

Sharing the Struggle

Listen to a reading from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians, the sixth chapter, beginning with the first verse.

(Read Galatians 6: 1-3 – The Message)

As most of you know by now, a brother in Christ, someone we loved and knew quite well has died from the effects of an addiction to alcohol. To varying degrees, many of us knew about the addiction. A few of us were brave enough to confront him, in love. Others of us watched helplessly, uncertain what we could or should do. Now, in the wake of his all too premature death, a lot of us are feeling guilty; feeling like we should have said something, done something or should have said or done more than we did.

In the text I just read, the Apostle Paul certainly confirms that as Christian brothers and sisters we have a responsibility to each other when we see someone in our community heading down a self destructive path. But if we haven't noticed or stepped in to support someone before we recognize full blown addiction, it's doubtful our confronting would have any effect, for a number of reasons.

Our feeling guilty will not redeem this tragedy. But one of the ways God will redeem this loss is in our using the opportunity to think about how we can more effectively, bear and share one another's burdens. And I think "bear and share" best describes what Paul is suggesting in this text.

Paul writes: "If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore them....stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens." The Greek word Paul uses for "sin" means to slip, as might happen to someone on an icy road. Paul says that, if someone does make a slip, the Christian duty is to get them on their feet again.

The Christian walk is a shared journey. We do not walk alone, others walk with us. In suggesting that we bear one another's burdens Paul is talking about interrelatedness and interdependence, a principle that is laced throughout Paul's epistles. The image of the "body of Christ" put forth by Paul, beautifully describes this special relationship in which "every part of the body is dependent on every other part; in which if one member suffers, all suffer together."

In relationship to our involvement in restoring a brother or sister, Paul's choice of words in our text points immediately to two common mistakes. His reference to the "sin" as a "slip" makes it clear that he envisions our involvement long before the person is in full blown addiction. Put that together with the image of being part of the same body and it suggests a much more intimate relationship than most of us have with other members of this community. So one conclusion about how we can do a better job of bearing and sharing one another's burdens is that we will need to become more intentional about deepening our relationships with people in the congregation.

This is at the heart of what we're trying to accomplish here at First Baptist by developing more and different kinds of small groups. Who will notice if you don't come to worship on a Sunday morning; who knows that things at work are really getting to you right now; who in the congregation knows that your kids are in a particularly tough place and that they seem to be distancing themselves from you; who will know that you are worried about the doctor's appointment that you have scheduled; who will rally to your support, and visit you, and help you with transportation when you come home from the hospital or bring home the new baby or after the funeral is over and all your family has gone home? Who in the congregation helps you, day to day, bear the burden of being unemployed for a long period of time; who knows that you don't feel at all fulfilled in your work; or that you've been feeling down for the last few weeks? If you are or were part of a small group, the members of that group who are sharing life with you, would be the answer to all of the questions I just raised. Email Stephanie Allen if you would like to be part of a small group.

One of the major reasons we don't know how or when to step in when a brother or sister slips is because we have not achieved relationships with those in our family of faith of sufficient trust to tolerate a confrontation however lovingly it is offered. Only as we truly become the body of Christ, as we lay a

foundation of trust and interdependence in our relationship, will we be able to follow Paul's' advice to enter into a ministry of spiritual support, correction, guidance and restoration.

Maxie Dunnam, in his commentary on Galatians offers several important ingredients to developing these trusting relationships.

One ingredient to living this shared life is learning to listen. Of course for most of us that presents a real challenge. Because most of us are much better at talking than we are at listening. Yet nothing enhances someone's feelings of self worth more than being listened to. When you listen to someone you say to them, "I value you. You are important. I want to hear what you have to say." God's Spirit is at work as we listen. When we listen, the gap between us and the person to whom we listen is bridged.

Some years back a friend from college days called me on the telephone to begin what became a weekly telephone conversation for two or three years. I had worked with this friend for several years in the theatre department and at church, and I thought I knew her pretty well. So I was surprised and embarrassed when, years later, she began to share the immense pain she had been carrying around with her since early childhood. She was a remarkably talented musician; with a supportive family and many friends. It never occurred to me that she had a care...when in fact she was literally walking a tight rope between life and death.

When our telephone conversations started, in many cases, even though I desperately wanted to say something that would make her feel better, there was nothing TO say. And so the calls primarily consisted of the friend talking with long interludes of silence. And at first, I felt terrible after every call because I hadn't been able to "say anything" that seemed helpful. And yet, she continued to call; week after week; for several years...insisting that the calls were one of the important things that helped her get through each week.

