

SECOND READING: Galatians 6:1-10

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My friends,<sup>[a]</sup> if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. <sup>2</sup>Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. <sup>3</sup>For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. <sup>4</sup>All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. <sup>5</sup>For all must carry their own loads. <sup>6</sup>Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher. <sup>7</sup>Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. <sup>8</sup>If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. <sup>9</sup>So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. <sup>10</sup>So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

FIRST READING: Psalm 103:1-5

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Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name. <sup>2</sup>Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and do not forget all his benefits— <sup>3</sup>who forgives all your iniquity, who  
heals all your diseases,  
<sup>4</sup>who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love  
and mercy, <sup>5</sup>who satisfies you with good as long as you live<sup>[a]</sup> so that your  
youth is renewed like the eagle's.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

***“Mark #5 Caring Relationship”***

*I once watched a documentary of a famous choir, a very renowned and long-standing beloved choir. However, over time the membership of the choir gradually changed such that it was made up of many outstanding soloists, singers who were at the top in their field. The problem was that each was very accustomed to being out for themselves, their own success, their own reputations. Never could the choir’s voices blend, never could it produce the rich intended harmonies that it had been known for. Eventually, conductors refused to lead them, patrons fell away, long-time participants quit, the choir lost its reputation and fell apart. In time, a new choir was formed, and a new conductor was appointed. Not such famous singers, volunteers all, filled the positions. They were determined to sing together as a team. Soloists could still perform, but all vocalists worked for the good of the whole and their voices combined beautifully. If any singer saw another singer making a mistake, they would help them with gentle advice, rather than competitive put-downs. If someone was having a difficult time, they would, as a whole, gather around them to encourage and support them, instead of taking the opportunity to take advantage of a weakness. Bit by bit the choir once again regained its fame and now, it is again regarded as a truly great choir bringing beautiful music to audiences everywhere.*

The situation in Galatia to which Paul wrote his letter was somewhat like the first choir. Some Christians in Galatia were seeing themselves as a particular ‘type’ who were better than another. It seems it was likely that the Jewish Christians were looking down upon the new Gentile Christians, having been stirred up by the “agitators”, missionaries other than Paul. The agitators led them to believe circumcision and obedience to some of the food laws were necessary. If one of the Gentile Christians did something wrong, they would be smugly corrected. Law rather than grace was again creeping in and division was, of course, the inevitable result. This type hierarchy and division is not new. It’s been going on as a trait of the human condition since the beginning of time. But it has never been a good thing!

Paul wrote to correct them. He wrote that the Christian life has a new reference point now.... the cross. On the cross Christ “gave himself for our sins”. There, the Son of God loved

us all equally and gave himself for us all. His self-giving love provides a motivation then and a pattern for all of our living. Paul pointed out that since Christ has borne this burden for us, we are compelled to “bear one another’s burdens”. This “fulfills the law of Christ” (i.e. the law of love). This is the law which supersedes all others and which undergirds all others. Every member should care for everyone else, especially those who are of the household of faith.

This caring includes helping putting things right if we notice our neighbor to sin today since tomorrow, we know that it may be us. We need do this without arrogance remembering as Dwight Moody is famous for saying, “*There but for the grace of God go I,*” when he saw a drunk stumbling down a sidewalk.<sup>1</sup> We evaluate only ourselves, not who is worthy of help and who is not. When it comes to our neighbor, we need offer correction with a spirit of gentleness, not heavy-handedness in holding others to task. Grace, the law of love, is the only law here.

I don’t know about you, but in all the years I’ve been around churches, it seems that church goers not only are some of the most quick to apply legalism, as Paul so well knew, but oftentimes the criticism offered is pretty caustic and it can be about the most trivial matters. I’ve seen it with issues as small as whether wine or grape juice is served during communion, whether the flag is in the Sanctuary or not, or whether packets of sugar are served with coffee or sugar in a bowl. In one church I was in, I witnessed children scolded for their style of dress or of hair, and I’ve seen people criticized for how loudly they sang.

*The most difficult example I’ve only read about. It regarded a church member who put a wreath on the edge of the church property to commemorate the location where one of their family members had been killed at the intersection nearby. However, the church had a rule that no signs or postings of any kind could be put on church property. A church official contacted the member and explained that they could not put the wreath there and that it would need to be removed. It would instead need to be placed in the church cemetery adjacent to the building. The Pastor and the Board backed up the church official. The building*

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Cunningham. “*Ture Love Reigns. Sermon IV: In His Service Love Bears Burdens Freely.*” <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/true-love-reigns-sermon-iv-in-his-service-love-bears-burdens-freely-charles-cunningham-sermon-on-love-245487> (accessed 3-5-20).

