

LAY YOUR BURDEN DOWN

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So, I'll have to share a little secret with you. Forth-two plus years of doing this, and it scares the living daylights out of me every time. [Congregants laugh] It's literally amazing. And it's humbling. And, at some level, I think it's also inspiring.

So, today I want to do a little talking about the idea of laying your burdens down. And it's interesting to me that this topic sort of just popped into my head, because the concept of burdens has never consciously been a part of my vocabulary. And I use that word "consciously" because I -- like most of humanity -- am way too busy living at the surface of life to consciously examine every aspect of my life and be concerned about burdens. Everything that I would have considered to be a burden -- or sometimes that I hear of as burdens -- are simple things like raising a family; being responsible for making a living; doing the best job that we can possibly do. To me, those are things that just come naturally in being appreciative of this amazing gift called life that we get.

And it seems to me that sometimes we sort of just go about living this thing without really truly being grateful for it and being humble about it. And we just kind of shift into drive or we shift into automatic and put the pedal to the metal and we just go full speed ahead. And we don't stop to think about things until things start to challenge us. Things like a high-cost living; like debt; things like caring for aging parents or aging partners; managing households; illnesses; disabilities; marital tensions.

These are usually for someone else other than ourselves, so we don't really give them a whole lot of thought until suddenly one of them knocks on our own door. And then we become sort of like Fats Domino: "I hear you knocking, but you can't come in." [Congregants laugh]

But somehow they still manage to find a way in. When they do get in they can be an annoyance. And one of the things I like about the business that I'm in is: I get to publicly deal with the annoyances in my life. [Congregants laugh] It's kind of masochistic in a way, but it's also healing. Because if I talk about it, my soul won't rest until I do something about it. So let's get it on.

I'll start with interesting little tale that I like because of just the nuances of the story.

So, there was a tourist who visits a Zen sanctuary. And while he's wandering about the gardens, he encounters two Zen masters having an intense debate.

"As one's burden increases," says the first Zen Master to the other, *"so does their need for haste."* And he steps towards the door.

But then he's stopped by the second Zen Master who says, *"True; but that which moves within us may also move without us."* And then he takes a step toward the door.

So, the first Zen master holds up his hands, and he says, *"Your words are wise. However, darkness held within becomes harder and harder to expel."* And he takes another step towards the door, only to be blocked by his companion who states, *"But a single gust of wind can release a fearsome avalanche."*

Several seconds pass in silence as the two men stand, and they stare at each other. And finally, the first one steps away from the door and he says to the other one, *"There can be no denying your enlightenment."*

And the second one nods and he walks through the door and he closes the door behind him. And the tourist is watching all of this and he's feeling curious, and he's also feeling inspired by it all,

and he rushes forward to speak with the first Zen master, and he says to him, *"I feel like I've learned so much, but I have just one question. What's behind that door?"*

So, the second Zen master says, *"What? That's the bathroom."* [Congregants laugh]

It takes a while. [Chuckles along with the congregation]

There are burdens in our lives and in our experiences. And there are shared burdens, as well. In our nation today, we have a lot of unrest; a lot of disorder. And it's a shared burden. It's on all of us to bring about peace. It's on all of us to love one another. It's on all of us to be at one with our world and with our nation. And so, that's a burden of sorts.

The reality is: in life, there are many shared burdens. There are also burdens that we assume just by virtue of who we are. And there are burdens that are expected of us, like being strong, family-oriented; or taking care of our families; or holding down positions of importance. And then there are occasionally imagined burdens: burdens that we build up in our minds.

And so, whatever type of burdens show up in our lives, they capture our full attention. And they hold our full attention until such time as we choose to either release them or to solve them or to surrender to them. And sometimes we don't know which of those is the correct thing for us to do.

A few weeks ago, when I signed on to do this service, and I began to wonder what it is I would enjoy talking about, the old gospel song "Glory Glory" came to my mind. That song is also known as "When I Lay My Burdens Down." It just popped into my consciousness. And my first thought was, *"What the hell?"* [Congregants laugh] Seriously! I thought, *"What the hell?"*

So, I've been toying with this idea up until right this very moment.

So, the first thing I want to do is give you a little segment of history about the song "Glory, Glory." The song has been recorded in a variety of genres. It's been recorded in folk music. It's been recorded in country music. It's been recorded in blues. It's been recorded in rock. It's been recorded in gospel.

