

A Sermon by Nada Sellers, preached at First Congregational Church, Branford on 10-9-16

“Will You Lend a Hand?”

Galatians 6:1-5 with Matthew 11:28-30

I’m wondering if anyone else read about the story of Jourdan Duncan that appeared in the Washington Post at the end of last month? He’s the black teenager from the Northern California town of Vallejo who was walking from his home to the northern city of Benicia and back every day, in order to work the 3:00 to midnight graveyard shift at his job with Pro-Form Laboratories. Problem was walking seven miles in the dead of night, along a busy road called “Industrial Way” is not a safe way to travel; it’s more than 2 hours of walking each way! When police Officer Kirk Keffer noticed the lone, lanky 18 year-old walking alone one night, he stopped his patrol car, got out and asked Mr. Duncan if he was okay? After the shock and the nerves - Duncan recalls thinking, “um, did I do anything wrong? Is he going to put me in cuffs? I didn’t do anything bad” - the teenager told the officer that he was walking back to his parents’ home from his packing line job. Soon Officer Keffer cleared out the passenger seat in his patrol car and offered the young man a ride home. It was on the ride home that he learned of the teen’s recent graduation from high school the year before, and of his desire to save money for college and his dream of becoming a California Highway Patrol officer. When Duncan’s aging Volvo broke down, he was initially able to get some rides, but didn’t want to continue to be a burden to his friends and co-workers. Instead, he started walking, plotting out a route using Google Maps, and over the months, the walk had become routine.

The police officer was impressed – he dropped Duncan off at his home, encouraging him to keep up the good work ethic. But unable to shake the story of this long commute from his mind, Officer Keffer shared the story with his shift supervisor, and together, they came up with a plan to lend a hand: They emailed the Police Association board to get approval to buy a bike, and within an hour, enough members signed off in agreement. The very next day a good mountain bike was purchased, with special lights, and a helmet donated by the shop’s owner. Making contact with Jourdan’s employer, Keffer made secret plans to gift him right after his Monday evening shift, as a token of the Police Association’s gratitude: A group of officers presented the new bike, explaining, “We would like to acknowledge your hard work and dedication for what you do and for setting the example for kids your age.” Jourdan Duncan was absolutely bowled over by the gift and all the attention, and he and Keffer are keeping in touch... There’s even a ride-along offered at some point in the future so the teenager can get a better idea of what law enforcement is all about.

Lending a hand – With all the incidents involving young black men and women getting trapped in encounters with police that somehow go terribly wrong, here is a true story that we can celebrate: appreciation and respect for one another, going the extra mile to help make a lasting difference in someone’s life. What a great experience for this young man, and a lasting experience of generosity and service for the entire police department of that town!

I’m fairly certain that if you and I started searching about for this kind of news, we could come up with many more stories like this in our own communities: I just learned about the Guilford Dog Park, which recently installed a bench outside the fence for people to sit with kids that are too young to go into the park. People are being encouraged to offer a hand to those sitting on the bench with a dog, assisting as a buddy in order to bring the dog inside the park and offer supervision so the owner can rest assured the pet

gets to enjoy the visit too. Dog park buddy's for your neighbors, what a kind and considerate thing to do! (See FaceBook @ Guilford Parks and Rec). See? There are amazing things going on around us all the time! It's so much easier to become dispirited in the wash of all the dreadful stories which always show up in every news cycle, than to purposely seek out the goodness and share *THAT* story.

Sorta' reminds me of the dynamics going on in Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia, where news that the churches which Paul had founded during his missionary travels in Asia Minor were having trouble, was causing the apostle great concern: Jewish-Christian "missionaries" had come to town preaching a "different gospel" that demanded Gentile Christians had to follow Jewish Law of circumcision. This is an intra-Christian dispute and Paul is outraged that his Gentile converts are being misled into this perversion of Christianity. (NIB vol xi, p 184-85) What to do!? The news was not good at all. How to counter this false narrative with the truth about faithfulness before the mission churches were in shambles? What could be done to re-present the expectations of the true gospel about God's saving love in Christ Jesus?

