

Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Galatians 6:1-10

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.

Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher. Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh; you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Sermon

This month we are examining the theme of a harvest of grace as we contemplate God's blessings and what our best response is to those blessings. Last week we looked at the first offering recorded in the Bible, the offerings of Cain and Abel and there we saw the trouble we get into when we start to believe that our giving, our sacrifices are given with an expectation of reward or God's regard. We do not give because we want to cause God to bless us - but instead we give out of the blessings that God has already given - in gratitude and praise.

Today we are turning to a different time, out of the Old Testament and into the New, to the time of the early church and to the letters of Paul. Paul's letter to the church in Galatia comes at a pivotal point in the church's formation - a moment when it was working to define its mission and identity. How will the faith community be known, what markers will identify the church as The Church? What will be the vision that moves the community to live into its calling, its mission, its ministry?

If you have some time in the next day or two, I would urge you to read the whole of Galatians with the context of identity formation in mind. It is only six chapters long but those six chapters are rich in content. Not only is it good to read Scripture in our daily life, but I would also contend that White Lick is also walking through a moment of identity formation. We are working to create a healthy answer to the question who are we, who has Christ called us to be, and out of our identity what should we do as Christ's church in this time and place.

So what does Paul have to say in the end of this important letter to the early church, and to us? In typical Pauline language, it can be confusing when in one sentence he says, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." and then a few sentences later says, "For all must carry their own loads." But I think there is some real profound truth in these two verses.

In many ways, the church has bought into the first sentence, that it is called to bear one another's burdens. That is why we have a board of deacons whose responsibility it is to care for the congregation and share a meal with those who are coming home from the hospital or grieving the loss of a loved one. That is why we have a Mission team whose responsibility it is to see the burdens of those outside our congregation whom we can help in their time of need - the homeless, the hungry, the scared and the addict. That is also why you have me, a pastor whose responsibility includes reaching out to our congregation in pastoral care and to our community and the world with love and kindness. Each one of us here believe in the calling of the church to help bear one another's burdens and that in doing so it is the fulfillment of the law of Christ - the law of love.

But what about this bit about "carrying our own load"? Could Paul not make up his mind? On it's own, we can also accept this notion. That each of us are responsible for our own faith journey. No one can walk our path for us, we have to take each step,

make each choice about right or left for ourselves. We each have our own load in life to hold, it is our calling, our responsibility, our purpose and no one else can take it for us. But we also have to be careful that we don't fall too far down the path of personal salvation or individual's faith. The notion that in some way that the congregation of faith is only a place that asks of us to give and has nothing to offer to our walk of faith and life has pushed more than a few people to walk away from the Body of Christ.

Bear one another's burdens, Carry our own load. A paradox of opposing phrases by Paul, yet there is great truth in them. Paul wants to remind this young church in Galatia that at its core, the identity of the church is a community that cares for one another, strengthens one another in our faith and hope and love, and though we may elect some who are called to help lead us, in the end it is the responsibility of each of us to do our part, to carry our load, and to fulfill our calling within the community of faith.

I wasn't sure what image I might use for the cover of our bulletin this week, but when I found this one, I knew it was the right image for us today. I believe it perfectly illustrates Paul's words for the church, and image that can help White Lick live into its identity as well. Each person represented is carrying their load, some on their back, some on their heads, children lifting what is appropriate for a child - and every person has their hand on the burden of another person, lifting, lightening, caring for another. This is the church that Paul envisioned in Galatia. This is the church that we can be today. What a beautiful image, what a beautiful hope and light. And what makes me so happy is that this is not just a fantasy or impossible dream, but this is something that we are so close to today. It is something we can obtain. Thanks be to God for a load to carry, and a community that comes together to lighten the load. Amen