Free to Bear

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Galatians 6:1-10
on July 6, 2025, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

I.

Unlike our Catholic siblings, Baptists don't have saints… unless you count the one that may as well have been the 13th apostle herself, Ms. Charlotte Digges Moon, who we Baptists know as Lottie. One couldn't last a week in a Southern Baptist Church throughout the 20th century without hearing her name invoked, her mission service lauded, her legacy secured, the Christmas mission offering in her name collected. Lottie Moon, you see, was one of the first single women to be sent by Southern Baptists to proclaim the gospel.

As with any of our heroes, as with any of us, Lottie lived her life in the space between saint and sinner, but no one doubted her love for the neglected. Standing a proud 4 ft 3 inches, Lottie grew up on her family's Virginia plantation in the mid-1800s. Every bit of education she acquired caused her to wonder about the world as it were: about the enslaved people in her home, about the men who thought they knew more than the women, about the vast world outside the rural South where she lived. So it came as no surprise to her family that Lottie would leave, first as a teacher in schools across the South, and later in the work that would occupy the rest of her life on a Southern Baptist mission to Tengchow, China.

The work wasn't easy. Lottie's sister had traveled with her, but found the culture shock too much and left. Lottie couldn't make decisions in her work on her own without permission from the male higher-ups. Conditions at that time were dangerous, and to many she served, she was a "foreign devil" to be despised. And yet, Lottie Moon felt the unyielding call to the people of

China: to be with them, to serve them, to love them. Over her years as a missionary, she lived among the Chinese as much as an outsider could: taking on Chinese customs, dressing in Chinese clothes, calling out any American who retained the terrible ideology that the Chinese were "heathens," urging the Baptists to share their prayers and resources with the people she so loved. Even as rebellions and persecutions set in over the years, even as her own doubt and depression crept in, even as some Baptists questioned her theology because - gasp! - she was teaching men , even as she was summoned home, her commitment to the Chinese people was undeterred even to the point of death. At the end of her life, no one could doubt: the burdens of the people in China were burdens that Lottie shared. And generations of people heard the call to serve because of people just like her.[1]

Though many of us may have tried, we're not all Lottie Moon. God only made one of her. But at our best, Baptists know how to bear one another's burdens. Baptists have dug wells in Malawi, welcomed refugees in Uganda, spent countless hours of disaster relief cleanup where hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and fires have hit. Baptists have planted themselves among the twenty poorest counties in this country for 25 years for the sake of presence, perseverance, proximity and hope. Baptists have engaged thousands of volunteers, interns, churches, and ministers in God's work of Love all around the world, and I'll stop right there, because I'm only speaking of a fraction of what Baptists have done among the Baptists I know best. It seems that with freedom at their disposal, Baptists have chosen – tirelessly, unconditionally, meaningfully – to love and serve the world.

II.

[1] Bill J. Leonard, "Lottie Moon: Of No Reputation," *Word of God Across the Ages: Using Christian History in Preaching*, p77-82.

Today, we conclude our four weeks in Paul's letter to the church at Galatia. We remember that he was writing to a fractured church, a fervent group of Jesus-followers wanting desperately to do it right. *Who's in?*, they wondered. *And how? What is expected of people who follow the way of Jesus? What does it ask of us? What does it cost? What fruit does it bear?* Some two thousand years later, it's a good thing we've clearly figured this out!

Just before our passage begins for today, Paul has outlined two contrasts: the works of the flesh and the fruits of the spirit, each with a thorough, descriptive list. We know those lists. The works of the flesh? Sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. The fruits of the Spirit? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. With these in mind, Paul encourages the faithful: "my brothers and sisters, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in the spirit of gentleness." Meaning: the fruits of the Spirit are there when a work of the flesh needs tending. "Take care," he says, "that you yourselves aren't tempted."

Paul continues: "bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." The word here for "burdens" (*baros*) is used throughout the New Testament to describe, quite literally, anything "difficult to carry which may be imposed on a person by a third party."[2] In these contexts, a burden might be a long workday, or a detailed religious ritual, or an ethical responsibility, or the demands of a life. To Paul, one Christian helping another Christian shoulder the heavy thing is as central to the law of

[2] Nancy Elizabeth Bedford, *Galatians*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, p186-187.

Christ as anything else. It gives ample space to live out the fruits of the Spirit, and to take seriously one another's specific burdens, and to practice both individual and communal spiritual health. Bearing one another's burdens patterns our living on Jesus, who bore the weights of the world even to the point of death on the cross. Implied here is the outcome: by shouldering together, suffering together, carrying together, bearing together, you become the church! As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "only as a burden is the other really a brother or sister and not just an object to be controlled."[3]

III.

I want to stay right here today and talk about what it means to bear one another's burdens. Because even if we're not all Lottie Moon, we too can - and should - bear one another's burdens. But there's no doubt that one another's burdens haunt us. Like you, I've been haunted since reading about flooding of the Guadalupe River and the missing girls from camp. I've been haunted by the parents taken from their children and sent to unknown spaces. I've been haunted by warring nations who sell their future for past grievance at the expense of thousands of innocent lives. And on and on. Yet I have to remember that seeing one another's burdens isn't the same thing as *bearing* them. Scrolling through another's burdens and feeling sick with sadness isn't the same thing as *bearing* them. Worrying about how another's burdens might become my own and making my own preparations in case it happens isn't the same thing as *bearing* them.

