

“Excess Baggage”

“Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”

For our 25th wedding anniversary, Susan and I planned a trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico, a city we had wanted to visit for many years. In searching for the best means of transportation, we book a flight on Southwest Airlines, one of the leading “no frills” airlines in the USA. When Southwest advertises itself as “no frills,” the airline isn’t kidding: in exchange for low airfares, several of the usual amenities found on most airlines are missing. There is no first class or coach, but merely one class in which the seats are tightly packed together (a real challenge for people of my height!). There are no in-flight meals, so most passengers bring their own sandwiches on board. There are no movies or in-flight entertainment; again, you bring that onto the plane. Southwest doesn’t even offer assigned seats; you queue up according to whether your ticket begins with an A, B, or C, and then select whatever seat is available.

But one thing that Southwest does offer that sets it apart from other airlines in a positive way is that it doesn’t charge for checked baggage, which can cost \$25 or more on other airlines. Of course, there’s a catch: the bag has to be under the maximum limit. All bags are weighed at check-in, and any bag that’s over the limit is subject to a stiff charge. We discovered this when we checked in at the Albuquerque airport for our return flight to New York; evidently we had bought a few too many souvenirs during our stay in Santa Fe, and we had exceeded the limit. But one very helpful Southwest ticket agent gave us some “off the record” advice: simply distribute the load among all of our bags so that no one bag was over the limit. So there we were, opening our bags on the sidewalk outside the terminal, moving our items around so that no one bag exceeded the limit. Thanks to their advice, we avoided being caught with excess baggage.

Carrying excess baggage can lead to unforeseen challenges in many aspects of our lives. If we overload our car or truck, it can overtax the engine and leave us stranded on the side of the road. If we are working in the yard and overload a basket or wheelbarrow, we can do damage to these containers – or even worse, to ourselves. If we place too much weight on an outdoor deck, it can lead to a collapse that can result in serious damage and bodily injury. We need to take great care lest the baggage we are placing or carrying exceeds an intended limit.

We also need to take great care that we do not overload ourselves with forms of excess baggage that don’t physically weigh us down but can nonetheless overburden us and those in our lives. We can become overwhelmed by an excessive work load, being burdened with responsibilities to no one person can shoulder. We can become weighed down with worries, fears, and anxieties that can be as excessive as any physical load. Our lives can become so buried with excessive burdens that it may feel impossible to move forward or accomplish anything that will benefit ourselves or others. Too many of our lives are compromised or destroyed by the excess baggage that has been placed upon our shoulders.

For the Christians of Asia Minor who were the original recipients of the First Letter of Peter, their decision to confess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord had burdened them with the stigma of being labeled “aliens and exiles.” In order to be accepted in the societies in which they lived, one had to conform to the norms and expectations of that time and place, which included worship of pagan gods and conforming to the corresponding beliefs and practices. The Christian faith, on the other hand, calls its followers to a life that is radically different from what would lead to acceptance from others in their midst; as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, it means that those who follow Jesus must *“present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by*

the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2). Because they chose not to “be conformed to this world,” many of these Christians paid the price of being deemed outsiders, which meant being shunned by family and friends, dismissed as “not a people” and suffering through the “fiery ordeals” of persecution that was the fate of many in the early church who decided to follow Jesus.

As we turn our attention to this epistle this morning, we hear the Apostle encourage those who are “beloved” to *“not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”* (4:12). Because Christians know that the glory and power belong forever to God through Christ, they are able to face the ordeals imposed upon them during the passing age in which they live. It is in this confidence that Christians are able to live faithfully. They should not be surprised at the suffering that is being imposed upon them because bearing the name of Christ means walking in Christ’s footsteps and following his example of suffering for the sake of others; it is a reminder of Jesus’ teaching that *“if any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* (Mark 8:34). Christ’s suffering is both the example of the suffering of believers and the ground for their salvation (*“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.”* – 3:18). The Apostle calls upon those who are suffering because of their faith in Jesus Christ to *“rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.”* (4:13). Such “rejoicing” does not mean that suffering should be seen as being a part of God’s Will, but because it through such suffering that Christians share communion (*koinonia*) with Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection (*“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”* – Romans 6:5). As Christ suffered and was raised in glory, those who suffer in the present age have the assurance that when Christ returns they will rejoice and *“shout for joy when his glory is revealed.”* Even if those who do not share their faith revile them because of “the name of Christ,” those who share in Christ’s death and resurrection have the assurance that they are blessed *“because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.”* (4:14). The life that shares Christ’s victory is a life marked by the power of the Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit rests upon them and is a foretaste of glory, Christians who are “insulted” because they carry the name of Christ are also “blessed.”

As Christians know that they are blessed, they also know that this blessedness is not something that they have created or earned but is solely a gift from God. Because of this, God’s people are called to *“humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.”* (5:6). The fundamental humility that marks Christian life is humility before God. The power of God that humbles believers also comforts them. It is this comforting humility that forms the basis for Peter’s invitation to his readers to *“cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”* (5:7). Liberation from anxiety (*merimna*) comes as one casts it upon God, because prayer grants freedom from care. Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount that anxiety about food or clothing is opposed to concern for the kingdom of God:

- *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ... Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* – Matthew 6:25, 31-33.

