



“Bearing One Another’s Burdens”
Scripture – Galatians 6:2-10
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 26, 2013

If you grow up in Oklahoma, tornadoes are a part of life, like hurricanes in Florida, blizzards in Colorado or earthquakes in California. They are not intriguing violent storms to study in books or watch on television, but something people experience, especially in the late spring.

When I was young, and nearby sirens sounded the warning, my parents rushed my sister and me into the bathroom. Mom instructed each of us to lie down in the bathtub, while dad dragged a mattress off one of our beds and placed it on top of us.

When we became too big for the tub, they scurried us into our garage where all four of us hovered inside our Studebaker. Raise your hand if you remember the Studebaker. Everyone with their hand up is old! For those of you under 50, a Studebaker was a car. Google it.

There were also a few occasions when the tornado alerts were given with enough advanced warning that we drove to a nearby business; a solid concrete structure that opened its doors to the public when watches were issued.

No one we knew had a basement, but my grandparents, who lived 20 miles away, had a storm shelter in their backyard. It was a dark, musty place where my grandmother stored the green beans and peaches she canned every summer.

Each spring violent thunder storms would roll in from the west with high winds and hail, but thankfully a tornado never hit our neighborhood. However, my dad told me that when he was young, a twister rumbled through the farm where he lived. He told of cattle being sucked up and swept away, pieces of straw blown almost all the way through telephone poles and he found household items fully intact, a mile from home.

But the tornado that hit Oklahoma last Monday was no routine twister. It was a monster, packing winds over 200 miles per hour, and stunning veteran tornado watchers by its size – more than a mile wide. Plus, it moved so slowly that one observer compared it to an enormous drill that pummeled everything in its path.

The F-5 twister ripped through neighborhoods reducing sturdy homes to match sticks. It spun through a horse farm, inhaling 1,000 pound horses as if they were stuffed animals, furiously flinging them in all directions. Residents of Moore had a 16-minute warning that a deadly behemoth was bearing down on them. People either

hopped in their pick-up trucks and tore away from its path or hunkered down in the safest place they could find. But the storm was so powerful that there was little built above ground that could withstand such a raging force.

Over the past seven months, there has been no need to watch disaster movies. We have had more than our share of real-life dreadful events. Last fall, Hurricane Sandy, the largest Atlantic storm ever, clobbered the East Coast. Less than 10 days before Christmas, Adam Lanza opened fire in Sandy Hook Elementary School. Last month terrorist bombs exploded at the finish of the Boston Marathon, and this past week 24 people were killed by the monstrous Oklahoma tornado. These deadly catastrophes have been glaring reminders that life is fragile and unpredictable.

If we cut out fried foods and maintain a steady diet of fruits and vegetables; if we exercise regularly and keep our body fit; and if we don't hang glide, rock climb or bungee jump, we stand a good chance of living a healthy and long life. However, no amount of tofu, cross training or abstaining from high-risk endeavors can keep you safe from a car wreck or a gunman or a terrorist bombing. No amount of right living and prudent behavior can keep you safe from tornadoes or earthquakes or hurricanes. Like every other living creature, we are vulnerable. There is much we can do to be healthy and safe, but it's a fact of life that lightning can strike out of the blue. Life is unpredictable and we are fragile creatures. What do we do with that awareness?

We do not want to go through life in a paranoid state thinking disaster may strike any moment, but it's important to come to terms with the fact that human existence is fragile and there are no guarantees of a long life. Such knowledge can make you feel like crawling under the covers; OR it can motivate you to do what you need to do and not put off the things that really matter.

Let these recent tragedies heighten your resolve to spend more time with the people you care about and tell them how much you love them. What's the point of life if not to love and be loved?

Let these events remind you that it really is important to celebrate holidays, birthdays, anniversaries and other special occasions. All of us encounter enough unpleasant moments, so we need to counter them with joyful celebrations.

Let these disasters prompt you to become the type of person who is ready to jump in and help when people are in need.

When a catastrophe strikes, there are always some people who rise to heroic levels. Over the past week, a number of stories have emerged of teachers saving the children in their care by herding them into the safest nearby places, telling the children to cover their heads with whatever was available and shouting words of encouragement to be brave. Despite the threat of danger to herself, "One teacher saved three students by shielding them with her body from a car that landed on top of them. The teacher was injured, but the children escaped unscathed."¹

It was the sort of action that the Apostle Paul beckons followers of Christ to take in this morning's passage when he calls on us to bear one another's burdens. He counts on us to have courage and to do what we can for one another, especially when we are in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death.

