



May 3, 2020
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Elevate Others: Empathy

Galatians 6:2

My wife Cyndi and I were over at the coast a few years back. We went for a hike and came to a flooded area. I had on my waterproof boots on; Cyndi did not. In fact, she had orthotics in her shoes that could not get wet. So, gallantly...romantically....I leaned down ...swept her up into my arms...and began to carry her across that pool...until my boot got sucked down into the muck, I began to stumble... and dropped Cyndi right into the water, orthotics and all! It wasn't as gallant...or as romantic...as I had intended it to be!

This morning, we are going to talk about bearing one another's burdens. Cyndi will tell you that I wasn't as good at that as I thought I was. And this COVID crisis has proven that I'm STILL not as good at it as I want to be. Maybe ! that's true for you, too.

So...welcome to worship! And a special warm welcome to those joining us for our inaugural, online classic service. Pastor Ellis and Gunnar Tesdahl felt like this was the essential next step for us as a virtual church...and that their team was up to the task. So, if your musical language runs a little more classical, I hope this option blesses you. Maybe you can even give a shout out in the comment section to Ellis, Gunnar and their incredible team! They are doing a great job!

"Chapel Hill exists to exalt Jesus, elevate others and launch disciple-makers." That's our new mission statement and we felt now would be a good time to focus on part two: Elevate others. In a season when it's easy to focus on ourselves; to hide and hoard and hunker... we do well to remember what the Bible says about elevating and lifting and encouraging ...other people.

Two weeks ago we started with the Golden Rule; elevating others with the love of Christ. Last week, Pastor Ellis called us to the humility of Christ; we cannot elevate others when we are focused on elevating ourselves.

Love and humility; two essential ingredients for elevating others. This morning, a third: empathy. Empathy is NOT sympathy. Sympathy is having pity or compassion for someone's misfortune. Pity and compassion are wonderful emotions...certainly better than cruelty or indifference. But we can feel those emotions from a distance! We can be sympathetic... and aloof. Empathy, on the other hand, enters into a person's experience; moves toward them: walks in their shoes. Empathy is compassion...in action.

The other day, our next-door neighbors invited us for a time of fellowship on her deck. But as she seated us...six feet apart... she said, "This is not social distancing! I don't like that term! It sounds like you're pushing someone away. This is 'distantly-social.' 'Distantly-social' says that, even though we can't be near...we can still be close." I LIKE that!

Empathy means moving toward a person in need; putting your compassion into action. THAT's how we elevate others. And our text comes from Paul's letter to the Galatians. 5:25 ff.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

To put this in context, Paul has JUST written about the fruit of the Spirit: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." That's what a Spirit-filled life produces. And by the way, the word "fruit" is singular; this whole list... is one fruit! It's not like going to the spiritual produce section and saying, "I think I'll grab some joy and peace...but I'm not in the mood for gentleness or self-control today." Nope...it all goes together. If the Holy Spirit lives inside you, all of this will be on display!

Then... Paul summarizes in this wonderful way: "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit." That phrase "in step" means "follow your leader!" My dad served in the Air Force during the Korean War. He was a Drill Instructor; the guy who whipped new recruits into shape. Once in a while my sister and I would talk Dad into doing his drill instructor voice for us. "Eft...eft...eft, aida...eft, hight, eft." We loved that...but it was like Dad was speaking in tongues. Eft? Aida? Hight? What do these unintelligible words mean, anyway?

But somehow, the recruits figured it out and soon, they were marching in step, following their leader. Paul says that if we CLAIM to have the Spirit of Jesus living in us...we ought to stay in step with the Spirit. And part of what that means is we ought to treat others the way Jesus did.

And it is here that we realize that Paul is a little grouchy. In fact, Galatians IS Paul's grumpiest letter. It is the only letter where he doesn't start out by saying SOMETHING nice about his readers. Every other letter starts with some sort of encouragement before he dives into his instruction or correction. But not Galatians. Paul is ticked at the Galatians and, reading between the lines, you discover why. They've turned into a bunch of legalists! They've turned the gospel of Jesus...the gospel of grace...into Moralism. "You gotta behave a certain way in order to be a true Christian." So said the spiritual elites in Galatia.

But Paul spends the entire letter saying, "Listen, dummies...you've got it backwards. When you become a Christian...when Jesus forgives and fills you...THEN you begin to change, not before. You don't earn God's love by being good. God already loves you. It is God who does your spiritual makeover... from the inside out."

That's why Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit. You don't TRY to produce fruit. I lived in Yakima; we were surrounded by apple orchards. I never walked out of my house and heard a single apple tree straining to make an apple. If you're an apple tree, that is what you do! You make apples. And if you are a spirit-filled Christian, you produce spiritual fruit!

But this group of hyper-spiritual leaders in the Galatian church were teaching something else. That you had to behave yourself in order to become a Christian. And then they set themselves

up as spiritual judges...whose job it was to catch people doing wrong...and pounce on them when they did. They were arrogant...they took delight in pick, pick, picking at the sins of others...provoking them.... all in the name of righteousness.

Does that sound familiar? Doesn't it sound like the Pharisees? The spiritual leaders who were in a constant battle with Jesus? It was not the sinners...the broken people... that Jesus had a problem with. It was the self-righteous, snooty religious snobs who looked down their noses at the unwashed masses...THEY were the ones Jesus had trouble with.

