

“The Burdens We Carry”

July 21, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Kate Layzer

Texts: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

I just want to read those last verses again:

“People began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak.”

I’ve been mulling over these lines for a couple of weeks as I’ve thought about our healing service today. I guess I’ve been trying to imagine what that actually looked like – people physically carrying their ill and infirm loved ones for miles. Did they lay the mats on stretchers, and enlist another person to help? Or did they simply lift their friend or relative in their arms, mat and all, and set off in the general direction of Jesus? HOW did they bring their sick?

Are you picturing it? Are you feeling the weight of the sick person resting in your arms, or hoisted up onto your back, your elbows under their knees... for mile after mile?

The burdens people carry for love...

You have carried burdens, I know.

For family members and friends and neighbors
and who knows who else...

And you’ve probably been carried at times, too. Maybe not on someone’s back – not recently – but borne along by their companionship and care.

All those countless ordinary little burdens people carry for each other:

cooking meals, sitting at bedsides, driving to doctor’s appointments, picking up prescriptions, doing laundry, speaking words of comfort, keeping company during chemo or hospital treatment, sitting up in the middle of the night, cleaning the bathroom –

ordinary, and yet at the same time, utterly extra-ordinary. Because no one has to do these things. They are acts of love, even if we don’t always do them perfectly –

even if we sometimes get tired or impatient or snappish –

the fact that we can offer each other these things at all seems miraculous to me.

Because left to ourselves, wouldn’t we mostly tend to lose ourselves in ourselves, in our own needs and desires, our problems and worries?

In a culture obsessed with self-fulfillment, being able to turn our care and attention to another person isn't just counter-cultural. It's profoundly liberating: a sign of the Spirit at work in the world, calling us out isolation into community.

It must be the Spirit, because let's be real, love is hard work.

All that weight. All those miles.

Even if we don't carry them around in our arms, or on our backs, caring for another person can weigh heavy on our minds and hearts.

And sometimes that weight can feel like a burden. But it can also feel like a privilege, an expression of something that flows straight from the heart, bringing healing through the simple grace of serving someone other than ourselves.

I wonder if that's what Jesus meant when he said, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

We are living in the midst of an epidemic of loneliness and isolation.

That's what the Surgeon General called it in 2023, citing studies linking loneliness and isolation to a host of mental and physical health challenges. We are all sick with this disease. Our whole society is sick with this disease, alienated and angry and lonely and scared.

And of course, illness itself can feel agonizingly lonely and isolating. How can we share with another person what is happening in our body, mind, or spirit? Just leaving the house may become difficult or impossible. And it can be hard to get past the dread we feel about being a burden.

But I've been thinking about people bringing their sick to Jesus, trekking across miles of country to get to him, drawn by love to the One who is love on human feet –

tired Jesus and his tired disciples, trying to get away for a little staff retreat, only to be met by crowds of people, wanting only to find help for their family member or friend...

...how he turned to each ailing person, one by one, looking in their eyes, laying healing hands on them, restoring them not only to health, but to community and connection. And I've been thinking about the joy and relief in the hearts of the people who had carried them all that way.

Because the healing didn't just happen in that moment, right? It started with the love that stooped to lift and carry, to help shoulder the weight of illness or injury or disability or depression or whatever it might have been.

And I'm struck that as each pair or group got closer to Jesus, they also got closer to each other, until they were in a crowd around him, a community of people longing for the fullness of life that only God can open up to us.

Funny how to draw closer to God is to draw closer to each other, and to draw closer to each other is to draw closer to God. As if we were all standing on the periphery of a circle, with God at the center. As we move toward God, the distance between us shrinks.

We have to overcome a lot of cultural messaging, though, to be able to move in that direction.

I guess church is as good a place to practice that as anywhere, right?

So today we have a chance to turn our gaze and our hearts toward the needs of the people around us, and the people they love. Coming forward to one of the healing stations, or praying from our pew, we'll take turns holding each other in the light of God, sharing touch and healing oil and a listening ear – simple everyday gifts that help us remember how deeply connected we already are, and always were underneath.

“Come to me,” Jesus says. “Come all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Amen.