This morning's reading comes from the final chapter of Paul's Letter to the Galatians. It helps to know that this letter is directed at a vital question for followers of Jesus. Is a Gentile who becomes a follower of Christ obligated to keep all of the Jewish law which includes not only the Ten Commandments, but the hundreds of other laws and ritual observances?

Paul wants to fight this idea and for good reason. If you're trying to start churches and get them to grow and spread, you probably do not want a rule that requires the uncircumcised Gentiles to undergo that ritual.

But, it's more than that. Paul was a faithful Pharisee who scrupulously followed all of the laws. He knew that the law was given so that we might know the will of God, but the law could become an onerous weight that led either to guilt – “As hard as I try, I cannot always obey every law” – or, self-righteousness – “I am far superior to you because of my scrupulous observance of the law.”

And I suspect he also figured out that you can follow all the rules, and still not become a kind and loving person. So, Paul spends much of the letter contrasting “works of the law” with “faith in Christ.” He tells the Galatians that Christ frees us from this burden that the law has placed on us. However, that does not mean that we are free to do whatever we please. We are now under a new obligation: the law of love. Paul says to the Galatians, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Galatians 5:14)

How do we fulfill this command to love our neighbor? By being open to God's Spirit and allowing God's Spirit to transform us. When that happens, we radiate what Paul calls the “fruit of the Spirit,” which is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22)

You could never have enough laws to detail the precise response to each specific situation that arises, but if you exude the fruit of the Spirit, you will respond with Christ-like love.

C. S. Lewis wrote, “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”² Each person is a unique child of God whose life you can enrich; and as you do, your own life becomes more beautiful.

In today's passage, Paul says, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” It's interesting that Paul has been contrasting the law – meaning the Mosaic Law – with faith in Christ. Now, he comes up with a term that sounds like an oxymoron: the “law of Christ.” However, if you have been following his line of reasoning, it is not a contradiction in terms, because what he means by “the law of Christ” is the commandment to love.

In his parting words to the Galatians, Paul gives specificity to the commandment. He says that one of the important ways of exuding love is to “Bear one another's burdens.”

When the tornado sirens sounded the warning last Monday, “the staff of the Agape Land Learning Center, a day care facility, hustled their 15 children into two bathrooms, draping them with a protective covering and singing songs with them to keep them calm. As the wind ripped the roof off one of the bathrooms, and debris rained down on the children, the teachers told everyone to keep singing as loudly as they could: ‘You Are My Sunshine.’ And though the day care center was almost entirely destroyed, not one child suffered a scratch.”³ If you're ever caught in an F-5, sing that song!

When you see the massive destruction of the two elementary schools – roofs ripped off, collapsed walls and all manner of debris including cars, dropped on top of them; it's remarkable that only seven children perished in one school and none in the other. There's no telling how many lives were saved by courageous teachers who protected the children in their care.

And immediately following the tornado, the first responders dug out people who were trapped in the rubble. Others began to extend care to those who lost loved ones or their homes and precious photographs. Churches immediately threw open their doors and became shelters for people who had suddenly become homeless, and

distribution centers for food and water. People from all over the country have contributed money to help the people of Moore to handle the aftermath.

Religious faith is neither something we keep to ourselves nor reserve for Sundays only. God calls us to exude love in all we do by looking out for each other and taking care of each other.

While there's a good chance no one you know will be caught in an F-5 tornado, someone you know *will* unexpectedly lose a spouse or be given grim news of an accident or be told that their cancer has spread. Will you respond with an act of kindness, a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on? It could make a huge difference in that person's healing.

When we're filled with God's Spirit, we feel empathy for people who are hurting. We realize that your loss is my loss; your pain is my pain. Caring for one another is what makes us faithful and it's what makes life worth living.

NOTES

1. Wade Goodwyn, "Death Toll Expected to Rise After Monster Twister in Oklahoma," *Morning Edition*, on National Public Radio, May 21, 2013.
2. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*
3. Nick Oxford and Michael Schwirtz, "Vast Oklahoma Tornado Kills Dozens," *The New York Times* May 20, 2013.