For these reasons, Paul wrote a letter to counter the claims of these traditionalists, to identify Jesus and the cross and the resurrection as the basis for our relationship with God, and re-emphasize what the power and presence of the Spirit means to the health and growth of the church. Galatians has become a deeply influential source for the development of Christian theology and preaching: Both Augustine and Martin Luther, for example, took their lead from Paul's message of radical grace, apart from the works of the Law. (NIB p. 183) As Paul is intent upon overcoming mistruths with what's real in the church of Jesus Christ, there's so much good news to for us to reclaim: For instance, according to Paul, there's this extraordinary connectedness about life in together in the church, when we walk in the Spirit:

"My Friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness... Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 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. For all must carry their own loads."

"Restore the one detected in transgression in a spirit of gentleness...Bear one another's burdens, playing out over and over again in the life of the community, the pattern of self-sacrificing love that Jesus shared with us." The community of the Spirit, Paul writes, is a place where we avoid censuring each other and instead, offer mutual correction in a Spirit of gentleness. Boasting and self-filled pride has no place in this community; this is a community of personal accountability before God – we each carry our own stuff now and into eternity – as well as a community where we help one another through shared correctives and admonishment, we "bear one another's burdens." (NIB p. 335)

This is what the real gospel of Jesus is about; it's not about placing restrictive burdens as to which rules you must keep in order to be righteous, but instead, welcoming the give and take of shared burdens and encouragements for improved devotion and faithfulness. One of the ways our state conference leadership in the UCC has been calling on member churches to reclaim healthy new directions, is to balance our congregational zest for independence and autonomy, with the virtues of interdependence. Collaboration and partnerships within and between Spirit-formed communities are reshaping the church of today for tomorrow. To be concerned with sharing each other's burdens is to recognize

the presence of God in the other and to cultivate the Spirit's gentleness in the ups and downs of these relationships. It is also to call one another to engagement, to taking part in the work and sharing the load of what being a church with people and buildings and resources and ministries which need to be shepherded for the glory of God. When you don't show up, I suffer and the community misses out. When the same people are tasked with things that ought to be shared burdens, frustrations mount and burn-out isn't far away... That's not how collaboration works.

When you and I declare that the Spirit of God is calling us to take action toward the church which is emerging, and yet we insist on falling back into old patterns and structures and limits over and over again, we are losing out on becoming the church God calls us to be today and tomorrow. How shall we lend a hand to share one another's burdens and to bring encouragement when it's needed, if we haven't found ways to build meaningful relationships in our lives together? Where do you find yourself in terms of the priorities of our church today? How does this shape our perspectives on activities and attitudes toward Christian service outside of our church walls? Paul's message is not that Jesus is a new Moses, or that Jesus' teachings are ethical prescriptions to be applied in rabbinic fashion... "Fulfilling the law of Christ" is about the love and mutual caring shared among believers as we "bear one another's burdens," something entirely different from the attitude that one should live solely for one's own self (WBC vol 41 *Galatians* R. Longenecker, 1990:275-276). That's an attitude which has the full backing of one of our presidential candidates, and it's got no business showing up in the life of the church (or is the White House, in my opinion, but that's another story!).

In his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, Dr. Martin Luther King spoke of human interdependence like this, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." In denouncing the false teachings which were ruining the churches in Galatia, Paul sought to teach his people to share burdens great and small. Can we also hear the call to lend a hand by sharing one another's burdens and lightening the load? Can we step up to lend a hand by giving rides to our Friendship Bible study friends Janet, Nancy and Mary, who are not here because there is no one to do this for them today? Would you be willing to increase your support of and participation in helping with the Christmas Fair which will definitely happen this year, and which needs a lot more helping hands to get involved? How about joining in the work days here at the church, as led by Land and Buildings? Of what about finding ways to be generous with our financial resources as we move into our Stewardship campaign, would you be able to increase your giving toward the renewal of the ministries of this church?

As we return to supporting the church as a **movement** shaped by the Spirit which is alive and moving, we move further and further away from maintaining the church as an institution. How will you lend a hand as this church asks itself, "What is it that God is calling us to do?" Amen.