And one of the interesting takes for me about this song is: it's listed as an American spiritual; a song that moved later after its genesis into the black gospel tradition. And the quote lyrics were in the beginning, "When I laid my burden down," and they were referring to, of course, the hereafter in the song. But when it moved over into the black gospel tradition the lyrics were changed to, *"Since I laid my burden down."* The first rendition focused on life in the hereafter; the second rendition is focused on what one of my favorite preachers called the *"Nasty now and now."* The nasty now and now. The times when things get tough. I kind of like that.

So, what does one do when life seems to present what we might call insoluble conflict? What does one do with that? What does one do when there doesn't seem to be a clear path to peace or to peace of mind? What does one do when obstacles appear to be more prevalent than what I would personally prefer life to be, which is smooth and easy? That's my preference.

But as we all know, we don't always get what we want and want. So, another thing about this burden idea for me is: How do we actually define burdens? It's a personal thing, in my opinion.

Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones said when they recorded the song "Beasts of Burden"-- which is one of my favorite songs -- they were coming at it from the perspective of it being a "soul begging song"; an attitude song that came after Richard's struggles with drugs and with alcohol throughout the 1970s.

And standing here this evening, I don't recall why I was led to use it as a title, except from the realization that we all can be victims to some kind of burden in our lives. I call it a burden trap. And the reason we can become victims to it is because life is filled with responsibilities. Life is filled with challenges.

It's filled with multiple opportunities, as well. And the interesting thing about this reality is that, any point in time any of them can cycle into what we might call burdens, just in the blink of an eye.

I remember my first gig as the minister. And I had been called to build a church. And I had no idea when I went to the ministerial school about building a church. As a matter of fact, it was the last thing on my mind! But somehow the burden fell into my lap, almost mysteriously. And it was frightening. And I was angry.

And I remember praying one night, asking, *"Why me?"* And it was a question I should have never asked. Because in the blink of an eye, the answer was, *"Why not?"*

And I'm thinking, *"Who is this? What is this that's saying to me, 'Why not?' when this is something I didn't consciously choose to do?"*

And for quite a few weeks, it took a tremendous toll on my emotions. And there were times when I felt like I'd lost a sense of safety, a sense of security, and also a sense of value, in some respect.

Most of my life I am an incurable optimist. And I'm usually that way, come hell or higher water. But I'm also a very pragmatic person, so when I get one of these "out-of-the-blue" things popping into my head, I get a little frightened. Because every time it's happened, I've had to make major changes in my life that I was not prepared to make or never even dreamed of making.

And my usual response is to say ... Oh, I guess I can't say what I *really* would say, [Congregants laugh] But let's say it's an, *"Aww, shucks"* moment.

And I have to practice what Eric Butterworth might call *"the art of separation."* I have to separate my fear and my anxiety from my faith and my strength and my wisdom and my will and my openness to be a servant of God. I have to remind myself that this -- whatever it is that I'm called to do -- really is just the blink of an eye in the greatest scheme of things. And then I have to lay my burden down and let it go.

One of my favorite Biblical reminders about laying burdens down comes from one of my favorite characters in the Bible. It's Job. There was no one in the Bible who was as skilled as Job was at whining, at complaining, at groaning about the complexity and the challenges of life. Nobody in the Scripture was as good as he was at that. To him, *everything* was a burden.

And he felt that it was because God demanded too much of us human beings. He demanded too much of us by giving us free will; by not giving us any clear guidelines; about not specifying specifically what those so-called "golden rules" should be.

So, according to Scripture, Job begged for an encounter with God to vent his frustrations, too use a modern-day term. And so, lo and behold, God gives him an audience; a chance to vent his frustrations. So let me share this scripture with you. It's from the book of Genesis, Chapter 3, Verse 22. And it states:

"Behold, the human has become as one of us. He has become as one who is capable of knowing good and evil. And lest he put forth his hand, and also take of the tree of life and eat and live forever, he should do quite well."

And here's Job's response to that. He says:

"Behold, I am of small account, God. How shall I answer thee? How shall I respond?"

And God responds back to him:

"Gird up thy loins right now, like a man. I will demand of thee, and declare you unto me. Deck thyself with excellence and dignity, and array thyself with honor and dignity and majesty."

