



"CARRY ON"

SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 66: 10-14; GALATIANS 6: 1-16
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

July 7, 2019

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Isaiah 66:10-14

66:10 Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her--

66:11 that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.

66:12 For thus says the LORD: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees.

66:13 As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

66:14 You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bodies shall flourish like the grass; and it shall be known that the hand of the LORD is with his servants, and his indignation is against his enemies.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Galatians 6:(1-6), 7-16

6:1 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.

6:2 Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

6:3 For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.

6:4 All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride.

6:5 For all must carry their own loads.

6:6 Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

6:7 Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.

6:8 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.

6:9 So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up.

6:10 So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

6:11 See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!

6:12 It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised--only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

6:13 Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh.

6:14 May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

6:15 For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!

6:16 As for those who will follow this rule--peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

If there had been planes in existence when the Apostle Paul wrote to the churches in the Galatian region, carry on luggage would have been the perfect metaphor for his closing lines.

When you fly you have to be intentional about what you carry on—and aware of what you are asking others to carry, what you add to the load that the plane has to bear.

On a plane the weight of the load is shared, and the weight of the load is evenly distributed to make the journey possible.

And in these last sentences of the letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul summarizes in no uncertain terms the nature of fruitful, flourishing, faithful Christian community—it's about the way we carry things—our own stuff, the burdens of others, and the real demands that come with following Christ.

What do you carry, how do you carry it, what do others carry, how do you share the load?

For Paul these are questions about mutual accountability, self-awareness and self-reflection, and a spiritual/existential cause and affect that folds out of how we carry ourselves in the world, in community.

Last week we talked about the fruits of the Spirit (“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”) being what we see in a community when the Spirit is leading the way—not a to do list, but a watch list—these fruits are how we know when the Spirit is present.

This week Paul is much more oriented on the to-dos: mutual accountability, self-reflection, mending and restoring relationships, and putting Christ's saving love at the center of how a community functions. These are the things he writes about in big letters. These practices are the right we should never tire of doing.

Accountability is about trustworthy relationships—relationships that can bear the weight of hard truth, relationships that share the load bearing required for holding each other accountable. The beautiful thing about Paul's call to mutual accountability here is that he bundles it with self-awareness and self-reflection.

Christ centered community is made up of people not afraid to look at themselves in the mirror. Christ centered, Spirit filled community means people welcome opportunities to “test their own work.”

This holiday week my family and I traveled through seven states. We visited family and the hometowns that formed John and me. We traveled not only across state lines but through layers of the competing narratives that define America these days. We traveled across stories and perspectives, and through memories and mentalities.

We drove through lands that were tribal lands—Cherokee, Shawnee, Erie, Susquehannocks, Monongahela, Catawba—to name just a few.

Journeying through America's geography includes the weight of narratives we have failed to tell each other, the narratives we have ignored.

We visited the church where I grew up in Kentucky—where they have decided to remove a statue of a confederate soldier that is on the church's property.

We drove by the stone walls that were near my house growing up built by enslaved people probably over 200 years ago and are still standing.

We traveled through areas of pristine horse farms and drove past substandard housing. We saw the sky scape of Pittsburgh and the lush, seemingly untouched mountains of West Virginia.

We observed July 4 surrounded by white affluence at a country club in Pennsylvania. We listened to stories from our aging parents and other relatives about where and what we come from.

We reflected on how we were formed by small towns in America in ways that are still with us and in ways that are continuing to be disrupted and dismantled.

It occurred to me as we made our way through these narratives, these memories, these iterations of America, what a treasured asset it is for my family that we are in a faith community that is practicing mutual accountability and self-reflection. Passing through all those layers of competing narratives and perspectives, we were keenly aware of the pain that comes when narratives become weapons, when voices are silenced because they tell us things we don't want to hear.

Mutual accountability and self-awareness in a church like Grace Covenant—a church deeply impacted by white ways of being and doing, means we must be practiced at not only listening to competing narratives, but at knowing the narratives that we most need to hear to be held accountable.

What do we carry, how do we carry it, what do others carry, how do we share the load?

The 4th of July is loaded with the weight of America's complicated, painful, and promising narratives of freedom. And our faith must be brought to bear on how we locate ourselves in this American story. If anyone should feel urgency about the integrity of freedom in America, it should be those of us who follow Jesus—the one who sets us free!

It is not enough for us celebrate freedom. We must also hold ourselves and our country accountable for the ways we boast of freedom at the same time we normalize all kinds of bondage—the bondage of oppression, the bondage of mistaking ourselves for God, the bondage of defying God, the bondage of supremacy, the bondage of legalism, the bondage of status and consumption and grasping at being better than everyone else.