*superintendent then removed the wreath as instructed. Of course, this action spread throughout the community. A concerned Christian counselor heard about the incident, met with the heartbroken family member, comforted them and then together they planted a flower with the family member at the site which would bloom nearly year-round. Importantly, church members have since taken great care to water and fertilize the flower to ensure that it kept blooming.<sup>2</sup>*

Yes, Paul reminded the Galatians and us that the Law of Love is the foundational law here. We are to bear one another's burdens, period. It is important to notice however that Paul is honest, honest in saying that bearing the burdens of others can be exhausting. Burdens of others can weigh heavy on our shoulders. We can get compassion fatigue. Such a life, he says, needs the presence of the Spirit surrounding and infusing it. A life that relies solely on our own efforts, on the flesh, cannot last and will go sinfully wrong. But a life that is fed by the Holy Spirit, nurtured through prayer, studying the Word, and practicing the spiritual disciplines gives the Christian who is bearing another's burden the reserves from which they can do good all day every day.

In addition, fruit from such a relationship with the Spirit shows forth graciousness, perseverance, patience and cheerfulness.<sup>3</sup> It yields seed, seed which can then be sown as we encounter others, as we bear one another up and we will reap a bountiful harvest of good that characterizes the eternal life and purposes of God. We reap what we sow. That's the way the world is. If we sow barley, barley is what will come up, and if we sow nettles, nettles are what will come up. If we sow seeds which are animated, dominated and motivated by the Spirit, we will reap eternal life in ourselves and others, the life of the new age that has already broken in in Christ, and will one day be complete.<sup>4</sup>

So, as we consider this fifth mark in our Vital Congregations Initiative, Caring Relationships, we would do well to consider the times when we have experienced Jesus' all-

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Cunningham.

<sup>3</sup>Sarah Henrich. "Commentary on Galatians 6:1-6, 7-16." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary...> (accessed 3-5-20).

<sup>4</sup> NT Wright. "Paul for Everyone. Galatians and Thessalonians." (Louisville: WJKP; 2002,2004), 74-80.

consuming love. Was it here...in this church? I know I have experienced it among you. I have felt it when one of you has held my hand after I've lost a loved one, or when I've received a difficult call from my doctor. I've watched you welcomed in the nervous guest as though they've been coming here forever, and pray over others with the same angst as if you are the one hurting. I know countless meals are made and cards are sent just at the right time to cheer and remind people they are not alone. And I've seen you come alongside each other, using what's called the "ministry of presence".<sup>5</sup> You show up. You don't say, "*If you need help call me,*" adding one more thing for people in trouble to do; you just make it your business to be present... there...ready to be used by God.

*One night, the teenage daughter of a friend of Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the US House Representatives, suddenly died. Early the next morning the father of the girl, heard a knock on his door, and when he opened it, there was Mr. Rayburn standing outside. The Speaker said, "I heard and just came by to see what I could do to help." The father replied in his deep grief, "I don't think there is anything you can do, Mr. Speaker. We are making all the arrangements." "Well," Mr. Rayburn said, "have you had your coffee this morning?" The man replied that they had not taken time for breakfast. So, Mr. Rayburn said that he could at least make coffee for them. While he was working in the kitchen, the man came in, sat down and began to lay down the horrible weight on his shoulders. Later, he said, "Mr. Speaker, I thought you were supposed to be having breakfast at the White House this morning." "Well, I was," Mr. Rayburn said, "but I called the President and just told him...I just told him that I had a friend who was in trouble and I couldn't come."<sup>6</sup>*

I think one of FPC's greatest strengths is our caring relationships. But I think there's room to grow here. I suppose there always is. We need to ask what challenges might this congregation face as we grow, or what things must we prepare ourselves to avoid which could lead us to sow to the flesh and not to the Spirit? How might we do more to nurture caring relationships in all current and future members? How might we be like the choir whose voices blend in total

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<sup>5</sup> S. Otte. "Care" 2004.

<sup>6</sup> S. Otte.

harmony, **EVERYONE** caring for the other's voice to be heard equally well and beautifully strong?

Listen, friends, to what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen and Amen.