You might be wondering: how **can** we bear the burdens of families in Texas or families at the border, people in countries a half a world away or people right here in this room? You're not alone in feeling haunted and

[3] Ibid.

helpless in the face of such staggering suffering, because we can't take those burdens away. We can't remove people's heartaches, and as much as we might want to, we can't fix what ails them. We can't suffer for, but we can suffer with. We can't carry the burden, but we can carry each other. We may not be able to do it for those who are far, but we can for those who are near. And we can bear them, filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. By bearing those burdens, these fruits are born in our lives!

We do this, not because our political party expects it. Not because our family needs it. Not because our conscience or our guilt wants it. We bear one another's burdens because Jesus Christ said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was in prison and you visited me." Jesus Christ – first and last, God with us – modeled for us, told us, lived out the finest expression of bearing one another's burdens that the world will ever know.

Burdens must be born up close, though. Distance-loving doesn't work as well for burden-bearing. We have to have proximity to pain, and refuse the pull to look away or limit who receives or gives mercy. At our best, Baptists have done this time and time again, drawing near to the suffering in order to shoulder the burden together. We haven't asked who a hurricane victim on the coast voted for before offering to clean out his house. We haven't asked if a minister ascribes to every fine point of our theology before asking her to show up for our members who are unexpectedly in the hospital away from home. Bear one another's burdens, Paul says, and so we do as Jesus did.

Because, you see, God knew that the only way humanity will know that God too can share our burdens is by coming close. God-with-us, right? It's

why Jesus walked these streets, and healed these wounds, and fed these people, and buried these saints, and wept with those who suffered. No better guide than Jesus, and no better law to fulfill than his law of love.

IV.

So friends, maybe the challenge you need to hear today is to bear another's burdens, to refuse the paralyzing cycle of despair and haunt of another's burdens by *doing something* – right here, right among those who are around you. And if you need a place to start? Look around. Right here in the church is a place to start, alongside the people who have committed to you and you to them in Christian love. If you wonder "how do I do that?," it starts by simply asking someone about their lives, and listening not to judge or jump in, but because listening is an act of bearing one another's burden. Then maybe you show up with a certain kindness – for a call or a text to encourage, perhaps a hot meal or a DoorDash in a hard time, or sharing a Bible passage or prayer that meant something to you in a time of need. Living our life together over time means getting to know each other on purpose, and knowing leads to loving, and loving leads to serving, and serving looks like bearing one another's burdens in love. If you need that encouragement today, start close. This isn't where burden-sharing stops, of course, but it can start here.

But maybe your challenge isn't the doing, it's in the letting it be done. Maybe your calling to bear is like an overdeveloped muscle but your willingness to let someone bear your own is woefully underutilized.

Eighteen years ago this summer, my brother was in a devastating car wreck. The wreck had occurred after a friend's wedding in Chattanooga, and the full weight of the crash hit worst on the backseat where he sat. Before my

parents had even been called, Andrew was taken by ambulance to the ER and immediately placed on a ventilator in the ICU, his body broken in countless places.

The call every parent fears came in overnight, and my mom set off from Huntsville, Alabama, where they lived, to Chattanooga to be by his side. But it was Sunday morning, you see. And as you heard earlier, my dad was on to preach for both worship services that morning at First Baptist – and teach Sunday School in between. He told mom he'd get on the road just as soon as worship ended, and at the conclusion of the final worship service that morning, my stoic father looked into the eyes of his congregation and finally wept as he told them about his son. "I can't stay to greet you," he said, "for I have to leave now." And they made a way.

Before we could even get home from the week we spent with Andrew in ICU, before we could envision the long-term effects of the nerve damage and broken bones, before we could make a plan for the months of recovery that followed, those beloveds at First Baptist Huntsville had come up with their own paper calendar for how to support our family. Mind you, this is before Meal Trains and Go Fund Mes and Amazon and such. Every single night – every SINGLE night – for two months, we had hot meals brought to our home. (And they made sure we didn't have chicken and rice casserole two nights in a row!) Books and DVDs that Andrew would like delivered. People offering to sit with him so my folks could take a break. Hundreds refusing to look away from our pain, and they showed up time and time again in it.

Now I'll tell you right now – do I agree with all the beloveds at the First Baptist Church of Huntsville on every fine point of theology, or politics, or practice? Absolutely not. But did those fine folks show up in our pain? Did

they bear our burdens? Yes they did. Those beloveds bore our burden because the church at her best does just that. They did so, because they're good at it – and the chicken casseroles too. But they did so, in part, because my parents let them. It was uncomfortable at first for those two. They're always the caregivers, not the cared for. And yet, what blessings would we have missed! What rich fruits of the Spirit we would not have received! What gifts of discipleship their congregation wouldn't have had a chance to exercise, if they hadn't let their burden be shared!

So friends, perhaps the challenge you need to hear today is the invitation to share your burdens. To trust someone to help you carry the hard. To practice vulnerability with one another as an act of faith. And if you need a place to start? Look around. Right here in the church is a beautiful place to start, alongside the people who have committed to you and you to them in Christian love. How do you do that? It starts with not brushing off a question of your well-being with a quick "I'm fine." It grows over time into sustained trust that you can actually ask for help. That it's not crippling someone else to care for you. It flourishes when you let yourself be known, and loved, and served. So if you need that encouragement today, start close.

V.

May we bear and be born in our burdens. May we not grow weary in doing what is right. May we reap the good fruits whose seeds we sow. May our freedoms be used for one another. May God be near to us, to all the world, now and forevermore.