

Thursday Afternoon Council Introduction and Conversation

February 18, 2010

Covenant and Companions

Welcome to the 106th Annual Council of the Diocese of West Texas. This council will have several focal points for our life together.

First, we are launching the diocesan theme for 2010 – ***Bear One Another's Burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*** (Galatians 6.2).

This passage will also permeate this council in all that we do, and I hope it will be your companion throughout this year as you seek to grow in your personal discipleship and in your response to Christ through service to others – and often this means bearing a burden for someone.

This council will also engage the idea of “covenant”, and our agenda provides generous amounts of time to engage one another for conversation and interaction.

The three sessions of bible study and conversation will allow us to explore how Christ is calling us to engage one another, and the world around us, in ways which lead us into more fully living into, as St. Paul puts it, “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2.16).

Thousands of times each week, week after week, Christians are praying the Lord's Prayer. As we pray this prayer, we say, “...thy kingdom come, thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.” In all of this praying, I wonder - is earth looking more like heaven? If not, why not?

I wonder what our world, our churches, and our individual lives would look like if we were bearing one another's burdens in such obvious ways that God's will was reflected through our lives so that earth might look a little more like the heaven.

The three conversations are entitled **Covenant and Companions** (this afternoon); **Covenant and Communion** (tomorrow morning); and **Covenant and Compassion** (tomorrow afternoon).

At this council, we will consider bearing one another's burdens as daily companions; as disciples in a world wide fellowship (Anglican Communion); and as servants who reach out to others in compassion (needs such as poverty, disaster, grief, daily hardship).

As we begin our conversations in a few minutes, I have asked the Reconciliation Commission (which I appointed at last year's council) to come forward and give

you a brief overview of their work over this past year and to explain the principles which we will use to engage one another.

(Reconciliation Commission intros/comments – 14 minutes)

In thinking about “bearing one another’s burdens”, I came across no less than 44 places in the New Testament alone where the phrase “one another” is used. And this doesn’t begin to be an exhaustive list of scripture’s use of this phrase. Here are a few examples:

Be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4.32)

Love one another (John 13.34-35; 15.12,17)

Honor one another above yourselves (Romans 12.10)

Stop passing judgment on one another (Romans 14.13)

Have equal concern for one another (1 Corinthians 12.25)

Serve one another in love (2 Corinthians 13.12)

Don’t grumble against one another (James 5.9)

Be patient, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4.2)

Wash one another’s feet (John 13.14)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God (Colossians 3.16)

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5.21)

In humility consider others better than yourselves (Philippians 2.3)

Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another (Colossians 3.13)

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others (1 Peter 4.10)

Pray for one another (James 5.16)and the list goes on....

Bearing with one another, serving one another, encouraging one another, forgiving one another, praying for one another – all of these are part of what it means to have a covenant with each other based on the covenant that God has made with us.

As Bishop Reed reminded us at our pre-council meetings, we are companions with God and with one another along the way. “Companion” literally means the one with whom I break bread.

When we break bread together, our Eucharistic (thanksgiving) prayers call our attention to God’s “covenant” – both “old covenant” (**Again and again you called us into covenant with you, and through the prophets you taught us to hope for salvation** – Prayer D, BCP, page 373);

and “new covenant” (**This is my blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins** – BCP, each Eucharistic prayer).

The whole Eucharistic moment is one of thanksgiving as we remember Jesus’ words: *Do this for the remembrance of me.*

And this kind of spiritual **re**-membering means much more than “not forgetting.”

To **re**...member something is to bring all the members back together again; to restore wholeness from the separation of **dis**...membering/scattering.

Each time we gather for Eucharist (and we do not gather for Eucharist alone), we “**re**...member” God’s fellowship; we join with the communion of saints throughout all the ages, **and** we join with our neighbors in the pew and at the altar rail – those people right next to us.

That is, we participate in God’s **re**-membering and redeeming work - old and new covenant – as we break bread with our companions along the way.

Now, a little reality check. Even though we all may be created in God’s image, we acknowledge that some of our companions are down right annoying.

Let’s face it - everybody in your life is not a wonderful source of inspiration. The reality is that people are not all alike.

