

One Another's Burdens

4th Sunday after Pentecost C, 7/3/22

It is gratifying to me at some deep level when a bit of scripture shows up with unintended irony or a double entendre, or is unintentionally funny. The funniest, of course, is when the Bible introduces its shortest character and then says nothing more about it. This is, of course, one of the interlocutors of Job, Bildad the Shuhite. (Take a moment.) But today's gospel offers an example that's good enough. In it, Jesus tells his disciples in one breath that "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" and the in next, "See, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves." *Um, Jesus, you can imagine Nathaniel, Judas, or another of the bright ones saying, I'm confused. Are we the laborers or the harvest? Because it sounds from this passage like it's wolves that'll be doing the most laboring – one might even say, 'harvesting' – especially since you're adding us to the number of lambs out there without purse, bag, sandal, or greeting.* "Ah," Jesus might well respond, channeling his inner Gramsci, "There's the rub. As the grain is to the reaper, so is the lamb to the wolf, but also the laborer to those who own the harvest, and the sheep to those who shear and eat them." Whether or not you are exploiting someone in this world, odds are someone, somewhere is exploiting you. Wherever you think you are on the food chain, there is always someone ready, willing, and able to make a meal out of you – and someone else ready, willing, and able to make a meal out of them.

As it says in 3rd Corinthians, chapter 3, vss. 11-15, "The lamb shall eat of the grass that grows on the grave of the shepherd in the place where he and the wolf perished. His children shall eat of the lamb, and the wolf's cub shall eat of the ewe, yet the laborer shall still be deserving of respect, and to be paid." Where the laborers are to put all that pay they deserve, in the passage we just heard from Luke, is not clear, given that these hard workers are out there without purse or footwear, bag or sandal.

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Perhaps having been fed and watered is pay enough; after all, that's all the pay the lamb ever gets for its fleece, meat, and leather, no matter how plentiful the harvest or how scarce the various shepherds that be have managed to make the wolves. Make of that what you will. This last reminds me of another passage from 3rd Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 9: "Cursed be they who slaughter lambs without mercy, or who murder the wolf cub in its den."

Btw: 3rd Corinthians is that book of the Bible that we compiled in seminary to hold all the things that we thought should be in the Bible but were somehow left out. An interesting game, or formation program, would be to mix passages from this text with ones in the actual Bible and see if people can guess which is which. So let's. I'll start: "Wherefore, being greatly perplexed in his mind, he determined to go to Persia" (1 Maccabees 3:31a). "Though they bring up their children, I will bereave them..." (Hosea 9:12a). "And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities" yet "have broken the teeth of the ungodly" (Amos 4:6a, Ps. 3:7b). "I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you" (Luke 10:19). "The Lord helps those who help themselves," and "Lord help those who help themselves."

All but the last two are biblical; the antepenult¹ is from today's gospel reading. Nowhere in the Bible does it say, "The Lord helps those who help themselves," though Paul does remind the Galatians this morning that "You reap what you sow." Better you than someone stealing from you, I suppose, though the laws of Moses make it clear that even then we are to leave a fair portion for the gleaners, that is, those who were not able to sow anything and hence have nothing of their own to reap. The sentiment chimes with the sardonic, Deuteronomic plea against selfishness that I made up: "Lord help those who help themselves" (3 Cor. 8:3).

¹ That is, the next-to the next-to-last. The word meaning 'the next-to-last' in a series is "penult"..

To wit: “There are those who labor, take pains, and make haste, yet are much the more behind. Yet there are those who are slow and in need of help, wanting ability and full of poverty. The eye of the Lord looked upon them for good, raised them from their low estate, and lifted their heads from misery, so that those who see them marvel at them” (Sirach 11:11-13).

For those in the back: the Lord helps those who *can't* help themselves. So should we who serve that Lord, as the Good Book says time after time after time.

Ah, yes; that is what we call: “The burden of the word of the Lord...” (Malachi 1:1a). Note, too, how that prophet’s book ends: “And he [Elijah, when he returns] shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Mal. 4:6).

In short: love one another, or else. The burden of the word of the Lord, indeed.

Not to be outshone by a gospeler he most likely never met or even heard of, Paul sounds even more contradictory than Luke in his instructions to the Galatians. Right after informing them that they are to “bear one another’s burdens,” he lets them know that each must test their own work (and be proud of any they managed to do), and carry their own load, yet share in all good things with their teacher. Well, which is it? Am I toting this bale I see before me, are you, or are we? Because the one thing we know for sure is that the bale ain’t toting itself, and it’s gotta be moved.

