

**“Don’t Do It Yourself”**

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

Of all the houses that were built in my neighborhood as a child, the one that intrigued me the most was the house that was under construction the longest. Instead of being built by a crew of carpenters, masons, plumbers and electricians, this house was being built by one man who worked on it by himself most evenings and weekends. The house was much simpler than others that were being built, and the progress of course was slow, but whenever I walked by the building site, I was amazed how this one person was able to do it all by himself. I shared my amazement one day with Mr. Whalen, our neighborhood grouch who usually didn’t engage in conversation with anyone, much less a young boy. But when I mentioned that I was very impressed that someone could build a house by himself, Mr. Whalen took great exception: “He did *not* do it himself! He didn’t mill the lumber, or make the wires, or manufacture the plumbing. He didn’t build the roads that brought the materials to the lumber yard, nor did he drive the trucks that traveled these roads. There’s no such thing as “do it yourself”!”

Mr. Whalen’s words have stuck with me, especially when the “do it yourself” craze took off with TV shows such as “This Old House” and the advent of home improvement warehouses like The Home Depot. People began to build decks, remodel kitchens, build dormers, and at like the man in my neighborhood even took on building their own homes. The hosts of home improvement shows became celebrities, and the initials “DIY” entered our cultural lexicon. We held people who could build things by themselves in high esteem, and many were convinced that they could join the DIY movement – even if they lacked the skills or knowledge to undertake such projects. But as Mr. Whalen reminded me, there is really no such thing as “do it yourself,” because even if someone attempts to take on a project by themselves there are many other people who are involved in the completion of these tasks. In the words of the famous poem by John Donne, “*no man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main*”

We may live in a DIY world, but the truth is that no one can do it by themselves. For Christians, it may be said that the call of Christ is DDIY – *Don’t Do It Yourself*. It is a call that reminds us that Jesus did not engage in his ministry by himself but gathered disciples who shared his life and work. It is the call the Jesus extends to seventy other followers who he “*sent on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he intended to go*” (Luke 10:1), a task they shared with their partner so that they might fulfill Jesus’ commission that “*whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.*” (10:16). It is the call that reminds us that “*you are the body of Christ and individually members of it*” (1 Corinthians 12:27), a body into which we are joined through Holy Baptism and in which we are dependent on each other for our life and vitality; for “*if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.*” (12:26).

In the final section of his letter to the Galatians, Paul offers a few brief directives about what it might mean for the faith community to walk by the Spirit. Paul thinks of the Church as an extended family (“*So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially for those of the family of faith.*” – 6:10), in which members should take responsibility for one another. Because they bear responsibility for one another, those who have been joined together as brothers and sisters in Christ cannot casually allow other members of the family to go astray; they have an obligation to hold one another accountable to live as faithful followers of Jesus. But because this is the family that has been joined together through Christ’s death and resurrection, all that they do in their lives together must be exercised with the same gentleness and humility with which Christ lived and served, so that the community will reflect the character of the Lord that the community serves.

Paul's first instruction to the family of faith that is the Church of Jesus Christ involves how the church is to respond when a member of the church is 'detected in a transgression,' which because of the body's interconnectedness affects not only the individual but the entire body. The practice of mutual correction in this situation must be offered "in a spirit of gentleness" in accordance with the fruit produced by the Spirit ("the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." – 5:22-23). These fruits must be embodied and put into practice because "the practice of mutual correction is fraught with dangers of prideful abuse and, at the same time, that all of us share in a common human frailty." (Richard B. Hays). If the Galatians take on the responsibility for correcting one another in this way, they will be "bearing one another's burdens" (6:2), a mark of the Church which Paul also describes in his letter to the Romans:

- "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor ... May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." – Romans 15:1-2, 5-6.

To live under the guidance of the Spirit is to live in a relationship of interdependence. Burden bearing entails in all aspects of life – its "joys and sorrows and all that the years will bring" – using the freedom Christ has given his Church "through love [to] become slaves to one another." (5:13).

- "It would be far easier to live as autonomous individuals without having to worry about responsibility for the conduct of others. But that would not be life in Christ." – Hays.

If the Galatians bear the burdens of their brothers and sisters, they will "fulfill the law of Christ," which for Paul "is summed up in a single commandment: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (5:14). Christ "fulfilled" the Law through his self-sacrificial death ("And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." – 2:20). Fulfilling the Law of Christ will follow as a consequence of the church's simple daily acts of assuming responsibility for one another.

- "From the point of his death onward, the Law can be understood anew as the Law of Christ, the Law defined by and belonging to him ... To fulfill the Law of Christ, then, is to play out over and over again in the life of the community the pattern of self-sacrificial love that he revealed in his death." – Hays.