And Galatia had their own group of Christian Pharisees; super-religious troublemakers. Constantly on the lookout for rule-breakers. And Paul says, "Stop it! Stop treating broken, burdened, struggling people that way. Stop provoking them." And then he gives them a different way... the way of Jesus:

"Brothers, "...if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness." The word "caught" suggests the idea of getting your feet wrapped up in a net and tripping. Paul says, any time someone gets tripped up morally or spiritually...your job is to restore them. And restore them in a spirit of gentleness. Isn't that sweet? You are not to provoke or poke. You are not to lift up your nose and condemn. You are to restore them.

And then...he sums it all up this way. "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." That word "burdens" means an excessive load; one that is weighing you down; one you were never intended to carry. Last week I got a half-yard of gravel in the back of my pickup...and I still haven't unloaded it. My pickup is pretty gutless...and so, when I'm climbing the streets out of downtown Gig Harbor... I can almost hear it screaming at me: "Mark...will you PLEASE shovel that gravel out! This is too much for me to carry!"

"Bear one another's burdens" Paul says, "and so fulfill the law of Christ." You remember the law of Christ. That law that said, "Love your neighbor as yourself?" That law that said, "Love one another as I have loved you?" Well...when you find your brother struggling...when you find your sister weighed down with sin or guilt or shame or any other burden... take on some of that load. Help them bear that burden."

And by the way, don't be cocky about it. "Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted." When we get up on our spiritual high horses while we are "helping" someone else, it is too easy for US to get bucked right off...if we aren't careful. "There but by the grace of God go I." We think our job is to pull others out of the slimy pit...when actually, we are right down there with them. We are in this together!

That's empathy! That's entering into their experience...into their anxiety...into their suffering... into whatever is weighing them down...and saying, "Here...let me help carry that load. Because it is what Jesus has done for me.

AND...because it's only a matter of time before I'll need YOUR help...your gentleness...your mercy...YOUR empathy." Bear one another's burdens....did you see that? **What goes around, comes around...in the spiritual world, too!** There will be a time when YOU trip and fall...when YOU are weighed down with guilt or anxiety or fear or need. It is only a matter of time before every one of us needs the burden-lifting support of someone else.

And if the Corona epidemic has reminded us of anything, it is that! Many people are carrying enormous burdens...and they need some relief. And Chapel Hill...this is when you are at your best. Empathetic followers of Jesus easing the burdens of discouraged, frightened people. We have all kinds of stories to tell!

-This shutdown has been tough for Celebrate Recovery. If you are fighting addiction...and suddenly cannot meet with the group that is helping YOU bear that burden... devastating! But we now have Virtual CR with over 70 people participating in it. And we have 20 lay counselors available on-line to bear the burdens of their brothers and sisters. And through Zoom, our Cancer Care and Grief Share groups are continuing THEIR essential missions without interruption. We are elevating others.

- Linda Brewer has a passion for the homeless. But the lockdown has limited her ability to gather food and clothes for these people. So she put out a call to her Chapel Hill family. If you could donate anything to help the homeless, meet at the Chapel Hill parking lot, Row A at 3:00 p.m. on Friday afternoon. She showed up, not knowing what to expect... and watched as car after car after car arrived with gifts of food. Here's what HER car looked like in the end. We are elevating others.

Then there were two Chapel Hill girls, Abi and Hadiyah Hallam who went to a local Family Shelter to bake cookies for the children of families who cannot leave their rooms. BTW, our girls wanted to point out that they kept the cookies socially distant on the pan! Elevating others. This is burden-lifting in real time!

But these aren't the ONLY Chapel Hill folks stretching their empathy muscles. Your pastor is, too! I've had a lot to learn about empathy during this crisis. My problem is I tend to be Cheerleader-in-Chief. In part, because that's the way I'm wired. I lead well in crisis. In part because that's my JOB! A pastor is SUPPOSED to help his flock believe in a future that they do not yet see! In part because I have not struggled as others have. I haven't lost anyone to COVID; I haven't lost my job (...yet ☺), I don't have kids at home to educate and entertain; I like my wife so hanging out with her more is fun. AND...because I really do believe that everything is going to be all right! God is in control and he will bring us through this.

But I came to realize that my rah-rah attitude is not always helpful. Proverbs 25:20 says this: "Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is likevinegar on soda." THIS is vinegar...this is soda...and THIS is what happens when you put the two together. It hisses like a mad snake. I came to understand that my cheerleading was hissing some people off.

So...I dialed it back. In fact, last week, someone said, "I don't hear you saying the word 'hope' as much." I replied, "Well, you didn't read my blog recently; last week was devoted to 'hope.'" But I AM being more careful about what I say...because I realize that I needed greater empathy for those who are struggling in this time....and my positive attitude wasn't always helpful."

So...I have some growing to do in this area of empathy. It's not that I'm not hopeful. I am. It's not that I don't believe we will get through this just fine. I do. It's not that I've stopped believing we will be better church because of this. We will. And it's not that I don't have complete confidence that Jesus is still on the throne. I absolutely do. Part of my call as Pastor IS to be Cheerleader-in Chief...and I'm happy to be that.

But I've come to realize that I FIRST must enter into the pain and fears and uncertainties of my flock...before I can lead them to a place of hope. Otherwise, I just hiss people off. SO...as always... this sermon is for me before it is for you.

“Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ!”