Paul was not wishy washy on this mandate for Christian community to live out of the freedom Christ died for us to have. Paul is most upset about community being broken when relationships deteriorate into connections that demean, estrange, oppress, and incarcerate.

Many of you may have been reminded these last several days on social media or elsewhere of Frederick Douglass' famous speech delivered to the *Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Association who had invited Douglass to speak at their July Fourth Independence Day Celebration in Rochester, N.Y in 1852*, "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?" He refused to come on July 4, but instead delivered the address on July 5.

Parts of his speech are often repeated this time of year--many of us may be familiar with the famous reading by James Earl Jones of this speech--that famous reading is only five minutes of what was an hour-long address. Douglass' scathing speech is about the moral hypocrisy of America celebrating the Declaration of Independence when people were enslaved. It was a call for America to be held accountable for such a grotesque breach of integrity.

Indigenous people of many different tribal identities ask similar questions about the Declaration of Independence and July 4 celebrations. Many have pointed to the language embedded in the Declaration of Independence about "all men being created equal" being followed just 30 lines below with language that calls indigenous people "merciless Indian savages."¹

This year, for the first time, I made it my business to find Douglass' speech in its entirety and read it all.² And to learn more about how indigenous people in American regard July 4.

While I was already acquainted with the way Douglass called the government and white Americans to account, I was not aware how much of his speech calls the church to account. Douglass said:

The American church is guilty, when viewed in connection with what it is doing to uphold slavery; but it is superlatively guilty when viewed in connection with its ability to abolish slavery. The sin of which it is guilty is one of omission as well as of commission.

Douglass was convinced that if the church had garnered its resources and energy to end slavery, that slavery would indeed have ended much earlier.

The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home. It saps the foundation of religion... it fosters pride; it breeds insolence; it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it; and yet, you cling to it,

as if it were the sheet anchor of all your hopes. Oh! be warned! be warned! a horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation's bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic; for the love of God, tear away, and fling from you the hideous monster, and let the weight of twenty millions crush and destroy it forever!

Douglass levels his sharpest criticism at the church for its failure to use its social capital to hold the country accountable. How does the church heed Douglass' warning today at this time of year?

The use of religion to destroy community and to oppress is also embedded in the way the 4th of July plays out in tribal communities around America today.

In the 1880s...the U.S. government developed what has come to be called the Religious Crimes Code—that prohibited American Indian ceremonial life...the code banned [Native] dances and feasts, disrupted religious practices, and destroyed or confiscated sacred objects, under threat of imprisonment and the withholding of treaty rations... In response to this policy of cultural and religious suppression, some tribes saw in the 4th of July and the commemoration of American independence a chance to continue their own important ceremonies... That history is why a disproportionate number of ... tribal gatherings take place on or near the 4th of July and are often the social highlights of the year. Over time these cultural ceremonies became tribal homecomings. American Indian veterans in particular were welcomed home as modern-day followers of warrior traditions.³

There are many ways the complicated narratives of freedom and oppression in our country reverberate today. Are we aware enough of ourselves as people of faith, as Americans, as Jesus followers, to hold ourselves and our country accountable to the ideals of our faith and our country?

We cannot deny the ways our country still carries the weight of violence, generational trauma, and oppression. And Douglass' strong words to the church still reverberate—how is the church helping to prop up oppression? And more importantly what is the church not doing to heal the wounds of oppression that are still festering in our country? How is the church an instrument of bondage? How is the church an instrument of freedom?

We carry that baggage with us as we come to the Lord's Table in the wake of July 4th 2019.

What do we carry, how do we carry it, what do others carry, how do we share the load?

What does it mean to encounter this merciful feast of God's abundant love when we carry all that we do?

The words of another prophet remind us that we also carry deep narratives of God's abundance and provision, narratives and experiences of being fed, of reveling in moments of God's gentleness, God's nurturing love.

Isaiah's prophecy spoke into a time of upheaval, a time of profound cultural loss--- loss of land, loss of identity, loss of sacred space. It is no coincidence that Isaiah is so rich with feminine imagery for God. In times of cultural upheaval we need ways to remind ourselves that God gives us what we need for the journey, that we continue to be nurtured and nourished for the work of transformation.

The question of what we carry includes the question of how we continue the work of building beloved community when the world needs us to grow and mature in our faithful witness as Christ's people in a world that still suffers in the grip of oppression and bondage.

This is a table where we experience again and again the delight of God's capacity to feed us with generosity and love—and to invite us to the feast by way of the cross, by way of the truth that can set us free.

“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up.”

That's Paul's way of telling us aspiring Jesus followers living in a contested and complicated world to carry on.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://nativenewsonline.net/currents/the-dilemma-of-the-fourth-of-july/>

² <https://www.theroot.com/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july-1836083536>

³ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/national-museum-american-indian/2019/07/04/do-american-indians-celebrate-4th-july/>