To care for the matters of the world is to fall victim to them. If such cares and anxieties gain control of us, it leads to apostasy, a total desertion of one’s faith. As followers of Jesus Christ, Christians are called to heed Jesus’ teaching to focus on the “one needful thing”:

- “But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need for only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’ – Luke 10:41-42.

Choosing the “better part” as disciples of Christ means that we cast all of our burdens, all that is weighing us down and holding us back from fulfilling God’s Will and living the abundant lives God desires for us, on the one who loves and cares for us. It means hearing and responding to Jesus’ call to cast these burdens upon him as we take up the true yoke of discipleship which replaces burdens with liberation:

- “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” – Matthew 11:28-30.

As the Apostle’s call for God’s people to “*cast all your burdens on him, because he cares for you*” shines the light of Christ in the darkness of our overburdened lives, it also calls us to recognize that in order for these burdens to be lifted off our shoulders it is necessary for us to humble ourselves “*under the mighty hand of God,*” so that the way in which we humble ourselves is to cast our cares on him.

- “Biblical humility is not self-deprecation or a dispensing of our self-esteem. Just the opposite. It is recognition that our worth is to be found in our Maker. The command is positive: we have a loving Father who desires us to come to him with all our shattered dreams, disillusionment, dashed hopes, and fears. At bottom, humility is a recognition that we really are frail after all.” – Daniel B. Wallace.

Christian humility recognizes that we are always dependent upon God for all that we need for daily living, as we are dependent upon God’s love in Jesus Christ for our salvation and hope of eternal life. When we place too many burdens – physical, emotional, or spiritual – upon ourselves, we are in a real sense turning our backs on God and pretending that we have no need of our Lord and Saviour. But such self-centered thinking and acting will eventually lead us to the place where the burdens become so great that they will prevent us from moving forward or having any hope of accomplishing what God has set before us. Casting our burdens upon the Lord is an act of trust and humility in which we recognize that “*for mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.*” (Matthew 19:26). God is the one who provides grace (“*set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.*” – 1:13); God is the one who calls the faithful (“*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” – 2:9); and God is the one who is glorified and who brings the faithful to glory (“*If you are reviled in the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.*” – 4:14). God does all this through Jesus Christ.

- “Because all power can rightly be ascribed to God, Christians can rightly trust that God will show that power by strengthening them and establishing them.” – David Bartlett.

The Apostle’s invitation to “*cast all your anxiety on him*” does not mean that our faith promises us a worry-free life; if anything, walking as a faithful child of God may well add more troubles to our lives. But what is promised to us is that whatever cares and burdens come our way, we do not bear them alone. We have God’s promise that our Lord Jesus Christ has lifted the burdens of “sin, death, and the power of the devil” that threatened to overwhelm us through his life, death, and resurrection, “*so that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally.*” (*Small Catechism*). Our Baptism is our assurance that our Lord will abide with us always, walking with us and lifting the burdens that would otherwise weigh us down. What happens to us in this one act of God’s gracious love blesses us each day, because “*daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.*”

- “In baptism we are immediately given complete forgiveness of sins and purity in God’s judgment. The man who is baptized may, and should, at every moment of his life cling to the totality of this in faith. At the same time, however, this becomes the basis of a movement of our lives which comes from God: the process by which God is continually at work throughout our entire lives establishing actual newness and purity in us. Baptism is a sign to us; it assures us of God’s covenant with us by which he makes us pure through forgiveness and now also wills to purify our nature... Luther thus places baptism at the center of the Christian life.” – Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*.

As all who have been baptized in Christ Jesus are called to cast all their burdens, cares, and anxieties on him, so also is the community of the baptized called to be a source of strength and support so that no one member of the body becomes overburdened. Paul calls upon the church to *“bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”* (Galatians 6:2). The ties that bind our hearts in Christian love through our baptism into Christ means that we are a community that *“shares our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.”* (ELW Hymn 656). As we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and welcome a new child into the body of Christ this morning, we renew our promise as baptized children of God that we will *“support these brothers and sisters and pray for them in their life in Christ.”* (ELW Affirmation of Baptism), inviting them to *“join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God’s creative and redeeming word to all the world.”*

- “Christian community is the place where we keep the flame alive among us and take it seriously, so that it can grow and become stronger in us. In this way we can live with courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness, and darkness ... Waiting, together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfillment – that is the meaning of marriage, friendship, community, and the Christian life.” – Henri Nouwen.

Carrying excess baggage can be far more costly than whatever fee an airline might charge. It can cost us physical, emotional, and spiritual damage, weighing us down to the point where there is no hope for us going forward into the future that God intends for us to enjoy. It can also cost us the awareness that the call of Christ is a call to Christian humility; when we believe that all burdens must be placed solely on our backs, we live as though our faith has no meaning and God is not a factor in the manner in which we live. Our lives may not be care-free, but we must not shoulder whatever burdens us by ourselves. Because Jesus Christ is Lord, in humility and thanksgiving we must never be discouraged but cast all our cares, our anxieties, our fears, our doubts, and our troubles upon him – because our Lord is with us, our Lord cares for us, our Lord loves us fully and completely with a love that never ends, a love that is ours when we are baptized in Christ Jesus, freed from all burdens so that we are free to serve our Lord in righteousness and purity forever. Amen.