



Roanoke, Virginia
Preschool Sunday, October 22, 2023

“Gift and Burden”

Romans 5:1-11

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Over Labor Day weekend, I led a retreat at the Menucha Conference Center for the good people of First Presbyterian Church of Portland Oregon. I was pleased to be invited and had my ego boosted because this means they must have enjoyed the retreat I led for them 17 years ago at the same place. It can't possibly be because they have a short memory.

I will tell you what also boosts a minister's ego. It is finding out that at least one person doesn't have a short memory. It is hearing someone quote to you word for word something you said 17 years before. Someone who was then a mother of young children remembered me saying that **“children are both gift and burden, burden and gift, and then a moment comes when you realize the burden itself is the gift.”**

When I said it, I was talking about one of Jesus' parables, the *Parable of the Eleventh Hour Worker*. If you're unfamiliar with that parable, fret not because that is not the passage I want to talk about this morning. I want you to think about that quote in relation to what Paul says in chapter 5 of Romans. Listen, and listen for the Word of God.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2** through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. **3** And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, **4** and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, **5** and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. **7** Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. **8** But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ



died for us. **9** Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. **10** For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. **11** But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Gift and burden,
burden and gift,
and then a moment comes when you realize the burden itself is the gift.

Is every burden a gift?

Some seem to think so. You've heard the examples of suffering only makes us stronger:

- break down muscles to make them strong,
- gain empathy from your pain,
- learn from your mistakes,
- build a higher sense of self from having persevered,
- gain from your pain a humble awareness of our need for God's grace.

It seems that Paul would join this chorus. Didn't he say he gives thanks for suffering?—at least he says, “**I give thanks for my suffering**,” because it gives him the gifts of endurance, a stronger character, and a greater hope?

But *all* suffering? The suffering of those who lost children in Ukraine or the Middle East? And you know people—you may have been one of them—for whom going down the “All things happen for a reason” rabbit trail would have been a terrible mistake. I think we can agree that there is a difference between suffering to be survived and suffering that redeems.

Actually, I don't think Paul would disagree. What Paul says is misunderstood, I think, if you think that he is speaking of all suffering. He isn't. He is talking about

suffering for the sake of others

because God in Jesus *suffered for the sake of him*.

He is talking about the suffering that comes of love,
and he is thankful for *that* kind of suffering
because *that* kind of suffering brings him closer to the God
who is *that kind of love*.

Let's go back to my quote. Let's think about those who bear the burden and blessing of caring for children they love—whether they be parents, grandparents, other kinds of guardians or even this congregation as a whole. Let's think again about what Paul says by beginning with where Paul's thinking begins. Paul's thinking begins not with *his* suffering but with *God's*.

He'd have you consider this:

You are to God “**both gift and burden, burden and gift**.”



As a child of God, you are both [gift and burden, burden and gift.](#)”

If you can go that far, consider this:

For God, “[the burden that is you is the gift.](#)”

It is because God has that kind of love for us, where even the burden of loving is a gift, that Paul gives thanks for his suffering because of his love of others. It has aligned him with God. It has aligned him with God’s grace.

This being Preschool Sunday, let’s go back to thinking about children being burdens and gifts to consider what Paul means. Usually, a baby is welcomed into this world as a gift. *The baby is precious **before** the baby learns how to be precious to get its way.*

Children do that, you know, learn to be precious to get their way;

- get some attention,
- make parents smile,
- push them to do something they may not otherwise be inclined to do, such as
 - play with them on the floor,
 - stay up a bit longer,
 - be given some extra screen time.
 - pay for a destination wedding in Montego Bay.

(They sure grow up fast, don’t they?)

I read somewhere that a baby’s smile is at first an imitation, but quickly becomes a tool.

But rewind back before the baby learns to be precious. At the beginning, the baby is precious just by being. When the baby is first placed in someone’s hands who is then told “[Say ‘Hello’ to your daughter](#)’... or [nephew](#) or [grandchild](#). Maybe sometimes the one who receives the baby is overwhelmed first by this baby being a burden, overwhelmed by a sense of responsibility. I get that. That makes sense. But I know that others—I was one of them—that when the baby is placed in one’s arms, one looks at the baby’s face, counts the fingers and toes, and is filled with gratitude. The baby is a simple gift.

But the child is also a burden. I speak of “burden” in a general sense, not a negative one, a word that can range from normal responsibility to a terrible cross to bear. The child is also a burden, and the one who loves the baby learns that soon enough.

Paige isn’t here so I can pick on her. She had a birthday this past Friday. Let’s celebrate her birthday by going back to the days following the *day of her birth*. Paige was our first, and Mille and I were faced with the intimidating responsibility of caring for and keeping alive this baby placed in our inexperienced care. I’m known to forget my jacket, my coat, my wallet, my keys, and one Easter Sunday my sermon when I came out here to preach, so how was I going to keep track of and take care of a baby? Fortunately, at first we didn’t have to get through this on our own. Millie’s mom was with us for a week and then my mom was with us for six more. But the day came when Mom left us.... alone... *with Paige... **who never slept.*** As I stood in the driveway and waved goodbye at her car as she drove away a little faster than I thought was polite, leaving us alone with that barely-sleeping, often-crying, child..., I was crying too.



There are moments when any significant responsibility, no matter how that responsibility is loved, can be a burden. And sometimes the moments are clustered together and build up.