This experience confirmed for me both the importance of listening – honestly listening – and also the reality of God's Spirit in the midst of genuine listening. For without my uttering one profound word in all those weekly calls, somehow my friend came to experience God's presence in her life through our conversation. Learning to listen will put us on the road to being available to each other, but there is more involved than good listening.

The **second ingredient in living the shared life that will enable us to bear each other's burdens is being available to each other in love.**

Now the good news about this principle of availability is that we only have to bring ourselves to a relationship. It doesn't require particular skills and training. We simply have to be open and honest and willing to share ourselves. The bad news is that for most of us it is terribly inconvenient to be available to each other. Our lives are so jam packed with work and school and a host of other activities that spare time is practically non-existent. And when you are falling into a chair exhausted, getting ready to "blob out" for the remaining hour or two of the day – you do not feel like making yourself available to anyone.

Let me state the obvious; people's needs do not occur at a convenient or predictable times. What is more, since the person who needs you may not be able or willing to reach out to you for help, being available often means reaching out as to them.

Now that you're in a small group you have a clearer sense of who might need that act of caring from you.

- One of your group members who has recently gone through a divorce admitted that the time right after supper is the hardest time of the day.
- You observe that a friend, suffering from depression has begun to withdraw and isolate.
- You sensed tension in the relationship of one of the couples in your group with small children and you know that some time away from the kids would do wonders.
- An older man in the congregation is in his 8th week of rehab recuperating from a fall in his home....last time you talked to him he told you people had stopped coming by to see him.

- The director of the afterschool youth program is looking for some adults to help him take the kids to a baseball game.

Being available to these members of your faith community may well mean carving out time where there is no time and pushing yourself to reach out even when you don't feel like it. But you might find yourself energized by your act of compassion and it could make all the difference for the recipient of your caring.

A third ingredient in the quest for the shared life that will enable us to share one another's burdens is to work at self examination and understanding. In the text I read earlier, Paul warns each individual to be wary, not about the neighbor and their slips, but about our own. Paul suggests that realistic self-evaluation is a guard against falling into temptation and puts one in a position to help with the burdens of another. It is impossible to "be available to someone" from a position in which we feel somehow superior to the one with whom we work. If we reach out with an attitude that we have arrived, that we are on a higher spiritual plane than the other; we eliminate the possibility of an interdependent relationship!

On the other hand, honestly facing my own "slips"; understanding how easily I can fall into self destructive behavior, makes my relationships more compassionate, more authentic and more helpful.

When I was in my forties, as part of some recovery work I went for a week of intensive group therapy. This was during a time I was trying to find my footing after a vocational meltdown....during the time when it wasn't clear if my marriage was going to survive. I was confronting some issues and behaviors in my life that were sabotaging my work and my important relationships. In those difficult days, I needed people with whom I could be completely honest and who would be honest with me; but who could extend grace to me as well.

In my roommate for the week, I found we had a lot of history in common. We shared very easily and we shared a lot. But there was one session in particular, where I consciously decided to share with him some things about my life that I had never told anyone before, things of which I was very ashamed.

I couldn't look at him while I spoke. I stammered and stuttered but with God's help I told my story. Even though I knew enough about him to know that he wasn't judgmental, that he probably had some of the same history as me, I expected to see a look of shock or disgust or condemnation in his face. But after I finished talking, I braced myself and looked up to see him smiling at me, tears in his eyes and all he said was, "well Martin, that's pretty much my story too!"

You see, in making himself available to me; in extending grace to me rather than judgment, in listening to me with his whole heart; this compassionate and trusted brother, who was obviously on a journey of self-examination not only supported me and contributed to my healing, he set me on a path to become a compassionate brother for someone else in need.

As we confront our feelings of guilt, wondering what we should or could have done that might have prevented the death of a brother in this community, Paul provides a way to help redeem the tragedy. He challenges us to face the truth that we have not been able to bear and share one another's burdens because we have not developed relationships with one another of sufficient knowledge and trust to be able to do so. He challenges us to make the necessary adjustments and carve out the time so that we can be available to one another. He challenges us to develop the ability to listen to one another with our ears and with our heart, without judgment in a context of self examination.

Of course doing so will enrich our lives, will set us more nearly on the pathway to the life that God wants us to have. But beyond that, forming these deepening relationships with others in the Body of Christ.....might just save someone's life....and in fact, might just save our life!

