

## ***BEAR ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS***

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University Congregational Church

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### **Reading: Galatians 6: 1 – 3 (RSV)**

**Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.**

The story is told of a man walking through a forest and came upon a fox who had lost all of its legs. The wounds were old and healed, and the man naturally wondered how the fox survived. Some time later a tiger came to the clearing where the fox rested. The tiger had game in its mouth. He ate his fill and then placed the rest of the meat before the fox.

The next day the man observed the same procedure. The man thought to himself, "How great is the providence of God. I too shall rest in this field and trust God to provide me with all that I need."

Several days later the man was dehydrated and most hungry. In fact, he was very near death. A light came down from the heavens and from that light a voice boomed, "You are on the path of error! Open your eyes to the truth. Stop imitating the disabled fox and follow the example of the tiger."

There are many who approach religion like the complacent gentleman. They believe that faith means God will provide all their needs and their role is that of passive recipient of God's grace. They look to the church as something akin to a shopping mall with a really large food court. They hope to pay as little as possible for the greatest spiritual bargains to be found in the city. That is why many church fundraisers ask prospective donors, "What has the church done for you lately." Or, "What would your life be like without the church?" Well, quite frankly, a little less hectic and a lot less stressful. But is that what the church is all about? No, I think the church is the place you come to give yourself away; to feed the foxes, rescue the lambs, and lift up the birds who have fallen out of their nests.

I believe that the church – and you and I are the church – is called to the task of restoration. Restoration is the work of reconstructing those who are broken. Restoration is the realignment of those who are crooked or disoriented. In his letter to the church at Galatia, St. Paul reminds the church of the ministry of restoration, even to those who have missed the mark, failed themselves and their families miserably, and who have violated the community's standards

and values. In the Pauline sense restoration means reconciling the alienated, healing the wounded, finding the lost and led astray.

I imagine that many of us are repelled at this notion. There are many who think that the moral and personal failure of our fellow parishioners is none of our business. We do not like to admit our own failure and we are not sure we want to belong to a church populated by losers. Like Mark Twain, we are not sure we would want to belong to a church that would have us as a member. We must not admit failure, or brokenness, or character flaws, or sin. We avoid the work of restoration because we do not want to confess our limitations. Sadly this also means that we avoid those in our congregation who, through no fault of their own, have lost their jobs, their life savings, or their health. We avoid the divorced, the pregnant teen, and the mentally ill.

This is a very difficult thing for people of many faiths to come to terms with, whether they are Unitarian Universalists, Catholics, Jews, or Protestants. We do not like to think of ourselves as people in need of restoration. Restoring others caught in any kind of wrong doing, from theft to adultery, from dealing from the bottom of the deck to pedophilia runs contrary to our understanding of who we are as a

religious community. We do not think of ourselves as “those kind of people.” “We do not do those kinds of things,” we protest. As soon as we lift up the ministry of restoration we are forced to look at our faith communities and ourselves with open eyes. Wide open. We are forced to come to terms with the darkness of the soul, the frailties of character, and the behaviors that wound and destroy human beings.

I also think that we do not live in a culture that really believes in restoration. We live in a culture that believes in retribution, judgment, and punishment. Our first impulse when we are wronged is to get even. If someone has offended us or harmed us we immediately call a lawyer seeking the greatest damage suit we can inflict. Ours is a primitive society that believes justice means an “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” More accurately it means a “bullet for bullet or a bomb for a bomb.”

I also think that we avoid the ministry of restoration because we have no idea what it means. We have seldom, if ever, experienced it. Like the rest of society our experience of the church has been one of blame, shame, guilt, and judgment. I have never served a progressive congregation that did not have seriously wounded members. By wounded I mean those who are spiritually wounded. These are

women and men who have been abused in body, mind, or spirit by members of their churches, Sunday school teachers, ministers, and bishops. Characteristically they are anti-clerical, refuse to grant authority and power to the Board or minister, and they are extremely intolerant of others. A therapist once said to me, “The church is the last institution that still shoots its wounded.” And let us confess that any congregation by ill will or clumsy intent has the capability of wounding one another. Restoration is an experience that many of us have never known in the very institution that God calls for the work of restoration.

Finally, I think that we do not do the ministry of restoration because it is hard work. Restoration is time consuming, frustrating, fraught with risk and failure, and seldom an experience with clear victories. I cannot think of one social issue where this is not the case. Restoration is the essence of civil rights but no one can claim complete victory for women, people of color, gays and lesbians, or the disabled. About the time we get something right, such as Head Start, someone comes along to shake its foundations and put it in serious jeopardy. Efforts at peace making are never ending. The work of restoration is hard work and never done. If you have ever had to

battle an addiction or depression you know what I am talking about. If you have ever had a child who suffers from bulimia, or a learning disability, or an attention deficit disorder, you know how hard the work of restoration can be. If you or someone you love has been the victim of a catastrophic accident or disease restoration is never fully achieved.

Yet despite all of our objections and excuses, Paul says the church is called to the ministry of restoration. And if only to humor him, what are the qualities or characteristics of restoration? How might the community of faith engage this ministry of restoration?

