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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 July 9, 2017
 Text: Galatians 6:2, (Psalm 34:15-22)

Bear One Another's Burdens

Introduction to Scripture

Our second reading is from Paul's letter to the Galatians. In the letter Paul argues passionately for Christian liberty, liberty rooted in justification by faith and not by the Law. This freedom, he warns, should not be an opportunity for self-indulgence. Rather, through love, he says, "become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Gal. 5:13-14)

At the end of the letter Paul provides specific instructions for living in loving, Christian community. Our text comes from that section and is a single verse. Listen again for God's word. *Galatians 6:2*: "Bear one another's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Sermon

In America, we live with a myth and a corollary, viz. The Myth of Independence and its corollary, The Pressure to Be Strong. We are bottle fed on cowboys and superheroes. We idolize the rugged individualist and the self-sufficient man or woman. We grow up hearing "when the going gets tough, the tough get going," "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," and "every person for himself or herself." We like being in control and if we're not, we work awfully hard at pretending that we are. We want to be perceived as having it all together. We fear being thought of as needy.

Yet in the immortal words of John Donne,

"No man is an island entire of itself;

every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

Tom Hanks in the movie *Castaway* learned how true this was when he was literally washed up on a deserted island after a plane wreck over the Pacific. He struggled for four years, dealing all alone with the hardships of surviving in isolation. At one point, he realizes that if he doesn't get off the island he will die. We are not made to go it alone.

Yet this Myth of Independence and The Pressure to Be Strong is glorified in our culture and shapes our attitudes. It can create great isolation and loneliness, or worse. When I was a student chaplain at a hospital one summer during seminary, I was assigned to a neurology floor. I recall visiting a woman who was hospitalized for very severe, chronic back pain. She owned her own beauty shop and had worked long hard hours, standing with raised arms to fix hair all day every day. When I met her, she was sitting up in bed and smiling. Every hair of her elaborate hairdo was perfectly in place. As we spoke over the course of several visits, she never stopped smiling and confidently looked on the bright side of her life, denying any feelings of anger, disappointment, or hurt. Her faith was a bullet-proof as her lacquered beehive hairdo. The

incongruity between her situation and her affect was glaring.

One day I stopped by but found her room empty. The nurse said she had been transferred to a psychiatric floor. It seems she had lost it. No longer able to hold it all together, she had gone to the chapel and stripped naked. Actually, maybe rather than losing it, she had begun to come to her senses.

Contrary to the Myth of Independence and The Pressure to Be Strong is the Christian understanding that we are made for community. We are created in the image of the triune God, and if that means anything, it means that we are created for relationships, for interdependence, not for independence. None of us has everything it takes. We need each other.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul likens Christian community to a human body. Just like the body has many parts—ears, eyes, hands, feet—none of which can function alone, so we in the church need one another. We aren't designed to go it alone. There are times we are weak and need help. And there are times we are strong and can offer help.

In our text for this morning Paul exhorts the Galatians to bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. Burden bearing for one another is a Christian responsibility. It's something we ought to do. We ought to do it because, Paul says it fulfills the law of Christ. What is the law of Christ? To love your neighbor as yourself. Bearing one another's burdens is an act of love. It follows the pattern of sacrificial love that Christ showed us in his life and in his death. As disciples of Christ we ought to do it, but it's also a privilege to do it. It is a holy privilege to walk with another through dark times, to listen patiently without judgment, to pray with and for someone in a difficult situation. To be entrusted with another's vulnerability is a rare honor.

Our congregation is about to embark upon a program of burden-bearing, if you will, called Stephen Ministry. Stephen Ministry is a system of one-to-one lay caring ministry. This system was developed in 1975 by Ken Haugk, a Lutheran pastor and clinical psychologist. It is used in more than 12,000 congregations from 160 Christian denominations in 29 countries. Stephen Ministry congregations equip and empower lay caregivers—called Stephen Ministers—to provide high-quality, confidential, Christ-centered care to people who are going through some painful life situation.

Let me spend a few minutes describing how Stephen Ministry works. The best way to understand it is to learn about three groups of people involved in this ministry: Stephen Leaders, Stephen Ministers, and care receivers.

Stephen Leaders establish and direct Stephen Ministry in a congregation. They—

- build awareness of Stephen Ministry within the congregation and community
- recruit and train Stephen Ministers
- meet with potential care receivers to assess their needs
- match care receivers with Stephen Ministers
- provide Stephen Ministers with ongoing supervision and continuing education

Stephen Leaders are trained at a weeklong conference and come home with a 35-pound manual of resources. Larry Gray and I attended Stephen Leader training three weeks ago in Orlando. Dawn Frisch will attend at the end of this month in Pittsburgh. Larry, who is the husband of session member Sue Gray, has the tremendous advantage of starting and leading Stephen Ministry at the 2,000-member church he served as pastor in a suburb of Kansas City, Missouri. Dawn has worked as a therapist, specializing in grief counseling, and served as the case worker on the IHN staff. I am very excited about our Stephen Leader team and the gifts and experience they bring to

this new ministry.