Put in modern terminology: Appreciate who you are, Job. Appreciate this amazing gift that I've just put on you. Stop whining about your responsibility that you claim you want to. This is not a burden; it's an opportunity.

So, I want to ask you to think about your life. And think about all the opportunities that you've had presented to you: the ones you took advantage of and the ones you didn't take advantage of. And then I want you to think about one simple word: that is responsibility. How much responsibility did you take?

I've had so many different experiences in life: been near death; been high; been low. And every one of them was because of me. Every one of them required responsibility from me. It is in my moments of inferiority that my challenges begin to arise. It's the moments when I doubt myself -- when I doubt my soul; when I doubt my capacity to be whole and well -- that my challenges really rise. It's in the moments when I'm not accomplishing what I thought I was going to accomplish as quickly as I wanted to accomplish it; that's when my challenges arise.

Because they all are coming from one simple place: my own personal ego. And, in some sense, It's sort of like a complex inferiority complex.

And Charles and Cora Fillmore, who was Charles' second wife ... They made the statement that Job had the inferiority complex of personality instead of appreciating what was really his to nurture and to expand and to mold and to shape and to alter and to improve upon and to extend it and to diversify it. He chose, instead, to see it as a burden ... and, hence, that's what it became.

So, I found that quite interesting. I found it interesting. And I also found it challenging. Because in my best moments, I believe I can do anything. But when the opportunity presents itself, that's where my work has to begin.

I've been doing it a long time -- 83 years now: this soul work trying to understand what it is I am worthy of, and what it is that stimulates the idea of unworthiness in me. And what is it that will help me to perpetuate the strong side of that equation?

It's the interesting thing about us as humanity. We have a tendency to worship the darkness in ourselves much more so than we worship the light. We'd rather be dictated to as a people -- as a nation -- than decide for ourselves what we're capable of being and doing. We, the people, are this nation. We, the people, are this world. We, the people, have a voice. We, the people, have strength and we have power. But it's up to we, the people, to utilize that to its fullest and to its highest.

So, it's a challenge that we get to decide. We can't put our faith in saviors. It's one of the challenges of Christianity: the idea of a savior to save us. We have to participate in that equation. There are places where that might be considered heresy. But if we truly read the scriptures -- and read them with understanding -- that's what we are called to do and to be.

So where do we go from here? As a people, where do we go from here? As individuals? What is it going to require from us, as individuals and as a nation, to bring about what we say we want ... which is progress, progress, progress. Continual progress.

So I'm asking you: Where do we go?

I don't know the answer, but I know someone who does. So. I'm going to share with you the "gospel" of Yoda. [Congregants laugh]

The first law of Yoda: Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose.

Number two: Attachment leads to jealousy, which is the shadow of greed, that is.

Number three: Your path you must decide.

Number four: Pass on what you have learned. How many of us pass on What we have learned?

Number five: Do or do not. There is no try.

Do or do not; there is no try! Lay my burden down. Lay my burden down. Lay my burden down.

I'm going to close with a little humor. Because this is pretty deep stuff.

So, a man rushes his pregnant wife into the delivery room. And as the doctors are getting ready to deliver, there is a new machine that has been invented that they want to use in the process. And the machine is called an "empathy machine." This empathy machine would transfer some of the pain of birth from the mother to the father. [Congregants laugh] And they wanted to know if he would be willing to take it on.

And so, the man -- being a loving husband -- agreed. And they laid him down in the room next to his wife. And then they tell him some fathers have actually died [congregants laugh] if the pain is cranked up too high.

So, the man opts to start it at 10%. And so, his wife lets out a sigh of relief. And the man looks no different. In shock, the doctors turned it up to 20%. There's nothing. Then 30%; there's still nothing. Sixty percent; still nothing. Eight percent; still nothing. One hundred percent; still nothing!

So puzzled, the doctors leave it at 100% and they assist the man's now tranquil wife, and she gives birth to a baby boy. And the doctors congratulate the man for being so resistant to pain. And they spend a few hours in the hospital, and then they go home.

They get out of the car to go up the walk to the front door of the house. And when they get home, they find the mailman dead on the doorstep. [Congregants laugh]

I don't get any better. [Congregants applaud]

God bless you for putting up with me.