

Bearing one another's burdens

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin Massachusetts, on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 6, 2008.

Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. Matthew 11:29-30

Clowns are supposed to make us laugh. But sometimes they leave us feeling sad. There is something about a clown trying so hard to make people laugh and be happy that can seem sad. Underneath their outrageously comical garb and painted smile or frown, there may be someone struggling with his own personal feelings and emotions of which we are not aware.

Many years ago, there was a very popular film called *It's About This Carpenter* in which the main character is a clown. There is no dialogue as the clown character goes about being helpful whenever and wherever he can. He walks with people and helps them carry their burdens. His very presence among them lightens what they carry on their backs as well as in their hearts. But there are those who resent this good man and plot to seize him and torment him. They string him up with ropes tied to his arms and legs and hoist him up, jerking him around like a helpless human marionette. As his persecutors continue to mock him, his pain and suffering overwhelms him and he dies as the puppeteer vainly yanks at his lifeless body. The final scene shows the clown riding away on a lowly donkey.

In almost every story I look for and usually find a Christ figure with the redeeming qualities of wholeness, compassion and a reconciler who cares deeply about people.

God knows and cares about what is going on in our lives. Just knowing that lightens our burdens. This is what Jesus means when he offers us his yoke. The stole that a priest wears around his neck symbolizes the yoke of Christ. It reminds us that the yoke of Christ, like the yoke worn around the neck of oxen, helps shoulder the burdens of others. When we let Christ share our anxieties, fears, difficulties and responsibilities, we are relieved of the strain of having to bear it alone. When we share the burdens of others, the gravity of our own concerns is lightened. None of us needs to go it alone in this life but we have to be willing to ask for help if we are to carry on. A burden shared is a burden halved.

Jesus accomplished more in his three years of ministry than most people could in a lifetime. All sorts of people sought him out for help. As his reputation preceded him, the crowds pleaded with him to be healed. The demands put on him were exhausting and he sought solitude from all who demanded his attention. He set the example for us by giving himself wholly and without reservation to everyone.

When Jesus says that his yoke is easy and his burden is light he means that his burden is well fitted. When I was a high school student we went camping in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. We carried provisions and other gear in a rucksack that had a metal brace that fit around the lower back, giving support to the weight of the heavy pack. Jesus most likely took this imagery from his days as a carpenter when he made yokes that were fitted for oxen that eased the weight of their load. Just as a yoke for oxen is built for two, Jesus shares our burdens and the yoke fits him well.

The people with whom Jesus spent most of his time were not well off by any standard. They were carpenters, fishermen, and shepherds. Most of those with whom he associated had little formal education and lived under political, economic and religious oppression. The twelve whom Jesus chose to accompany him in his ministry supported each other in the work of Christ's mission. Most of them would not have been considered successful by the world's standards. God indeed chose those who were

considered foolish and weak to shame the wise and the strong. He helped shoulder the burdens of those who were on the margins of society.

All of us bear some personal burdens that we can't share with others. In dealing with health issues, we learn that attitude is so important in the healing process. While no one can lift the full weight of anyone else's burden, it helps to share our concerns with others, even if they may not be able to do anything about it.

As we live with the specter of continuing war and terrorism, we could allow ourselves to be crippled by fear. We would grow weak and depressed under the strain were it not for the fact that we are all in this together. It was our faith and national resolve that got us through two world wars and the great depression in the last century. That same resolve enables us to stand against intimidation, fear and paranoia today.

Taking our faith seriously and applying it in every aspect of our lives is part of being a Christian. The celebration on this Fourth of July weekend is a time to reflect on the meaning of patriotism. With all of our shortcomings as a nation, I still love my country in the same way that I love my church. It was Dr. Samuel Johnson who said that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel and by that he meant that the flag should never be used as a blindfold from reality. It is out of patriotism that we speak for or against a governmental policy. It is our great privilege to have the freedom to make our thoughts known to our legislators. I have paid personal visits to our state representative on important issues and on one occasion her response was she didn't think my congregation felt the same way. That, of course, had nothing to do with what I believed to be right. Who hasn't felt the weight of taking an unpopular stand? When you stand against the tide of public opinion for something you firmly believe, you may find yourself standing quite alone in your conviction. It would be easier to go along in order to get along, but that would also be dishonest. Christ frees us from having to be liked by everyone and avoiding any criticism. I've been described as opinionated and always felt that it was not a criticism, but a compliment! I am grateful for those in my life who have challenged me on critical issues. Their honesty reached me and stretched my thinking.

The next time you find yourself feeling down because someone has been critical with you or you hold an opinion contrary to those around you, stop, and focus on who you are and remember who loves you and feel better about yourself. Let Christ walk you through it. He's been there.