I think that the first quality is humility. We have to have an honest understanding of our selves and our motives if we are to be effective in the ministry of restoration. Many people who enter the field of social justice often do so from a sense of outrage and anger. There are certainly many reasons to feel anger about the injustices that we see or experience. But ministry founded on anger usually directs us toward blaming and judgment. If our sense of fairness is chapped we might become arrogant and disrespectful. I have known many people who work with the poor or incarcerated with attitudes that are patronizing and condescending. We simply cannot be in the

judgment seat if we are going to effectively restore people to wholeness and health.

No, we can only enter the ministry of reconciliation and peace making with wariness of our assumptions, pride, and fear. We are too ready to call attention to the faults of others – the unemployed, the single mom, the government. Humility is the only path to restoration. And that means that we enter such work with the recognition that we too are flawed, tempted, and too often weak.

I am reminded of the monastic brother at Scetis who committed a fault. A council was called to judge him. Abba Moses was invited but he refused to go. The priest sent someone to say to him, “Come, for everyone is waiting for you.”

Abba Moses got up and went into the council hall. On his back was a large jug of water. The jug had a leak and the water drained onto the floor behind Abba Moses. The brothers called out, “What is this Father?”

Abba Moses replied, “My sins run out behind me and I do not see them. Today I am coming to judge the faults of others.” When they heard that they said no more to the offending brother but forgave him.

Restoration requires of us an accurate self-assessment that even allows us to see that our best efforts are flawed and there is no room for boasting. The Rabbi of Lelov said to his Hasidim, “A man cannot be redeemed until he recognizes the flaws in his soul and tries to mend them. A nation cannot be redeemed until it recognizes the flaws in its soul and tries to mend them. Whoever permits no recognition of his flaws, be it man or nation, permits no redemption. We can be redeemed to the extent to which we recognize ourselves.” Restoration begins with the humble understanding of the human nature that walks around in our skin.

This is what St. Paul means when he says that we are to bear one another’s burdens as we bear our own. It is the paradox of the community of faith. We bear the limitations and failures of our brothers and sisters as we bear our own limitations and failures.

The ministry of restoration is rooted in humility as it seeks out those who are more broken than we are, who have wounded and harmed others, who have wrecked their lives on the shoals of greed. Restoration is about binding together the wounded and hard hearted. I think this is one of the hardest lessons and tests of faith. We naturally expect the offenders to come to us, or the people they have

hurt, with apology and offers of restitution. They should confess their sins and beg for absolution. Well, I guess that happens, sometimes. But in my experience it is not the norm. Rather, restoration is initiated by the wounded and alienated. That is to say, the victims often initiate restoration.

You see, the guilty are too much in denial. Their egos have put up a huge wall of excuses and rationalizations that dwarf the Great Wall of China. Barbed wire, growling Dobermans, and signs that read, “No trespassing,” and “Keep Out” enclose their consciences! They are morally paralyzed and cannot be agents of restoration.

But the wounded healers, to borrow that wonderful image from Henri Nouwen, are the most capable of restoration. They are the most hopeful that wholeness and reconciliation can take place. Yes, they are deeply hurt, but they know first hand the experience of injustice and they continue to pray for justice. They have not closed their eyes to the damage and pain done to them or their families. And they fervently hope that the pain can be relieved. Restoration can only emerge from those who hope.

Now I am not saying that the guilty do not bear the consequences of their actions. I am not suggesting that those who

violate the criminal code can avoid the criminal justice system. But much of what is broken in human communities involves trust, fidelity, and responsibilities to self, family, and society. And I also understand that there are some people who are beyond the grasp of restoration. The ministry of restoration does not concern itself with a futures scheme that bets on the outcome of its work. We are not responsible for how others respond. We are only responsible for tendering the gifts of grace and reconciliation.

You might ask why we take up the ministry of restoration. I think there are many answers. Restoration is the only future possible for the human race. Recrimination and revenge spells death for human beings. Violence in any form will finally destroy people, families, and civilizations. Terrorism and a national security system founded on weapons of mass destruction, regardless of the nation's identity or ideology turns us all to dust and ashes.

Restoration is what it means to be a church. That is our essential mission; despite all of the time we spend on the budget, the issues about music, personnel, and religious education. All of those are essential realities about church life. But perhaps we might reframe them from time to time to remind us of what we are about.

The question is, how do our budget, music, staff, and religious education promote the ministry of restoration? Do they restore relationships, promote tolerance and respect, strengthen personal and corporate integrity, champion freedom, provide for the poor, and protect the weak? If not we do not need them.

And if you are wondering how you might engage the ministry of restoration in your church may I encourage you to be involved with the outreach board, the Stephen Ministry program, or the Christian education council. And there are countless opportunities to volunteer in civic organizations that have a role in the human restoration project.

Restoration – our souls yearn for it, our families hunger for it, our community is desperate for it, and the world is dying for the want of it. Restoration – as people of faith we are called to it and it is the mission of the church to our community and world.

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