While Paul's words to the Galatians can sometimes be harsh, he also offers words of encouragement to the faith community to persist in doing good: "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up." (6:9). Paul urges the Galatians not to grow weary or give up, even in the face of opposition, but to endure faithfully to the end, a message that echoes the words of Jesus in his teachings ("Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." – Luke 18:1) and that Paul would repeat in his correspondence with the Corinthian Christians ("Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." – 2 Corinthians 4:1). Our efforts to do good are to be understood as Spirit-empowered manifestations of God's working in us, not as autonomous performances. Doing good is synonymous with "faith working through love." (5:6).

Paul's final word of encouragement is an exhortation that "whenever we have the opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith." (6:10). Doing good works "for all" expands the sphere of moral concern to the world at large, fulfilling Jesus' commission to the apostles that "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8): "The way of life that comes from grace takes the whole land and sea as the table of mercy." (St. John Chrysostom). At the same

time, Paul counsels the Galatians to focus their energies particularly on doing good to those in the “household of faith,” an image of the church that Paul employs throughout his letters:

- “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.” – Ephesians 2:19.
- “I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” – 1 Timothy 3:14-15.

The church is the family of faith into which we are incorporated in Holy Baptism when we are born anew to a living hope as the adopted children of God; *“And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.”* (4:6-7).

- “... the Spirit-powered community was given the task of doing good and offering the message of reconciliation to the whole world [‘All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...’] – 2 Corinthians 5:18], but that reconciling work had to begin at home within the community of believers.” – Hays.

One of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith that often gets lost in our DIY world is that Christianity as always been a communal faith; being a Christian means that we are a part of a community of which we became a member not of our own choosing but through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While Jesus would from time to time go off by himself for prayer and reflection, he always returned to the community of disciples and continued to invite more and more people to follow him. On the day of Pentecost when the church’s Spirit-empowered mission began, Luke reports that those who came to faith in Jesus Christ were incorporated into faith communities in which their shared life and faith with others who were baptized into Christ:

- “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and good and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their numbers those who were being saved.” – Acts 2:45-47.

In our Lutheran tradition, we continue to understand the church as the community of God’s people into which we were incorporated when we were adopted as sons and daughters of God in Christ Jesus. Our Augsburg Confession defines the church as *“the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”* (Article VII), which is rooted in Luther’s understanding of the Church as a “congregation of saints”:

- “I believe that there is a holy group and a congregation made up only of saints. And you too are in this church; the Holy Spirit leads you into it through the preaching of the gospel. Formerly you knew nothing of Christ, but the Christian Church proclaimed Christ to you. That is, I believe that there is a holy church which is a congregation in which there are nothing but saints. Through the Christian Church, that is, through its ministry, you were sanctified; for the Holy Spirit uses its ministry in order to sanctify you. Otherwise you would never know and hear Christ.” – “Sermons on the Catechism,” 1528.

Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer continued this teaching in his book *Life Together*, written during the darkness of their reign of Nazi Germany to emphasize how the Christian *“belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes.”*

- “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this ... We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ. What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united in eternity.”

One of my favorite hymns that has a special meaning for me is *Blest Be the Tie That Binds*,” our Hymn of the Day this morning. It brings back memories of the years I served my second congregation in Waretown, New Jersey, where we shared a wonderful ecumenical ministry with our local Episcopal, United Methodist, and Assemblies of God congregations. This was far more than a formal community partnership that existed merely on paper; this was a fellowship of Christians, a community of God’s people that transcended denominational lines to truly love and support each other. *Blest Be the Tie That Binds* became our theme song, the hymn that was sung at every community worship service and defined the manner in which we lived; for this was truly a community of faith in which “*we share each other’s woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.*” As I sing these words again this morning, I give thanks for my sisters and brothers in Christ with whom I shared Christian love in the community Christ established in that place, and pray that we might embody that same fellowship that binds us together in Christian love and bears each other’s burdens so that we might fulfill the Law of Christ to love one another as Christ loved us.

- “When we form a Christian community, we come together not because of similar expectations, knowledge, problems, color, or sex, but because we have been called together by the same Lord. Only God enables us to cross the many bridges that separate us; only God allows us to recognize each other as members of the same human family; and only God frees us to pay careful attention to each other. This is why those who are gathered together in community are witnesses to the compassionate Lord. By the way they are able to carry each other’s burdens and share each other’s joys, they testify to God’s presence in our world.” – Henri Nouwen.

That house on Ridge Avenue was finally completed and the man who had spent all his time and energy on its construction was able to move in with his family and enjoy the fruits of his labors. But whenever I walked by the house, Mr. Whalen’s words rang in my ears: “*There’s no such thing as ‘do it yourself.’*” Even though he did a lot of the work by himself, this homeowner did indeed rely on many others to assist him in this project. We do not live in a DIY world – and we are not members of a DIY faith. In Christ we have been made members of the Church which is the Body of Christ in which we live and share our joys and our burdens, caring for one another so that we might testify to the presence of our Lord who seeks to incorporate all into a community that bears one another’s burdens so that we might embody the love of Christ as we love one another as Christ has loved us. Amen.