

*Sermon for St. John the Baptist, July 3, 2016; by Rev. John Perry*

## **Bearing One Another's Burdens**

In today's passage from his Letter to the Galatians, Paul says, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

*Note: This sermon was given without a text. The sermon dealt with a number of ways of interpreting 'burden,' in terms of what this might mean for us today. One example given was when another is ill or infirm, and we Christians help bear this burden by bringing food or giving lifts or running errands. Another example was when we help another member of the church with that person's ministry, like when my wife and I were temporarily sheltering refugees from Latin America, and other members of the congregation helped by bringing groceries or by taking the refugee family into their own home for an evening and a meal, thus giving us respite.*

*But more difficult by far is when 'burden' is understood (as it sometimes also was, in Paul's time) to mean 'moral lapse.' One example of this proved to be particularly thought provoking.*

There are times, either within the church community or as a result of other contacts we have, we encounter a person who has persistent difficulty with alcohol or drug addiction, or a serious problem quite similar, and this person presents his or her self as being in repeated need of help. How are we called to bear this kind of burden? Indeed, **are** we so called?

It needs be said that alcoholism or drug addition, per se, is properly thought of as a **disease**, **not** a moral lapse. However some of these people, especially those whose addictions are particularly severe and persistent, are prone to behaviors that we do understand to be moral lapses. Deception, for example, can become a factor. Dependency can become an issue. Apparent unwillingness to help their own selves. Refusal to accept responsibility. These are murky waters indeed; they do not make our responses clear, or easy.

Out of Christian love we may help someone financially, or help her get into rehab, or help him get re-established in life. But what happens if such a person comes back to us again and again? What happens if we find out we have not been told the whole story? What happens when our attempts to help, end up enabling the very behaviors we wish to resolve?

Bear one another's burdens. How do we do this, in such a situation? We ought not to shy away from bearing burdens that are indeed moral lapses. We are, all of us, imperfect people. We all have committed moral lapses at one point in our lives or another. Paul said it well: "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

I do not have the answers to this. It rarely is clear to us, what we should do. Perhaps this is as it should be.

One thing that becomes clear, is that there need to be some limits, to our bearing such burdens of another. I do not embrace these limits, without sadness. I guess it is supposed to be hard. I guess we are supposed to be sad.

Perhaps our best course, is to hold these two impulses we have – on one hand, our desire to help bear the burden; and on the other hand, our awareness of our limitations and our concern that we may not be really helping the situation – to hold these two in tension. Circumstances will always vary, will often be nuanced. The people we seek to help, may best benefit from one sort of assistance on one occasion, and a different one on another. Our own inclinations may be driven more by forgiveness and understanding one time; more by righteous anger and realistic appraisal on another. Perhaps the best we can do, is hold these in tension. And pray. And seek God’s guidance. And know that our desire to help, even as we despair knowing how best to do this, is in itself pleasing to God.

And know that God shares fully in our sadness.