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Galatians 6:1-16

### **Contradictory Advice**

When my dear daughter Ruth was nearing one year old, she was still not sleeping through the night. Frustrated—and tired of being tired—I explored the various infant sleeping schools of thought. I skimmed books, talked to people, discovered some different, some differently strong advice—some of it contradictory. There seemed to be one school of thought that said, ‘When your baby cries, comfort them, help them settle down, give them the security they need to sleep.’ And another school said, ‘Let ‘em cry it out. Teach them resilience and self-control—that they can learn to quiet themselves.’ Now I’m sure there are parents who have successfully followed one or the other of these philosophies. Here’s what I did: both, at the same time, on the same night. I decided to let little Ruth cry, let her wail, so she could learn that she could get through this, but then after listening to her for a good long time, I couldn’t take it, so then I would go to comfort her. My advice? Don’t do that. That’s not the right combination.

Today’s reading from the New Testament book of Galatians has some advice, some of which at first seems contradictory. Before that contradiction part though, some context: Galatians is a letter that is addressed to one of the first Christian churches, written by a man named Paul. Paul, who used to be a persecutor of Christians, is now birthing baby churches, including the one in Galatia, which is not much past its infancy, and he writes to them using, among other imagery, that of a parent, a nurturer, he even talk about nursing them. Not only are the Galatians new Christians, they are unlike many—most—of the other early Christians—for the Galatian Christians are not Jewish. This was a point of great contention in the early church. Do you have to be Jewish, or become Jewish, to be Christian? Do you have to follow Jewish codes and practices? Dietary laws? Circumcision? No, you don’t. As Jesus crossed social, political, cultural, and gender boundaries so Paul followed the gospel’s radical inclusivity—God’s love in Jesus is for all, and so Paul travelled outside Israel, proclaiming the gospel in places like Galatia, Paul became known as the apostle to the Gentiles, non-Jews. Paul preached that it didn’t matter where you came from. It didn’t matter your social position. It didn’t matter whether you were a man or a woman. That’s what Paul writes in that great verse from Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ.”

The people in Galatia got it—and then forgot it. The Galatian Christian’s started to listen to other voices, they were even other voices claiming to be Christian, but they weren’t saying things that were in keeping with Christ. These other Christians were telling the Galatian Gentile Christians they should do these other things, become circumcised, to be Christian. And that got Paul mad. Paul was mad, and he let loose in this letter to them. We have a tendency to read it in a proper and decorous manner, here in church, and to skip some of the really potent parts, which is maybe a shame, because it is powerful letter, powerfully filled with declarations like 3:28, and filled with exclamations and curses. At one point, so worked up about the question of circumcision, Paul says that people who are saying otherwise than he should go castrate themselves.

Maybe Paul was sleep deprived. You know how that is, when you are so tired and frustrated. You know how you can just go off, and on your own children? I can, I do! So does

Paul. Paul was mad, mad as a parent can be with their child, with someone they love so very much. Paul is mad, because the Galatians had welcomed the gospel, but then they started acting in contradiction to it. That makes Paul mad. That makes God our heavenly father, who loves us like a mother, mad. And so Paul writes this letter, to correct the Galatians, to set them straight. As Paul writes in the part of the letter that we heard read today, “My friends, if anyone is detected in transgression, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” In a spirit of gentleness...I think Paul may also have been preaching to himself there.

Paul corrects the Galatians, a spirit of vehement gentleness, and then nurtures them in faith, offers all kinds of good, life-giving advice. Although, some of it may sound contradictory. There’s this: “Bear one another’s burdens.” You’re all in this together, you care for one another, when others are in trouble, go to them and offer comfort. That’s perhaps like the comfort model of infants and sleeping. And then there’s this: “All must carry their own loads.” Take responsibility for what is yours, be accountable, and see how learning and change can come. That could be like: Let ‘em cry it out. Paul says do them both. “Bear one another’s burdens.” And “Carry your own load.”

Paul combines them, but I think in the culture that we live in, there’s a lot that says just the opposite, says no to both. Instead of a combination, we get a double negative. Instead of bear one another’s burdens, there’s an individualistic strain in our culture, self-centered voices that says that other people’s problems are their problems. Why should we do something about it? Why should we care about them? And then, instead of carry your own load, in our culture there’s also an other-blaming strain, a self-victimizing voice that says that our problems, our loads, can all be traced to other people. It’s not our fault. I mean, just think of all the ways our parents messed us up! Carry our own load? We’d much rather unload on someone else.

We gather here, we read these ancient letters, because we seek to be a different kind of culture, a culture formed by Christ, a culture in which we both bear one another’s burdens and carry our own loads. We do them both.

Now, like my initial attempts at sleep training Ruth, sadly, even in church we can get this wrong. Think of the sharing of burdens part. How often it is, how sad it is, that sometimes churches are places where we are afraid to talk about the burdens we bear. We suffer, but we don’t dare tell our brothers and sisters in Christ about it. And think of the carrying your own load part. Sometimes in church we insert ourselves as fixers. We think we are being “helpful.” So often, when we do so, we lack both true awareness of the load, and the strength of the one beneath it. We become paternalistic—which is not at all the same thing as good parenting. My children teach me about this. Sometimes they will tell me about a pain they are experiencing, a load, a problem, and then I try to swoop in and solve it. This makes them very mad. As it should. I’m not there to make all their problems go away. I can’t. It’s theirs. They might not articulate it in this way, but what they really want is that I recognize their burden, see it, feel it, share it, bear it, too. Bear with them, too. Ask them to bear with me. That’s what we do, here, with one another, all of us, all of us, children of God.

We all have our loads, our own burdens, that we bear. Being a Christian doesn’t make them go away. We carry them, and we bear one another’s others, too. Won’t that be awfully heavy? No, it is hopeful, it is light. To live like that is to live in hope, to live in the light of Christ. There is tremendous hope in the affirmation that you can carry it; you can carry your own load, and there’s yet more hope in the affirmation that you will not be bearing it alone. Take that up, take up that advice, and find it is not a contradiction, it is a yoke that it is easy, and a burden that is light.