The second group in this system is Stephen Ministers. Stephen Ministers are congregation members who offer confidential, one-to-one Christian care to people going through tough times. In order to be prepared for this ministry they go through fifty hours of training led by the Stephen Leaders. The topics include things like the art of listening, ministering to the dying, and maintaining appropriate boundaries. A Stephen Minister usually provides care to one person at a time, meeting with that person once a week for about an hour. Twice a month, Stephen Ministers gather with their Stephen Leaders for supervision and continuing education.

The third group is the Care Receivers. Care Receivers are people—congregation members and others in the community—who receive care from a Stephen Minister. These are people struggling through a difficult time in life—experiencing grief of a loved one, divorce, job loss, infertility, an empty nest, a new baby, chronic or terminal illness, or some other life crisis. There are important guidelines in place for this caring relationship which protect both the care receiver and the Stephen Minister, namely:

- The relationship between a care receiver and a Stephen Minister is strictly confidential. Gossip about a care receiver's problems would sink the whole program faster than you could say "Facebook post."
- Men are matched with men; women with women.
- When a care receiver's needs exceed what a Stephen Minister can provide, the Stephen Ministry team makes a referral to an appropriate mental health professional or other community resource

In the coming months, we will be getting the Stephen Ministry program off the ground. Specifically, we will be recruiting our first class of Stephen Ministers. We will be looking for people who are caring and compassionate, people who are willing to share another's emotional and spiritual burdens. We are looking for people who are willing to embody God's love to another person, to show up faithfully and care—not to judge or provide answers—but to listen and accept the other. There's nothing more powerful than that. The theology behind it all is incarnational. To bear another's burdens is to embody the love of God—God who cares for the brokenhearted and crushed in spirit, as the psalmist tells us. Hopefully, we have all be on the receiving end of such love fleshed out by another person who sat beside us, who handed us Kleenex, who was a safe and supporting presence through some trying time. Serving as a Stephen Minister is the chance to offer that sort of comfort and grace to someone else.

You may be thinking, well, that's a great ministry, but it's not for me. I want to encourage each of you not to dismiss the possibility that God may be calling you to just this ministry. It's a big commitment, but it's an opportunity to make a real difference in other people's lives. It promises to be a very meaningful and powerful experience for both care receivers and Stephen Ministers. Pastoral care is not something that only pastors can do. One of the hallmarks of the Protestant Reformation is the catch phrase, "the priesthood of all believers." We are called to be priests to one another, pastors to one another. This new ministry will give us a formalized, structured way to do this with training, accountability, and confidentiality. It's worked very successfully in thousands of congregations. Our session and staff are enthusiastic that it will work here, too.

At my church in Atlanta we had a summer program for Hispanic preschool aged children in our neighborhood. One day a little girl brought her friend to me because the friend had skinned her knee. As I applied a Band-aid to her from the First Aid kit, I noticed that the first girl, the one

who was sympathetic to the hurt girl, also had a skinned knee. And I thought of Henri Nouwen's book called *The Wounded Healer*. Nouwen's title refers, of course to Jesus, who through his wounding on the cross effects healing and reconciliation between humanity and God. But Nouwen goes on to speak about how by simply being human we all experience the painful existential wounds of loneliness and isolation. Paradoxically when we reach out with a spirit of hospitality to others who are also experiencing life's painful wounding, the shared experience is healing. Healing happens, says Nouwen, through our paying attention to the other and through offering not to take away their pain but to give the other a safe space to share it.

While I've unabashedly explained and plugged this new program of Stephen Ministry we are preparing to launch, please hear our text as an ethical command for everyone to act anytime, anywhere--even every day—to bear one another's burdens. We've all got them, and some are too heavy to carry alone. The world needs more compassion, more people that care. So, listen without judgment to your child, your partner, your co-worker. Reach out in a spirit of hospitality to a friend or a stranger who is hurting.

You would think that a 350-foot-tall Redwood tree would need deep roots, but that's not the case at all with the *Sequoia sempervirens* species. Redwood tree roots are very shallow, often only five or six feet deep. But they make up for it in width, sometimes extending up to 100 feet from the trunk. They thrive in thick groves, where the roots can intertwine and even fuse together. This gives them tremendous strength against the forces of nature. This way they can withstand high winds and raging floods. We are like that. We like Redwoods need others in the grove to keep us standing. Contrary to what the world teaches, we are not independent nor strong all by ourselves. We thrive by our intertwining connections. So, take Paul's command to heart. Bear one another's burdens. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. To God be the glory!

Note: See www.stephenministries.org for more information about Stephen Ministry.