“Sharing the Burden”
Romans 12.9-15 and Galatians 6.1-2,9-10
Sunday, November 13, 2016
Rev. Charlie Berthoud, Covenant Presbyterian Church

If you only ever read one chapter of the Bible, read Romans 12. We just heard excerpts from these wonderful words that conclude Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, a church that was dealing with some theological conflict. In Romans 12, Paul offers an aspirational picture of what the Christian life is about.

Our second reading is also at the conclusion of a letter Paul wrote to a community in conflict. (It’s probably not a coincidence that we are hearing two readings addressed to communities in conflict just a few days after a very contentious election.)

Galatians was written to a community dealing with a theological conflict, as they wondered about various religious traditions. Paul urged them to tear down the walls that divided them, and he concludes by urging them to journey together, take care of each other, and work for the common good.

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. 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.

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture.

Every year on the first Sunday of November, we celebrate All Saints Sunday. We read the names of loved ones who have died, and we light candles in their memory, and we sing “For All the Saints,” and we break bread to share communion, and many of us cry at least a little bit.

It’s the one Sunday a year, when it seems like it’s OK to cry in church.

I’d like to suggest that today, or any Sunday for that matter, is an OK time to cry in church. We all experience pain and loss, and too often we keep our emotions bottled up inside.
We need to learn more about how to care for each other. So I’m glad that the Presbyterian Church USA has designated today Caregiving Sunday.

I want to tell you a little more about my brother John, who died nine years ago. Last week in the sermon, I think I painted too negative a picture of him. Yes, like many older brothers do, he gave me a fair amount of grief over the years in a variety of ways, including by gloating about his favorite sports teams doing better than my favorite sports team, as I mentioned last week.

But more importantly, he was kind, and gracious, and thoughtful. He and I had different opinions about politics but a common desire to make the world a better place. We were able to listen to each other and often times respectfully disagree and we still had a great time together. I didn’t always agree with him, but I had great respect for his integrity and thoughtfulness, because he was a kind and gracious human being.

And he was the world’s greatest uncle. One time, about 11 years ago, he came to visit us in Pittsburgh. Our boys were 4 and 2, and they had decided that their favorite colors were red and yellow.

So Uncle John gets off the plane with two big playground balls—one red and one yellow.

We had a lot of fun playing around in the baggage claim area, long after his suitcase had arrived. We always had a good time together.

So when he died suddenly a couple years later, we were all devastated.

I was blessed to be part of a loving church community that surrounded us and cared for us. As I waded through unknown territory, people shared cards, hugs, and encouraging words. And if I had a nickel for every time someone said, “I’ll pray for you” I would be a very wealthy man.
And I heard that phrase—“I’ll pray for you”—in two distinct ways:

1. People were praying for God to give us comfort and peace.

2. At a time when I had a hard time praying, I felt like people were actually doing my praying for me, since I wasn’t fully able to do so myself.

I felt something like I imagine the paralyzed man in Mark chapter 2 felt. He was on the mat, unable to move himself, when his four friends picked him up and carrying him to Jesus. Because of the crowd they couldn't get near Jesus, so they went up on the roof, made a hole, lowered him down. And the text tells us that before healing him, Jesus commended the faith not of the paralyzed man, but of the four friends.

I felt like other people were bearing my burdens and helping to share the load. I experienced how the people around us were living out Paul’s words in Romans 12: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

The reality is, we all carry heavy burdens; some of us are really good at hiding those burdens. Many of us, most of us have lost a loved one, and while the pain gets better, it never really goes away.

Many years ago, I heard a speaker at a conference, who was encouraging us to be kind say: “Everyone stands next to a pool of tears.” I think I appreciate that idea more as each year goes by. “Everyone stands next to a pool of tears.”

Too frequently we are told to hide our tears and to “be strong.” Well-meaning Christians tell other Christians who are grieving “Don’t cry, your loved one is in heaven.”

I've always been puzzled by that sentiment. Why shouldn't someone be crying after a loved one has died? Yes, we can rejoice in the hope of heaven, but at the same time we can be sad as we miss our loved ones right here with us. So it’s OK to cry at times of sadness.
The Bible, particularly the book of Psalms, gives voice to grief and sadness and fear. Our new hymnal does too, with several hymns that help us to acknowledge and process our sadness.

In a few minutes we’re going to sing a poignant hymn about dementia and memory loss, something that just about every family experiences, but something that we too rarely acknowledge together. As we sing I hope you’ll realize that none of us is alone. [“When Memory Fades”]

A few minutes later in worship, we’re going to sing a verse from another beautiful song, “The Servant Song” which reminds us that we care for each other along the way:

   We are pilgrims on a journey; we’re together on the road.
   We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.

So I’m glad to be part of a church that knows the truth of these words. Our newsletter is called “The Caravan” which is a wonderful image for the Christian life: people travelling together in sometimes challenging territory, helping each other along the way.

And I’m glad to be part of a church with so many caring people, where we do bear one another’s burdens.

We have a good a variety of small groups—men’s and women’s groups, Dinners for 8 groups, fellowship groups, book study, groups, coffee and donut groups—where people can find safe space to share and care.

We have caring people in a variety of roles. Our Deacons are very good at helping us to care for each other in a variety of ways, and I thank God for them. Our Welcome Team is also very caring, particularly for newer folks here at Covenant. I am blessed with wonderful staff colleagues who are very caring in their work.

And we are especially blessed to have a Care Team here at Covenant, with about 15 specially trained individuals who have learned how to share the burden with people in need, in one-on-one relationships.
The Care Team members know how important it is to give people time and space to share their joys and their sadness. They know that it’s OK to not have all the answers. They know that when someone is sad we don’t *always* have to change the topic to try to cheer them up.

My hope for this church is that we all get the care we need, and if you’re not getting that care, please let me or Jeff or Clara or one of my staff colleagues know. With such a big church sometimes people do slip through the cracks, but we try to avoid that.

Another of my hopes for this church is that we keep growing as caregivers, that we keep finding newer and deeper ways to carry the burdens for each other at difficult times.

There is a fundamental rhythm of the Christian life. God loves us, so that we can love our neighbors. God blesses us, so we can be a blessing to others. God cares for us and patches up our wounds, so we can care for each other.

To help us get there, the ushers have something for you today: a small card, with today’s theme verse from Galatians, along with a prayer.

As they pass out the cards now, I encourage you to think of one person you know who is carrying a heavy burden right now. Maybe grief. Maybe illness. Maybe despair over our country or our world. I invite you to write their name on this card and keep it in your wallet or on your night-stand, or on your kitchen table, or your bathroom mirror, or in your Bible.

And I challenge you to pray for that person every day for the next week. Use the prayer on the card or one of your own. I am convinced that God hears our prayers when we pray for others, and as we pray God often shows us a way to care.

As we pray for others we need to pray for ourselves, so we can stay rooted and grounded in God’s love, so we can continually receive God’s grace, mercy, and kindness.
I invite you now to join in saying the prayer on the card, and feel free to speak out loud the first name of the person for whom you are praying, or hold their name in silence.

Loving God, I pray for ___________.

Send your peace in the midst of the storm.

Give hope in a time of despair. Heal them, in body, mind, and spirit. Surround them with your love. Give hope for the future.

I also pray for myself, that you would fill me with your love and renew my strength to live as a faithful Christian.

Amen.