

## **Sermon at the Council Eucharist**

***Bear One Another's Burdens (Galatians 6:2)***

(Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Galatians 5:13—6:2; Luke 9:18-25)

**106<sup>th</sup> Annual Council of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas**

**Corpus Christ Cathedral      February 18, 2010**

The Rt. Rev. David Reed

En el Nombre de Dios—Padre, Hijo, y Espiritu Santo. Amen.

Good evening and welcome...Muy buenas noches y bienvenidos a todos. It is so good to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness and we are blessed by the generous hospitality of Bishop Carmody, Father Lopez and the Cathedral staff as they welcome us again to their home.

We have something of a mini-Lambeth Conference here, or a smaller version of the Council of Nicaea, with all these bishops here. It'd make me nervous if I wasn't one myself. Y asi, estimados obispos y clerigos de Mexico— nuestro amigos y hermanos en Cristo: Bienvenidos y muchas gracias para su presencia aqui. Es como una junta pequena de Lambeth. Uds. son un signo que nosotros somos un parte de la Iglesia mas grande y mas fuerte que solamente nosotros—el cuerpo de Cristo en el mundo. Cuando andamos juntos, en la unidad del Espiritu Santo, podemos hacer todas cosas por medio de Cristo Senor.

And to Bishop Surya of Karimnagar, South India, and to Bishop Charles of Soroti, Uganda, and to Bishop Tiemann of the Lutheran Church and Bishop Dorff of the Methodist Church, let me say the same thing, but in

proper English: Howdy, y'all! And many, many thanks for being here. We're tickled as all get out and honored to boot that y'all would drop in. Ojalaque you'll set a spell. Nuestra casa es su casa. Our worship is graced and enriched by your participation with us. You are a sign and reminder that we are part of something mas grande than just us—we are part of a bigger and stronger Church than only us—the Body of Christ throughout the world. When we walk together, in the unity of the Spirit, we can do all things through Christ our Lord. And now, andale...

I did a little soul-searching the other day, some rigorous reflection and unflinching moral inventory to get ready for Lent. And as I do every year, I've come up with a list of Lenten disciplines. And may I say, in all humility, this may be the most awesome list I've ever come up with. Oh, it's not perfect—shucks, I'm not either—but it *is* excellent, and I'm very proud of it...in a humble kind of way.

I know it's the second day of Lent and so it's a little late for some of my best ideas for keeping a holy Lent: like, avoiding large crowds of nametag-wearing people; and not texting snide commentary to friends during meetings; and not attending events that are so big you have to watch a Jumbotron to see what's happening.

But I've got lots more good stuff for Lent, and if you will just do what I say, then you'll be better people and *my* Lent will be easier and holier. If you just use my easy-to-follow spiritual directions, then you will not be a burden to me and my spiritual path of least resistance will be amazing.

If only it was that easy, right? We know it's not, but we keep looking, keep trying to find an easy Jesus. Some book, some church program, some prayer technique, some perfect combination of traditional and contemporary, some correct mix of hip irony and solemn piety and it will all come together for us and for the Church. Love God? Check...Love your neighbor? Check...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you? Check-minus...Feed the hungry, heal the sick, bear one another's burdens? Check, check, check...

Lord, have mercy upon us. Thanks be to God for this holy season that recalls us from all the flirtatious and fluffy spiritual flim-flam that gets marketed as the cure for what ails us. Instead, the Church gathers us around big words and bigger truths, like sin and repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and renewal; transformation and holiness of life; dying to self and living for Christ. And the Church calls us to old-fashioned, slow-acting, non-urgent practices, like self-examination, prayer, fasting and self-denial; like reading and meditating on God's holy Word. Not so that when Easter

gets here we can get back to whatever we gave up, or be spiritually buff, but so that we will have recommitted our lives and our selves to the covenant God has made with us in his Son Jesus Christ. And so that, knowing more surely that we are forgiven, loved, and free, we might love one another as Christ loves us...and actively love and serve the world—even *those people*—the world for which we are called together to be light. We are drawn here so that in our love for one another, in our life together, in our unity and our worship and our service, we might remind the world of Jesus.

