

Bear With One Another

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series: One Anothering

Ephesians 4:1-6

“Be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the strong and tolerant with the weak because someday you will be all these things.”

- G. W. Carver

There’s an old legend about three men carrying sacks. The first man carries his sack in front of him. All the bad things people have done to him are stored in his sack. Periodically, he opens his sack, takes out the bad things that have been done to him and examines them. Since he stops to contemplate these bad things often, he doesn’t make much progress. The second man carries the bad things done to him in a sack on his back. The sack becomes heavy, which slows him down, but the man can’t seem to put it down. The third man also carries the bad things done to him in a sack on his back, yet it doesn’t weigh him down. You see, this man cut a hole in the bottom of the sack so the bad things could go in one end and out the other.

What are you carrying in your sack? Are you storing up all the bad things people have committed against you or letting go of them?

Paul directs us in our Scripture lesson to “bear with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2). The word “bear” in Greek means to forbear, put up with or endure one another. Its Latin equivalent, “tolerare,” is where we derive our English word tolerance. Forbearance is the virtue of tolerating one another’s differences.

The first three chapters of Ephesians focus on the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, while the last three chapters provide practical application. This practical application section begins in chapter 4 by urging us to lead a life worthy of this calling to follow Christ with our lives (4:1). Verse 2 summons us to humbly, gently and patiently deal with one another’s deficiencies. Bearing with one another in love calls us to make allowances for each other’s shortcomings.

George Washington Carver advised us to “be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the strong and tolerant with the weak because someday you will be all these things.”

Eugene Peterson wrote in the book *The Message*:

“When Christian believers gather in church, everything that can go wrong sooner or later does. Outsiders, on observing this, conclude that there is nothing to the religion business except, perhaps, business—and dishonest business at that. Insiders see it differently. Just as a hospital collects the sick under one roof and labels them as such, the church collects sinners. Many of the people outside the hospital are every bit as sick as the ones inside, but their illnesses are

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either undiagnosed or disguised. So, Christian churches are not, as a rule, model communities of good behavior. They are, rather, places where human misbehavior is brought out in the open, faced, and dealt with.”

Some people insist on setting impossibly high standards for community life in churches. But the moment someone in the church fails to meet their exacting standards, they quit.

I can promise you someone, sometime, somewhere, will disappoint you in the church. Paul is under no illusions about church life. He is realistic in his letter about the problems of community life. He accepts the fact that there will be inevitable clashes of will and attitude in the church.

The German philosopher Schopenhauer compared the human race to a group of porcupines huddled together on a cold winter’s night. He said, “The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And, in the lonely night of earth’s winter, eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness.” We can either huddle together for warmth, enduring sharp jabs, or freeze to death in our loneliness.

We put up with one another precisely because God puts up with us. Just think of all the things in our lives God put up with!

We bear with one another. Paul takes it a step further in Galatians when he counsels us to “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2). We not only put up with one another, we carry one another’s burdens.

God graciously bears our burdens. We began today’s worship with the words, “Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears our burdens” (Psalm 68:19).

Jesus Christ assumes the role as our divine burden-bearer. “He bears our sins in his body on the cross so that we might become dead to sin and alive to all that is good” (1 Peter 2:4).

If you meet someone coming out of a store weighed down with packages, you might offer to help carry them. Some of us did not carry packages into worship, yet each of us has brought burdens with us into this sanctuary. It may not be obvious; indeed, we try hard to conceal these burdens from one another. It may be a recurring temptation (Galatians 6:1), a relationship problem, a chronic illness or a difficult decision.

God doesn’t intend us to carry these burdens alone. The Christian enterprise is a mutually shared experience. Paul, time and again, speaks about God’s comfort mediated through the company of spiritual friends (Titus 7:5-6).

Thinking about our mutual burdens brought to mind this week the words of the old hymn, “Blest Be the Tie that Binds.” I wondered if there was a story behind the words, so I did some investigation. The

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hymn was written by an English pastor, John Fawcett, who served a small, country church in England. As a promising 32-year-old minister, he accepted a call to a prestigious London church in 1782. He preached his farewell sermon; afterward, the congregation gathered around the wagons packed with possessions to bid John and his family farewell. Some of his parishioners stood by the wagon in tears, entreating them not to leave. Finally, John's wife couldn't take it any longer. "John, I know not how to leave these people." Her words struck home. John announced, "We will stay here and serve the Lord." A week later, he penned the words to that beloved hymn, "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love." The third verse of this hymn is particularly poignant: "We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear; and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear."

If we're going to bear one another's burden, we had better know one another. Each of us would do well to cultivate a few spiritual friends in life.

How can we bear one another's burdens if we don't know what our burdens are? Some of us are sealed shut. We have the hardest time letting other people into our lives. I find this to be particularly true for men. Men in our society are driven to achieve, control, conquer, man-age and perform. Many of our work relationships are competitive in nature. Loneliness and isolation are a way of life for

many men. This church is looking for more men brave enough to break their old masculine conditioning to bear one another's burdens.

Stephen Ambrose's book *A Band of Brothers*, relives the valor in WWII of the members of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division. Ambrose traces how this rag-tag Easy Company of green recruits transforms into heroic, fearless soldiers willing to parachute behind enemy lines on D-Day. The book became a TV mini-series several years ago with the appropriate tag line, "They depended on each other. And the world depended on them." Would that we would come to depend on each other as a band of Christian brothers and sisters, united in bearing with one another and bearing one another's burdens!

The key to becoming a company of spiritual friends, a band of Christian brothers and sisters, is small groups. Men's groups, circles, Mothers of Young Children—any gathering of two or more people for prayer, study and fellowship qualifies as a Biblical quorum. We urge you this Lent to cluster together in small groups to engage in the "one another" practices listed on your bulletin cover.

People who talk with me about their personal situations often remark, "I don't want to be a burden." Hey, this is what we do for each other. Why apologize for something Scripture commands us to practice? We bear with one another. We bear one another's burdens.

“He ain’t heavy; he’s my brother.”

Roe Fulkerson wrote a column for the Kiwanis magazine in the early 1920s. Fulkerson met a boy one day carrying a smaller boy on his back. He commented that the lad was carrying a pretty big load for such a small boy. “Why mister,” the little boy smiled, “he ain’t heavy; he’s my brother.” When Fulkerson wrote an article for the Kiwanis magazine in 1925, he told the story of this boy and appropriately titled it, “He ain’t heavy; he’s my brother.”

In the early 1940s, Father Edward Flanagan came across a pen and ink drawing of this same incident. The caption of the picture contained the words, “He ain’t heavy; he’s my brother.” Father Flanagan had initiated, years before, a ministry to orphaned, troubled boys and had witnessed countless examples of older boys helping younger ones. When Father Flanagan read the words, “He ain’t heavy; he’s my brother,” he adopted it as a motto for Boys and Girls Towns.

In 1969, a British band called the Hollies released a song with the same title, soaring to the top of the charts. The song was re-released in 1988 and became popular all over again. The words of the song capture the spirit of Paul’s admonition to “bear with one another” and “bear one another’s burdens.”

“The road is long with many a winding turn
That leads us to who knows where, who knows where.

But I’m strong, strong enough
to carry him.
He ain’t heavy; he’s my brother.

So on we go. His welfare is my concern.
No burden is he to bear, we’ll get there.
For I know he would not encumber me.
He ain’t heavy; he’s my brother.

It’s a long, long road from which there is no return.
While we’re on the way to there,
Why not share?
And the load doesn’t weigh me down at all.
He ain’t heavy; he’s my brother.”

