

For the Good of All

Will you please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you. For you are our rock and our salvation, amen.

Our Old Testament lesson is a prayer of praise to God for their help, for their presence, and for overcoming troubles. This seems like a fitting prayer for 4th of July weekend. So many of us are doing well, even in the midst of a lot of world turmoil and worries about supreme court rulings, most, if not all of us, can look around and say that we have food, shelter, water, possibly even air conditioning. Our communities live in relative peace. Relatively speaking, we are doing well. So it is good and right to take a moment to praise God for God's role in that, for the abundant and thriving lives that so many of us have experienced.

The New Testament lesson, then, pairs with this one in an interesting way. You will remember that Paul's letter to the Galatians was written partially in response to some other Christians and their views about how to live a good, Christian life. You see, Paul had started this church in Galatia, then left to start churches elsewhere. In the meantime, some other Christians, who preached that people needed to be circumcised and needed to follow the letter of the Old Testament law in order to be Christians, had come and confused the Galatian church. Paul believed that their interpretation of Jesus' message was too narrow, that it put people into two categories, us vs. them. So a large part of this letter is

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meant to encourage the Galatians to think of their community more broadly—we are all one in Christ, all people, all nations.

That's the background for today's section, and you need it to understand what will seem like inconsistencies in what Paul says here. Notice that in the part we read today, Paul says that we are to bear one another's burdens and work for the good of all. At the same time, he says that we reap what we sow and we are to carry our own loads. Doesn't that seem like a contradiction? If we expect others to carry their own loads, why would we bear their burdens for them?

But both the context of this passage and a close reading of the words in this passage clarify Paul's message to us. Notice that he starts this chapter by telling his followers to act in gentleness towards one another, especially towards any who might sin. Right after that, he goes on to basically tell his followers to stop comparing themselves to others or to stop judging them: "For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride." The Message translation puts this passage like this: "Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life."

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Don't compare yourself to others and don't be impressed with yourself. Taken in the context I have explained above, Paul is telling his followers that they need to stop judging how other Christians act—if they aren't circumcised, that's okay. If they don't follow traditional dietary laws, that's okay. If they sin, forgive them. If they are in need, help them. Focus on who you are as a Christian and what you are called to do, not on what others are doing.

In other words, there is no contradiction in his message: We, as Christians should do our best to bear our own load as Christians—following our own calling as best we can. But at the same time, we don't hold others to that same standard. Instead, we act towards others with charity and generosity, forgiving them and bearing their load, when they need the help.

It's an interesting message to hear on the 4th of July, when we celebrate our country and feel a sense of national pride. That can certainly be natural and is okay, as long as it doesn't cause us to judge or look down upon other nations. So if we, as Christians, were to apply this message to our view of other nations and to individuals living in other nations, what would that mean? How do we work for the good of all and bear the load of people in other nations?

I have been thinking about the story we heard in the news this week about 53 migrants who died by being left in a truck in 90-100 degree weather with no water or air conditioning. I heard interviews

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with the parents of some of deceased—two young men and a woman. All had been highly educated in their country and had tried for years to get good paying jobs that could support their families. But jobs are hard to come by in their country for multiple reasons, including recent hurricane damage to businesses, business closings due to Covid, some gang extortion of businesses. So, hearing about America, that it is the land of opportunity where, if you are willing to work hard, you can thrive, they tried to get here. Some might say that it was a poor choice, to try to come here illegally, but I wonder what I would have done in that situation. If I couldn't find a job, couldn't afford to marry the person I loved. If I knew that the United States has so many jobs available that there are constant shortages in supplies and delays in getting services that we want and sometimes need, if I knew that legal immigration could take years. What would I have done?

What does acting for the good of all mean when we're thinking about immigrants and migrant workers? What does it mean when we think of where they are coming from? Should we be finding ways to support their economies, so they can remain at home and work? Should it mean that we try to change our own policies so that it's easier to get into our country for those who wish to work? Should it mean that we work to reduce poverty and violence in other countries, that we help countries most affected by climate change, or that we work to affect our own environmental policies?

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Those are not questions that I am going to answer for you in this sermon. All I can say is what scripture and our faith teach us, and to ask us to consider these things particularly while we celebrate the freedom and relative prosperity that living in this country has brought to us. And, according to our New Testament lesson, our faith teaches that that we should not judge those migrants, their families, or even the countries that they come from. Our role is to carry our own load as children of God, and our load is figuring out how *we* can act to follow Christ's teachings. It also means that we together as a church and as individuals are to figure out how to work for the good of all so that everyone can have the same opportunities to thrive as we have had. Amen.