Forty days doesn't seem like enough time. It's a weighty season, solemn. It's not easy to be honest about what we've done with the gift of self, others, church and creation. I think I might miss the "Alleluias" more this year than most, because it seems like such a penitential time in which we live anyway: from fear and anxiety and division within the Church, to global economic upheaval and budget stresses in our congregations, to poverty and wars and degradation that just won't seem to go away. I don't mean that our culture is experiencing this as a penitential time—our popular culture seems incapable of restraint, moderation, civility, of being even slightly embarrassed by what it says and does. And so it could be that this is a time for us, the Church, to be intercessor and advocate for our world gone

wild, to stand with those wrecked by the brokenness of life, to bear their burdens, to love them as we are loved.

And we do this, if we dare, not like Blessed Doubting Thomas or Blessed Eeyore, sighing heavily and expecting no good to come of it. But as those who know the deeper and more beautiful truth about what God desires and what God intends. We enter these Lenten lands with our hearts fixed on the Kingdom, the liberating assurance that, in Christ, there is more and better to come. And so, Lent (wherever kept) is never gloomy, morbid or depressing. We are pressed down so that we might be lifted up, made humble so that we might share in Christ's glory. It is a time for renewed hope and renewed confidence in what God sees when he looks upon us and the Church.

The Epistle to the Galatians that contains our Council theme, "Bear one another's burdens" is sometimes called the "Magna Carta of Christian Liberty." Paul declares that those who live in Christ are free. He starts his letter with this "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age." (1:3-4) And the portion we heard read by Reid begins, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters..."

So far so good. I like my freedom, don't like anybody telling me what to do. I think if our Bishop, Gary, had gone with that for our theme, we'd have had a really good marketing tool: "Called to freedom!" How many great ad campaigns play on that notion, our desire—our right—to be our own person, to be truly free to use a deodorant that sends us sailing across the ocean or to drive a car that carries us to a mountaintop show, or to drink some god-awful energy drink that makes everyone want to be near us.

But somehow, I don't think Paul was that into packaging and marketing the Gospel. Because he insists that our freedom from sin and death in Christ binds us to something new, something larger than our selves. "You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only don't use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"(5:13-14)

Free to be servants? Free to bear burdens for others? What kind of freedom is that? We'll never pack the pews with a message like that.

Except that it's true. It's a law of life as certain as gravity: If we do not love, if we cannot love and serve others, we are as dead as if all our arteries clog up and our hearts stop. Serendipitously, our other Scripture readings support this hard and life-giving truth. (Just so you don't think we

stacked the deck tonight, these are the readings appointed for the day after Ash Wednesday.)

In the Deuteronomy passage, God's people are gathered by Moses to hear and remember and recommit themselves to the covenant. Or not. They are free to choose. But Moses tells them to understand what their choices really are—life and death, blessing and curse. To choose the freedom of obedience to God is life and blessing. The Psalmist sings of the happiness, the blessedness, of those who delight in God's law, who live within the covenant relationship God has made. And in the Gospel, Jesus says that those who follow him will need to deny self and take up their cross. To find real life, they'll have to lay down their lives and go where he leads.

And where does he lead us, but into a death-and-curse-choosing world where life is cheap and cheapened? Where does Jesus call us in our freedom but to go to people whose lives are over-burdened, to stand with them and share the load.

Why us, of all people? In some ways, I just don't know. It's a mystery and maybe a prank. I mean, look at us. Why us? Why any in the long parade of unlikely saints starting back in Jerusalem and Galilee all those centuries ago, and stretching all the way into our churches back home last Sunday. Why those 12 apostles? Why those Hebrew slaves in Egypt? What was God

thinking? When I got consecrated bishop, Bishop Hibbs gave me a helpful little plaque with a quote reading something like: “Bishops are people called by God far beyond their ability and competency.” It’s true for all of us: called not because we’re so spiritually gifted and talented, but because, by grace, we have seen and have heard and have known that Christ stands with us, has entered fully into our lives, has carried our burdens, has carried us. His cross is planted in the middle of our lives and he has claimed us for his own. In his love, in his perfect freedom, he became as a slave for us and has set us free from sin and death to follow him and to enter with him into the suffering of others.

Beyond the grief and the grace, what I found most compelling in the video we watched this afternoon of the Cozad family was not the uniqueness of their story, but in how *common* it is. I can’t count the times I’ve witnessed that out-pouring of compassion for a family that’s suffering, how many times I’ve seen people refuse to turn away from the suffering of others, but stubbornly minister to them with tender mercy and kindness. People kept visiting and calling and writing Jane Cozad right up until she died. They would not give in to the protective barricades the family had put around their own breaking hearts.

