

## **“Community- Strengthened in Christ”**

**Galatians 6:1-5**

**First Presbyterian Church  
October 4, 2020**

There's a story of a tiny ant carrying a broken drinking straw much larger than he was. A man watching said to himself, "How interesting the little ant can carry something so much bigger than himself."

As he watched in fascination, the ant came to a crevice in the ground. The gap was too deep for him to go down and too wide for him to cross. So the ant took the straw, laid it down over the crevice, and walked across the straw, picking it up on the other end and continuing on his way. The ant turned his burden into a blessing.

This is exactly what the Apostle Paul is telling us to do – turn our burdens into blessings. But just how do we do that? Well I can tell you, it's not just a matter of us as individuals figuring out some way to survive the indifferent and overwhelming circumstances of life. It's not about being a loan wolf who lives or dies based on your stamina and cunning, your strength and wits.

No. As Christians, we're not loan wolves. We're much more like a colony of ants who work together for the greater good. That's what the community of faith is. Paul, in making this point to his fellow church members of 1<sup>st</sup> century Galatia – and to our fellow church members here in Independence – he begins by saying, "My friends ...." Paul is reminding us that we are all friends – friends who are connected to one another in Christ.

Among friends, there are no loan wolves, right? I mean by definition, a loan wolf doesn't have any friends. He's a loaner. Now, when it comes to the community of faith, there is always a place for those loan wolves out there in the world, a place to find a home, to be welcomed in, whenever they're ready to enter the pack, to begin hanging around the community of faith.

Because welcoming new people is what we do as a church. No one is turned away, no matter what. In fact, Paul says, "... If anyone is detected in a transgression (and we'll get to the word "transgression" in a minutes) ... If anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit, should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness."

By transgression, Paul is talking about living outside the faith – choices and actions that are not based on being a follower of Christ, but rather based on the ways of the world. There is a certain loan-wolf mentality in this world, isn't there? We are taught to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, take care of No. 1, get ours before the other person takes it all, sink or swim on our own.

And it can become very tempting to live our lives that way, particularly when we are doing OK and it's the other person who's struggling, who feels left to fend for himself or herself.

So Paul warns us about that, saying, "Take care that you yourselves are not tempted." Don't be tempted to pass by someone in need, to see yourself as superior to those who are struggling, to kid yourself into thinking that you made it all on your own – so why can't they?!?

Look friends, none of us made it on our own. We've all needed and been given and received help along the way. This is why Paul says, "... If those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves." In other words, if you think you're better than others or just more naturally blessed, you're mistaken. "All must test their own work," says Paul. "Then that work, rather than their neighbor's work –(comparing yourself to how good or bad others have it) -your own approach to life., will become a cause for pride."

Of course, we do compare ourselves to others, all the time. There's something in all of us that just can't help but count our blessings compared to those who have it rougher. And that's ok, to a certain extent. But heaven forbid, we should lord it over them. And yet, some in this world do that. They think they deserve the good things they've gotten in life, and if someone else is struggling, well it's probably their own fault, it's just the way of the world.

But it is not the way of Christ. As Christians, we know that "there but for the grace of God, go I," don't we? We know that our fortunes could change at any moment – economically, socially, emotionally, physically or whatever. And as Christians – as members of this community of faith – we know that we are never alone. There is always someone to turn to when we're in need, and there is always someone we can reach out to with a helping hand, no matter how good or bad we have it.

That is the community of faith that Christ formed and built up and sustains even now, whenever two or three gathered in his name. In this community of faith – instead of being set apart based on our differences – God uses our differences to bind us together. And in that, God makes each of stronger, both those in need and those able to help. "Bear one another's burdens," says Paul, "and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ." ... The law of Christ? Apparently, it's not even an option whether or not Christians share in each others struggles. It's the law of Christ, the law of Christ that says "love your neighbor as yourself." Under this law – under this way of living together, of doing life together – no one is better than anybody else. We are all dependent on the grace of God.

Now, those who aren't feeling God's grace, who can't bring themselves to accept it, that's just who Paul encouraging us to help the most. We are to help those who feel closed off, off from God, shut out from the grace of God. We are to help them come in out of the cold and be here among us,

help them to lay their burdens before the Lord. One of the best ways to help someone else accept help is to show them how it's done. For many people, it's hard to accept help from others. As I said, we're taught in this world to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, take care of No. 1, get ours before the other person takes it all, to sink or swim on our own. It becomes ingrained in who we are.

But with Jesus, it's never about who we think we are, it's never about us, especially when it feels like it's about us. When it feels like we're bearing the weight of the world all alone, that's when we are called to dig deep in our faith and allow Christ to raise us up.

If you're reluctant to reach out to me or a fellow church member for help, know that doing so is not a self-serving act. No! It's a bold testament to God's love for us and our mutual bond in Christ. Suffering silently and struggling alone is just not how God created us to be, and it's not how God builds up the community of faith.

That little ant carrying that big piece of drinking straw I mentioned earlier – he wasn't carrying that straw because he was thirsty and the glass was too tall. He wasn't carrying that straw for himself, at all. He carried that straw to build up the ant colony, the community in which he lived and had his life. And that's how he turned his burden into a blessing for him and others.

And so it is with us. Whenever we help someone amid their struggle and burden – or allow others to help us – we are doing it, not for ourselves, but for God, not to build ourselves up or be lifted out of our struggles alone, but rather, to build up the community of faith, and to lift it up to the glory of God to turn our burdens into a blessing for all. Amen.

## **Pastoral Prayer**

We come as many people, O God, yet gather here and online and around the world as one people in this time of prayer. Some of us come with joyful hearts for the blessings of our lives, even as we are mindful of and praying amid the struggles of others.

We come concerned about recent medical test and anxious about critical medical treatments.

We come also, O Lord, thankful for the spiritual refreshment and nourishment of this day, even as we anticipate the week ahead.

However, we come this day, gracious God, and wherever we are, we know you are there. All of our moments are your moments.

Help us to remember this, as we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us – the Lord's Prayer – lifting our hearts and voices together in song, praying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;**

**and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**