Parents learn this early on with children. I thought since our three children were being raised in the same household by the same parents, we’d be a nice little example of uniformed heavenly living; a little slice of heaven on earth.

As that thought quickly drifted away, I adopted a different mantra: "Let's all do it my way, now!" That hasn't worked out too well either.

In life and in ministry with one another as members of God's big family, it is important to move from thinking, ***What's wrong with that person?*** to something on a deeper level, such as:

I wonder why that person thinks like they do?

I wonder what have been and are the major influences that has made them who they are?

I wonder why I think like I do?

What have been and are the major influences that have made me who I am?

Daily I'm growing to appreciate the meaning of scripture's use of the phrase "variety of gifts."

This idea was once again before us in the epistle lesson several weeks ago when Paul writes of the parts of the body working together for the good of the whole (1 Corinthians 12.12-31) and that each part has an important function and an important gift.

Sometimes, however, the "gifts" of others seem like "burdens" to me.

And then I hear, ***Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.***

It prompts me to ask: "What, exactly, is this law?" A Pharisee had a similar question.

One day, a so-called "expert in the law" asked Jesus - "***Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?***" ***Jesus answered him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments"*** (Matt 22, Mark 12, Luke 10).

Seems pretty clear. It's the law of love.

Peter, the ultimate first hand witness to Jesus' ministry, picks up this theme of Christ when he says: ***Above all*** (notice he doesn't say "fourthly", "lastly", "after you agree on everything"...rather he says **above all**, meaning this is the most important thing...) ***hold unfailing your love for one another, (why?)... because love covers a multitude of sins.***

As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace...

(why bother?)...***in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ*** (1 Peter 4.10-11).

So, with all this talk about “love” by Jesus and throughout the scripture, I wonder how the Church, the Body of Christ, has come to be seen as such a source of division in much of the world, by much of the world?

The reality is that many people are not thinking that religious institutions are helping them grow closer to God, even though survey after survey indicates people are, in fact, interested in God.

Many people identify themselves as spiritual but not religious.

Somehow, in many people’s minds, religion and spirituality are separate from one another.

This should be a serious concern for a faith that calls itself “the body of Christ.”

It is something to think about.

Christians need a variety of tools, then, to be salt and light in the world. You can’t have just one tool.

If all I have is a hammer, everything else looks like a nail and I will act accordingly...

Galatians 6.2

Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ

Related passages:

- Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you. Psalm 55.22
- Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matthew 11.28-30
- Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you. 1 Peter 5.7
- Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. Romans 13.10

- A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. John 13.34
- The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Galatians 5.14
- If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well. James 2.8

Paraphrase/excerpts on Gal 6.2
by **John Stott, The Message of the Galatians, pp 157-159:**

Notice the assumption behind this command, namely that we all have burdens and that God does not mean us to carry them alone.

Even as Jesus is the ultimate “burden-bearer”, one of the ways in which God helps us bear our burdens is through human friendship.

Paul was comforted by Titus as Paul notes in 2 Cor 7.5-6: *But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus...*” God’s comfort came through the companionship of a friend as well as the good news which this friend (this companion) brought.

Bearing one another’s burdens is part of the purpose of God for His people....because the law of Christ is to love one another.

As indicated in the passages above, (1) loving our neighbor; (2) bearing one another’s burdens; and (3) fulfilling the law are three equivalent expressions.

Stott says that to love one another as Christ loves us (more often than not) is found in the day to day, unspectacular ministry of burden bearing.

When we see somebody with a heavy burden on their heart or mind, we must be ready to get alongside them and share their burden.

Likewise, we must be humble enough to let others share ours.

To be a burden bearer is a great ministry.

It is something that every Christian should and can do.

It is a natural consequence of walking by the Spirit.

It fulfills the law of Christ.

“Therefore,” wrote Martin Luther, “Christians must have strong shoulders and mighty bones” – sturdy enough to carry heavy burdens. (end Stott’s comments)

This begs the question, then – ***What can we do, as a diocesan family, to deepen our own discipleship so that we might become “stronger and more able ministers of Christ...nourishing Christ’s people from the riches of his grace”*** (BCP 531-532).

(Small group discussion – see handout)