Some technically-trained barbarian may mander in at this point about how the Greek for “burden” and the Greek for “load” mean different things, but any jackass knows there’s not a whit to tell between a burden it has to carry and a load it has to bear. Whether you’re standing there holding something up or taking it with you as you go along, whatever load you’re burdened with feels like it’s yours and yours alone. Yet it’ll be easier to avoid marauders, wolves, or the whips of the muleteer if

we walk alongside one another, each with our own burdens but offering moral support to one another as we bear them. Moral support, wise counsel, warning where needed, ears to listen, tongues to know when to speak and when not to, and a heart to give a damn. None is an island, as John Donne put it, yet some do seem peninsular, or connected to the rest only when the seas are calm and the tide low.

Events of the past weeks, and in particular the hits that keep landing on Ukraine and Sri Lanka, and many that keep on coming from the Supremes, have made me rather want to get to, if not become, an island. It is heartbreaking and enraging to watch tyrants ruin countries, whether by tanks and bombs or eye-watering levels of corruption. It is sobering to learn just how close this country came to a coup on 1/6/21, and how clear and present the danger is that those who led that one will lead another one. It is gut-wrenching to watch people write down or away our rights and abilities to: vote in free and fair elections; control our own bodies and reproduction; access medical care and competent legal counsel; clean our air, water, food, and land; have safe workplaces and a competent, representative government; be free from police abuse, prosecutorial misconduct, and religious indoctrination; and stop those who would gun people down “in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea,” from obtaining the guns with which to do so. The hymn from which I quote reminds us, in ear-worming kitsch, that what we’re meant to find in such places are not polluters, abusers, or heavily-armed haters, but the saints of God – those who hurt no-one, are free from all that oppresses, and intend to stay that way.

Paul and Jesus want their people to be free like that, and to share the burdens and carry the loads that such freedom enables and requires. They want us to help people deal with whatever oppresses or deceives them, and to remind us all that the law does not save – no law saves; God does.

How? Well, not by force or magic, but by giving us minds that can know the truth and act upon it, and when imbued by the truth, discern by reason alone what it is meet to hope for and right to do. The Lord saves those who cannot save themselves not least by endowing us with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of Cadillacs (or so went an ad campaign some years ago)², and making our hearts restless until they rest secure in these rights under the rule of those who respect them. Securing such rights is the just and proper role of a government, so long as it has the consent of the governed – and the one thing the governed can't consent to is ignoring or rolling back rights that cannot be denied. Chief among these are life and liberty – that is, autonomy of body and autonomy of mind. Abuse or deny these rights, foster a tyranny, or operate without the consent of the governed and it becomes the right, nay the duty, of the people to...oh, how does the Declaration put it, again?

On that note: Happy Birthday, Declaration of Independence; of thee I sing. It's been a long 246 years, yet your truth abideth still. On each Glorious 4th I reread the thing, and as much of Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech, "What to the Slave is Your 4th of July?" as I can. Each is vital, and they resonate with one another, victims of tyranny and of slavery having much in common, as Jefferson's 1st draft of the Declaration, at least, made clear. Douglass notes that enslaved persons have little cause to celebrate a day dedicated to liberty and justice for all, since they enjoy neither of those things. Those who do celebrate such a day, he argues, should maybe give it a miss until they've ended slavery and broken the power of those who benefit from slavery. This is because while any are not free, none are truly free – and freedom isn't free, though it is freeing. Free your mind, free your body, and free those who aren't free, even if

² The original has "happiness," which means human flourishing.

you go out as lambs amidst wolves to do it, or as laborers too few for a harvest that will rot in the fields if we fail to bring it in.

For: “You reap what you sow,” as Paul reminds, and “God will not be mocked.” If even Santa knows when you’ve been bad or good, how much more the Lord God Almighty? Yet, as Isaiah 66 also reminds: “As a mother comforts her child, so I [the Lord] will comfort you...your hearts shall rejoice, and your bodies flourish like the grass” (Is.66:13-14). Do what you can; no more will be asked, and no less. God will help, but don’t just sit there waiting for it. Be wise, be wary, be diligent, and be kind. Bear one another’s burdens; carry your own loads. Be humble and be grateful. As Jesus says, “Do not rejoice in your power, even over the enemy, but that your names are written in heaven.”

Which reminds me of a poem I could once recite in the original Algonquin:

Love many;
Trust few.
Always paddle
Your own canoe.

And when one has found *les motes justes*, that is the end of the matter. *Amen.*