

BEARING BURDENS

Haslett Community Church, July 4, 2010- Carol Ingells

“Live creatively, friends. If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him, saving your critical comments for yourself. *You* might be needing forgiveness before the day’s out. Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ’s law. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived.” Gal. 6 – *The Message*

This is one of those rare occasions when Independence Day falls on Sunday. Bearing burdens seemed to fit. Sometimes I wonder how humanity can bear so many burdens, of such unimaginable weight. In a sense, the weight of the world really is on our shoulders—war upon war, society’s institutions crumbling, the earth raped and wasted, living beings destroyed because of human greed and apathy, fears of unemployment, illiteracy, disease, religious antagonism. And that doesn’t include the specific concerns we have for those close-in to our lives—disastrous relationships, illnesses, mental and physical addictions, financial worries. A rather depressing recitation, wouldn’t you say?

But here we are, aware of these concerns, coming to experience together some bit of reassurance, of comfort and of hope.

How do we bear these burdens? First, our own. Here are two ways, both simple and profound. One is solitude; the other is community.

In order to bear the burdens of our lives, we need to spend a portion of our time alone in a quiet, peaceful and safe place, in order to listen to the wisdom hidden deep within our souls. Yes, thinking is involved; but, from a place deeper than the mind, impulses, intuitions, surprising revelations can spring forth out of the silence. Wow! Where did that come from—an idea, a possible solution, a feeling of utter peace, a sudden knowing that all shall be well.

And we need community, the presence and love of others. Where two or three are gathered there I will be, Jesus said. This is one reason why people seek a spiritual director—to have at least one person, one place, where they feel they can be safe, where they can say anything, where they can trust.

Of course that is why we gather in congregations, as well. Sometimes an experience at church, during worship or otherwise, can be the very gift we need to keep going, to feel reassured of God’s love and care. We hear a particular piece of music, someone gives us a squeeze or a beautiful smile, the Bible reading touches in some deep place, the beautiful space feels safe, sacred, promising. Community

happens in an infinite variety of settings, religious and otherwise. But we must have it; else we perish in a dark hole of isolation and despair.

How do we help others bear their burdens? Well, that's a lot like what I just said, only in reverse. This phrase helps me remember how to help: Don't evade and don't invade. Perhaps this sounds a bit negative, but bear with me.

Somehow we must find a balance between these two "don't's". If we know someone is hurting, say a loved one died, do we evade talking with them? I'm not good at funeral homes or hospitals. I don't like nursing homes. I don't know what to say. I didn't know him/her that well. I've heard myself say all these things from time to time. Well, tell me, who DOES like hospitals, nursing homes, funeral parlors? Who DOES know what to say?

We are called to be present, to trust that no matter what we do or don't say, the Holy Spirit will operate and the hurting one will be helped.

At the same time, and this is done all too frequently, we must not invade, asking questions mostly out of curiosity, giving platitudes which only serve to add fuel to the fire burning within the other, deciding for someone what is best for them. Adult children are especially good at doing this to/for their elderly parents.

So we need to allow people space and time to be alone with themselves and their wounds. AND, we need to be available, humbly listening, when that is what is needed. We need to look people directly in the eyes, to show our own emotions openly, to hug more than to lecture.

During one of his bouts of clinical depression, Parker Palmer said that when he was at his lowest, the only person who was able to help him was a man who came over every afternoon, quietly massaged his feet for ½ hour, then left. There was something in the faithfulness, the respect, and the human touch which helped Parker come up out of the extreme abyss.

Our country could learn from these two stances, as well—evasion and invasion. We have been far too good at not looking at what we don't want to see, especially about ourselves as a nation. And we have been far too good at invading the space, culture and religious beliefs of others, thinking we were being helpful. We have born a great burden, even though much of our action has been well meaning.

Finally, we bear the burden of this planet. This one is particularly difficult. What on earth, so to speak, can any of us do? We respond to the destruction of this earth somewhere on a spectrum from being totally oblivious to changing our entire life styles. I more and more believe that Mother Earth is more powerful

than we presume. She will survive; she will take care of herself. At what cost to the human species, I'm not at all sure.

But to conclude, here are some thoughts I wrote on my blog the other day after the earthquake in Canada.

As Tessa and I walked the earth yesterday, in the vicinity of our home, I was thinking about the difference between surface and depth. Whether we're contemplating cosmic dimensions or human connections, there is often a huge difference, isn't there?

The earth appears perfectly placid, maybe a little wind and rain, but pretty peaceful. Yet down under, the earth needed to change positions--maybe she gets a bit uncomfortable at times. And so the surface shook, even here in Michigan. When Mother Earth's bulk changes position, we better be prepared to shake!!

In the kind of ministry I do, people often reveal the turmoil in their depths. Usually they are people who on the surface appear to be all together. I, too, give off that appearance much of the time. And so do you. Calm surface; deep inner pain, turmoil, guilt, doubt, confusion, fear--you name it. When I serve wine at Eucharist in my church, I am often in awe of the outer strength and self-possession of people whom I know are carrying tremendous burdens--physical, mental, emotional, spiritual burdens.

The reverse is also true. Think of the ocean or one of our beloved Great Lakes. The surface can be highly roiled by winds, yet deep within the waters, things are calm and unmovable. When life's storms have us flailing about, not sure how to get through the next 10 minutes, let alone the next 10 years, we can trust that somewhere deep within, our souls are OK and are pouring out energy and strength to keep us from capsizing. The Divine is residing within, loving us whether we notice it or not.

And so, ultimately, God bears the burdens of us all. May it be so!