Cindi finds

- A stained-glass lamp shade shattered on the floor,
- And this is right after a lovely new curtain was found ripped,
- And this is after mud prints were discovered on her beautiful rug *and* couch.

It puts Cindi a bit over the edge and she says, “[This is why we can’t have nice things](#),” scolding her cat.

Many parents have said the same thing to a child.

There is a certain amount of wear and tear—sometimes, a certain amount of destruction—that comes with having children around. And I think most of you know what I mean when I say that sometimes the wear and tear is of the heart, felt acutely when one’s child does harm to another, or to herself. You suffer because you love. And you suffer because you won’t give up.

Paul is talking about our being that kind of burden to God. Paul is talking about the sacrifice and hurt that comes of love for the sake of another. A love that has you kidnapped because you can’t escape it. That is God’s kind of suffering which was revealed in Jesus’ suffering. Jesus showed that

while we are yet sinners—

- while we live in ways that harm God because we are harming ourselves and others,
 - even while inviting what Paul says is God’s wrath—

God *doesn’t quit us* but suffers for us—

- suffers because when you do not abandon someone in their mess,
 - you get messy too,
- suffers because when you do not abandon someone in their pain,
 - you hurt too.

Paul doesn’t make this point lightly. In fact, he presses it home. You heard him:

- Even when we are at our worst, when we are the
 - broken lamp,
 - shredded curtain
 - or muddy rug,

instead of discarding us as ruined and no longer of use, God takes on the sacrifice of our restoring.

- Even when we are weak, Paul says—
 - which is a way of saying that even when we are such burdens that God must do for us what we cannot do for ourselves—
 - God won’t quit us.
- Even when we are enemies, Paul says—
 - even when we are actively trying to oppose what God stands for in the world—



- God won't quit us.

This is the suffering of God's love.

And that is why Paul can say, "I give thanks for my suffering for the sake of others," because

- that is a love that comes from God.
- It is a love shared with God.
- Thus it is a love that brings one closer to God.

This suffering love

- teaches endurance, Paul says. "God doesn't quit so I don't quit."
- It grows character, Paul says, because he grows more in God's selfless image.
- It gives him hope for the world, Paul says, because he knows
 - that God won't quit on others.
 - just as God didn't quit on him.

(A side note here. Some hear Paul talk about being given hope and assume that Paul is talking about hope in God because the world is falling apart. In this time of disturbing news at home and abroad, it is important to note that Paul is talking about hope *for the world*. He says that God's healing of him strengthens his hope that the glory of God will be shared with others who need healing... hope for Ukraine... for the Middle East... for our country... for our community.)

Back to the main point:

Can you see that Paul is not talking about *all* suffering, but a particular kind of suffering, the suffering that comes of loving others in the way that God loves him. It is the suffering that comes of the burden following in the way of Jesus among people who do not always join you on the way, sometimes get in your way, but who all need to find their way back to God.

I want to close by talking about this congregation and our burdens that are gifts. Let me fly through a few examples to warm us up for the one I really want to talk about today which has to do with children.

We have a facility to take care of. It's a burden. But when we worship in this space and have connections with each other as we connect with God and see the community and programs that happen in its rooms and hallways, it is easy to see the burden of maintaining facilities as a gift.

Providing those programs is a burden. Add up the effort of organizing, the work of implementation and the cost of affording it, and a good bit is asked of all of us. But when we see what is learned in the classrooms, the friendships made in the clubs, the joys and cares that are shared within the community, it is easy to see the burdens as gifts.



Providing the outreach that we do is a burden. We are giving money and ourselves away for goodness sake. That's right, for *goodness* sake. When we see families kept off the street, the mentally ill receive kind treatment, children of single-working-parent families being tutored, and systemic issues of poverty get addressed, it becomes easy to see the burdens as gifts.

And then there is our Preschool. Our preschool demands a great deal from the church:

- facilities to house it,
- teachers to hire, train, and pay;
- furniture and toys to maintain and clean—
 - and then replace after understandable wear and tear.

There are expenses involved.

- Don't get me started about the outside doorway we had to knock in a wall only a few feet from an existing outside doorway so that we could make a building code smile.
- Ask our property and preschool committees how complicated it was to get the new playground installed. (By the way, if you haven't seen it, it is beautiful. You might even want to lie down because of that cushy ground covering).

But what a *gift*—what a blessing—is our preschool! What a wonderful, glorious gift it is to provide a faith-based nurturing environment of play-and-learning where children can grow in mind, body, and spirit. What a gift it is to the staff to see the children constantly roaming our halls. What a gift it is to have those children feel like this place is a second home where they are safe, loved, and accepted for who they are. Many churches out there would love to have these burdens.

Combine the Preschool with the other church responsibilities I described, and I think you can see that it is these kinds of burdens that grow this church's heart and give it its sense of purpose. Even the suffering that comes with our outreach, the burdens of understanding the real hurt and harm that is in the world, and then addressing them even knowing we cannot solve them (which causes us more suffering), draws us closer to God.

So, let's not dismiss Paul because we think he is talking about *all* suffering. Let's hear him as he describes.

the burdens of love,
the hurt that comes of love,
the good that can come out of showing that love,
and the intimacy with God that can come of sharing that love.

Then, maybe we can bow our heads and give thanks to Paul for the suffering that helps us endure, builds character, and gives us hope for our troubled world.

