

We Get to Carry Each Other

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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September 20, 2020

Scripture

Matthew 5:1-1-5; Matthew 11:28-30

5:1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

5:2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5:5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Matthew 11:28-30

Jesus said,

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Prayer

Sermon

Beloved, sometimes a song gives rise to a sermon,
And so it is today.

Actually, there are two songs...they both include words on carrying one another's burdens. And I find myself grateful that we are not singing in the sanctuary now, because I could not do them justice, but let me share the words of the first, a folk song:

Oh, my brother, oh my sister
Won't you stand here beside me
We shall carry each other
And should your soul grow weary
Or the strength leave your bones
Oh my brother, oh my sister
I will carry you home.

(lyrics, slightly modified, by Robbie Schaefer as performed by Eddie from Ohio)

Jesus walked the towns and countryside, meeting people. Witnessing their pain. Seeing those who were sick or in the words of the day possessed, seeing those who were under the knee of the Roman occupiers, those who were poor, poor in spirit, mourning. Jesus saw the outcasts, the folks who would have been seen as cursed. Matthew tells us he went through Galilee, teaching, preaching, healing every disease and sickness, those who were suffering... And then, Matthew says Jesus climbed a hillside, gathered the people close together, and began to speak blessings upon them.

These were no abstract blessings. I imagine Jesus saw the woman whom he'd counseled, and said: blessed are the poor in spirit. Jesus saw the hungry child, hiding behind her father, and said: blessed are the meek. Jesus saw the grieving brother that he'd walked beside, and said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

I see you, he said.

Oh my brother, oh my sister, I will carry you home.

A little while later, Matthew says Jesus spoke this beloved blessing:

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

When Jesus was in Galilee, the people who encountered him were seen, and their burdens lightened by his yoke.

This is an enduring blessing of our faith, that it was not just a few thousand people in first century Palestine who were seen and blessed by Jesus. What a friend we have in Jesus, today, too. We are seen. We are blessed.

Those of you who feel poor in spirit today, those of you who are mourning loved ones who died from CoVid or another illness, those of you grieving and calling out racism and violence, know that you are seen by Jesus.

One Bible scholar says it this way: Grief is real - Jesus does not dismiss it. Jesus says to those who are grieving, you are beloved and you are blessed and you are seen. But more importantly, Jesus says, the grace of God meets you here and pulls you forward. The present does not define the future. Blessed are you...for you are part of God's kingdom.¹

We all know this truth: either we've been in mourning, or we will be some day. "We will all be counted amongst those who mourn."² So it's good news that Jesus, the one who came to bless and save, the one who came that we might have life, life abundant, sees us in sadness and grief as much as he sees us in righteousness and happiness.

But.

Our human communities in this time have something to do with seeing and blessing and calling forward those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn. We're not just cheerleaders, and it is a profound act of compassion to witness one another's pain, to share the yoke, to draw people forward to new life.

I learn so much from the students I work with at Harvard Divinity School. This year they are scattered around the continent, forming community over Zoom. And within that community they are holding so much, a pandemic, a crisis around racial justice, and their graduate program. When I want to hear good theology I look to them, and they do not disappoint. Two first semester students, Nathan Samayo and Jordan Venditelli, preached at worship last week and they offered this word which I think speaks just as much to us:

Nathan said, "We are living in a complex world...we inherit both complex realities of grief and lament and hope at the same time, and we occupy all those spaces at the same time.

Now this hope that we have in the midst of grief and lament is not an irresponsible hope, this hope is not an unrealistic hope as much as it may feel every day, and it's also not dangerous hope, in which dismisses the truth of violence on marginalized groups every day. But, this hope is communal; this hope is what we get to offer one another in the midst

¹ Craig Koester, in the Working Preacher Narrative Lectionary Podcast released on January 19, 2019, paraphrased.

² The words of Rev. Ian Holland

of hard seasons.. Hope is a community effort, that requires this communal exchange to breathe and speak life into each other...

Jordan invited us to imagine that we are rooted in common soil, interdependent:

“There are many knotted tree roots intermingling together. Our roots are what ground and connect us. They provide us with nourishment and they connect us to each other.”

I will tell you in all honesty, this sermon on carrying one another through grief and hardship was on the abstract side until this weekend. I woke Saturday morning feeling the weight of dual emotions: grief and anxiety. Grief over the passing of the extraordinary Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, champion of equal rights, a “woman of valor” (Justice Steven Breyer) a woman both “decorous and dogged” (NPR’s Nina Totenberg), “a tireless and resolute champion of justice” (Chief Justice John Roberts).³ Anxiety mounting for the next two months in the United States. Grief, that our sister church just blocks away would be the site of a rally by a hate group (as designated by the SPLC).⁴ Anxiety that today remains, if not peaceful, at least without violence.

Blessed are those who mourn?

Blessed are the poor in spirit?

How can it be?

In the midst of these two interleaved reasons for grief and anxiety I have turned to
community,
To members of this congregation,
To LICA and my clergy group,
To my sister and trusted friends.
And my most trusted friend, Jesus.

The griefs are raw,
And the anxieties unresolved.

But the invitation is there, to bring it to Jesus for blessing,
To bring it to community for carrying together...

The invitation is there, to bring your griefs to to Jesus for blessing,
And to bring them here to this community, for carrying together...

³

<https://www.npr.org/2020/09/18/100306972/justice-ruth-bader-ginsburg-champion-of-gender-equality-dies-at-87>

⁴ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/act-america>

That's the other song, by the way, One from U2:

One life, with each other, sisters, brothers...we've got to carry each other. (U2, One)

We get to carry each other,

and each other's yokes we get to bear on our shoulders,

we've got to carry each other.

We will carry each other home.

This is how we get through.

This is the hope we offer and

the hope we receive

in the midst of hard seasons.

May it be so.

Always.

Amen.