We can only be humbled and grateful in the presence of such love. And yet, it is the Anglican way that we live in a rhythm of thanksgiving AND repentance. So we are thankful for the loving care that surrounded Jane, and are rightly moved to witness how her burdens were carried by those whose love would never think to see them as “burdens”—still, we know of others in our churches and outside them, who lived and died lonely, for whom no one kept vigil and no one came to bear their burdens with them. The power of that story then, is not in leaving us in awe and appreciation for a loving family and a loving church, but in moving us to repentance, to turning around and seeing those in need that the Lord places before us, and trying again.

Lent is perfect for movement like that. Bearing one another’s burdens, loving our neighbors, forgiving one another, choosing to remain with each other—these are things we will never “get” through some church program. And yet, they are Christian habits and practices that can be practiced, practiced, practiced. They arise out of old-school, low-tech, slow things like prayer, worship, Bible study and service.

The forty days of Lent give us about a tithe of the year in which to reorient and recommit our lives to the proposition that real freedom lies in serving Christ. Whatever your congregation has planned for Lent, you can

set it within the framework of bearing one another's burdens, of living compassionately with one another. So that whatever you are focusing on in this season, you can see it through the lens of this Galatians passage. How does your practice of prayer, or worship, hospitality or service or stewardship strengthen you and your church for bearing one another's burdens, and so fulfilling the law of Christ. With so many in the Church pulling away from each other, what does it look like for us to lean on one another? At work, at school, in your families, how does the desire to more intentionally bear one another's burdens get fleshed out?

And do not stoically and proudly—sinfully—ignore the mutuality of this passage. To bear one another's burdens means also that you allow others to carry *your* burdens, to stand with you in your hurt. To acknowledge we *have* our own burdens, that we need others can be a tough admission. But this awareness of mutuality in burden-bearing—an awareness that an exchange is taking place deep within us—can prevent us from being condescending in our taking on the burdens of others. We are not superheroes swooping in to the rescue, so much as those who have been rescued finding within us the capacity to abide with others and be a means of healing and grace.

Here's a good story about keeping this mutuality in mind.

A priest in a declining downtown neighborhood noticed a lot of people hanging around on weekdays—poor, unemployed, hungry people. He talked about it in church and everyone agreed they should do something to help. So they started a meal program, they volunteered to serve hot lunches and they warmly welcomed the crowds who came to eat during the week. But then, the priest started inviting these people to come to church on Sundays, and some of them did. And then some more did. The church people became uneasy and unhappy with this. A group of them asked for a meeting with the priest and said, “Feeding these hungry people is important and we’re glad to do it. But inviting them to worship with us is too much. They aren’t like us, and we aren’t like them. None of us will be comfortable. You’ve gone too far.”

The priest thought for a minute and then said, “I’m really sorry. I guess you’re right. I was only trying to save as many poor sinners as I can.” Well, you can imagine how guilty that made them feel. There was a long, awkward silence. Finally, one of them said, “No, Father, you’re right. We should do all we can to save them.”

And the priest said, “I wasn’t talking about *them*. I was talking about *us*.”

All of this burden-bearing can become just another chore, just another burden that leaves us resentful, tired and joyless, unless we are mindful that to use our freedom to love and serve others is to participate in the Christ's own life. It is Christ in us who reaches out to others through us. We who have been redeemed find life in offering Christ's redemptive love to others. We who have known Christ's compassion in the love and care of others, are empowered to live compassionately toward others. As Christ has done, and continues to do these things, so we, too, are given grace and courage and hearts big enough to do for others. And in this participation in his life, we discover that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

Christ in his perfect freedom takes upon himself the sin of the world. He beckons us to join him in that freedom and follow where he goes. And we know the way that he is going. Here it's described in this poem by Welshman R. S, Thomas:

And God held in his hand  
A small globe. Look, he said.  
The son looked. Far off,  
As through water, he saw  
A scorched land of fierce  
Colour. The light burned  
There; crusted buildings  
Cast their shadows: a bright  
Serpent, a river  
Uncoiled itself, radiant  
With slime.  
On a bare

Hill a bare tree saddened  
The sky. Many people  
Held out their thin arms  
To it, as though waiting  
For a vanished April  
To return to its crossed  
Boughs. The son watched  
Them. Let me go there, he said.

Amen.