

**Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Proper 26**  
**Year A**

**Do You Feel Burdened?**

**[RCL] Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12**

Do you feel burdened? The writers of our epistle and gospel want to know. “You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God,” Paul says. Jesus speaks of the scribes and Pharisees, saying, “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” What is the difference between the two? What separates those in the Beloved Community who impose burdens on others, and those who remove them?

The topic of burdens is important throughout the Bible. Paul tells us in the Letter to the Galatians, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ.” Jesus himself says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” We all know what it is like to feel burdened by life. Every single person we know is bearing a burden of some kind, some seen, some unseen. Cancer, financial hardship, caregiving for an elderly parent, a child struggling in school, addiction—the burdens add up and weigh us down. And we all feel the collective burdens of lives lost or altered in natural disasters, mass shootings, and the global struggles of poverty and disease.

It’s no surprise that the bearing of burdens shows up all over scripture. And in our texts for today, we have the contrast between how Paul is trying to relate to his spiritual community, and how the scribes and Pharisees are. What differentiates the two? After all, Paul began religious life as a Pharisee. What helped him escape being a burden to his community? And more than that, how did he become someone who lessened the burdens of others?

We can immediately see from how Jesus describes the scribes and Pharisees that they are creating burdens for others because they are carrying crippling burdens of their own. Their burden is made of a toxic combination of trying to earn God’s favor by their works and demanding that everyone around them acknowledge their superior efforts. They have taken the sacred Law of Moses, which Jesus upholds in this passage, and burdened it with the deceptively heavy weight of their fragile egos.

The scribes and Pharisees that Jesus describes do not believe that God loves them freely and fully regardless of what actions they do or do not take. They are constantly hustling for God’s favor. They do not believe in an unconditionally loving God in their heart of hearts.

This is not the fault of the law, but the predictable result of any religious person who has never grown beyond the petty and fearful tyranny of the ego. There are many Christians today who suffer from this unseen burden of functional works righteousness. We say we believe God loves us, but we feel safer hedging our bets by racking up good works.

And those good works are usually seen by others. That public do-gooding starts to earn us the approval and congratulations of others, and we get addicted to it. Before long we start to think we're better than other people who aren't working as hard as we are to build the Kingdom of God. It can be a short road from "trying to help and care for others" to "holier-than-thou and insufferable."

What began as an honest search for the love of God and a life in the center of God's will has turned into our becoming a burden to our faith community. Why did this happen? What is missing?

What is missing is the space, silence, and vulnerability necessary to actually receive the radiant love of God. When we approach the Christian life as a constant stream of virtuous activity directed as loudly as possible both at God and at our faith community—"Look at me! Look at all the wonderful things I'm doing!"—the still, small voice of the Spirit is very easily drowned out. Our self-imposed burden of a needy ego, never patient enough to learn the love of God, will sooner or later become the arrogance and self-satisfaction of the scribes and Pharisees in our gospel passage today.

"You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God," Paul tells us. This "labor and toil," "night and day," that Paul speaks of consists in large part of patient and faithful prayer. Going within in silence and stillness, engaging in spiritual disciplines, finding and remaining faithful to daily spiritual practice—this is the labor and toil that over time, lifts our false internal burdens and makes us free. The freely chosen work of prayer and building spiritual intimacy with God slowly transforms us from being burdens, to merely having burdens, to one day lifting the burdens of others.

That's one half of the equation—the labor and toil of prayer and individual encounter with God. The other half is the night and day patient engagement with one another in community. Moving from being a burden to others to lifting burdens from others requires exactly that—others. The quest for gospel transformation does not take place in a bubble. There are some of us who might enjoy sitting alone all day and thinking beautiful thoughts about God—but that is not love. Individualistic spiritual practice taken to an extreme will make us a burden to our community as surely as no spiritual practice at all.

Anyone who has had to carry heavy burdens will know that balance is the key. Trying to carry heavy bags of groceries up flights of stairs in only one hand is very difficult. Shift the bags to carry them equally in both hands and the burden is suddenly much easier to bear. So it is with our balance of individual and community spiritual intimacy. Keep it all on one side of the equation and we are quickly out of balance, becoming heavy to both ourselves and others. Seek an even distribution of time alone with God and time together with God, and suddenly progress forward is smoother and easier.

Paul says in our epistle today that the Word is at work in us as believers. That's the most important thing of all as we seek to carry our own burdens and those of our fellow disciples. No burden we shoulder is ours to carry alone. The Holy Spirit within us is always present and ready to do the heavy lifting. Jesus says it himself in the Gospel of Matthew: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." The burdens of life and community may never go away, but when the love of God pervades them, they are no longer crushing weights. Our burdens become a steadying presence, anchoring and grounding us in the faithful pursuit of grace and truth. For it is when we commit to turning our burdens over to God that we are at last empowered to bear the burdens of one another. And a burden shared becomes a burden halved, as the old saying goes. Perhaps we could modify it for ourselves—a burden shared becomes a burden graced.

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