to add to those burdens, or even to be that burden ourselves. Now presumably for those who aspire to be followers of Jesus Christ, the answer to that question is pretty obvious. So obvious that I really can't imagine anyone setting out with the intention of becoming a burden on someone else. Yet it clearly happens, so the question is why? How exactly do we become a burden on others, particularly when we may well have started out trying to do the exact opposite, wanting to help lift the burdens of others?

I'd like to take a closer look at these texts with that question in mind, and in particular, take a closer look at Paul's comments in our epistle, and at Jesus' heated diatribe against the Pharisees in his day in our gospel, which may also be Matthew's diatribe against leaders in the early Church. Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul refers to something that was his custom everywhere he went throughout the course of his ministry, which is that he did not expect the local Christians where he was working to support him, that is, didn't expect them to put him up or feed him. Instead, he and those who had come with him worked to support themselves. They were—we

learn from the Book of Acts—tent-makers, which is why to this day, pastors who minister to a church but also hold down a day job are often called “tentmakers.”

Astonishingly, Paul was often criticized for this practice by other Christians, particularly other Christian missionaries who clearly *did* expect local Christians to support them. They seemed to think the fact that Paul did not do so meant that he apparently didn’t trust God to provide for him, and if he didn’t trust God, then he certainly must not be a real apostle. Not surprisingly, Paul would have none of that, and claimed that he supported himself pure and simply so that he wouldn’t be an added burden on the Christians wherever he was working. Not that he ever called the fact of his having to do so, his having to work to support himself, something he considered to be a burden. No, to the extent that Paul had to take on extra work to support himself, or even those times when he had to endure persecution in order to proclaim the gospel, he described it merely as his sharing in the sufferings of Christ, a sharing that Paul pointedly never described as a burden, but only as a privilege.

One of the reasons for Paul’s actions, by which I mean both his insistence on working to support himself, and his refusal to consider that in any way a burden, is that he shared Jesus’ view of all too many of the religious leaders of his day, too many of whom did not—as Jesus says—“practice what they preach.” While demanding from others a high level of righteousness, they did not exhibit such a high level in their own lives. Even worse, many of them had clearly developed a taste for special privileges, privileges of honor and rank, shall we say, that in practice only added to the burden their kind of religion imposed on others.

Here in Matthew, Jesus was talking about the scribes and Pharisees in his own day. What is clear from Paul’s letters is that later on he felt exactly the same way about all too many of the Christian missionaries in his own day, missionaries—in Corinth he mockingly called them “super-Apostles”—who would come to a town and expect the Christians there to support them indefinitely, while claiming for themselves all the privileges they felt were due to someone of their position, all the while bad mouthing Paul because he didn’t. The fact that there were Christians—even some considered to be apostles—who within a generation of Jesus’ death could conduct themselves in this fashion, could claim for themselves privileges of rank that Jesus would *never* have claimed for himself, shows you just how easy it is to fall into this trap, this trap of claiming for yourself privileges that only add to the burdens of others, more concerned with exalting yourself than lifting up those around you.

The fact is serving others can be hard work, and it takes time, time that we could certainly be doing something else. There’s a whole lot of places I could have been yesterday morning at 8:30 than the corner of N. 43rd & Westminster with our Habitat volunteers. But lifting the burdens of others means taking on some of those burdens ourselves, at least taking on what others would think of as burdens. The problem is when we start thinking of them as burdens, because the moment they become burdens to us, then we begin to think that somebody owes us something, and the moment we start thinking that way is the moment we start claiming privileges for

ourselves, privileges that almost inevitably become a burden on someone else. That's the problem Jesus had with the Pharisees, and it's the same problem Paul had with some of his own colleagues. The only way not to fall into that trap ourselves—and I know very few ministers that haven't fallen into this trap—is to never think of what we do for others as a burden, but always as a privilege.

Our mission as a church, as the followers of Jesus Christ, is to lift the burdens of others, to bring joy where before there was sadness, to bring hope where before there was only despair. Doing that is not easy. It takes a lot of work to do that, a lot of work that someone has to do. It takes a lot of time to do that, time that someone has to take. And yes, it takes a lot of money to do that, money that someone has to give. For some people, all that can be a burden, a burden that if you're not careful you can grow to resent, and resent so much that you may begin to think that someone owes you something, because you're special. But in the church there's only one person that's special, and that's Jesus Christ. And for a follower of Jesus Christ, sharing in his work is never a burden to be resented. It's a privilege for which we should be grateful.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,  
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*