

ELCG Devotional Activity
2nd Sunday after Pentecost•
Week of 14 June 2020

Balancing Our Packs

Scripture:

"We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:3-6)

"I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13)

Reflection

We live in a world that values self-sufficiency and self-reliance. We are told that success is built by putting one's own needs before the needs of others. Those who are considered to be weak are often hidden or isolated – the poor, the elderly, those who are sick or disabled, and so we are reluctant to acknowledge our own weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

Yet, the message of our faith tells us of a dramatically different truth: "It is God that made us, and we are God's." (*Psalms 100:3*) God's grace is sufficient, and the power of Christ is made perfect in weakness." (*2 Cor. 12:9*)

This week we are reflecting upon God's grace that is known in weakness, and the role of community that enables us to live into Christ's hope.

Imagine that you are preparing to go on a backpacking trip with a group of faith friends or loved ones near the Matterhorn. (*For the sake of this reflection, disregard any limitations that might prevent you from doing so in real life ☺*)

Consider what items your group will need to pack in your backpacks: food, water, sleeping bags, a tent, spare socks, jacket, sunscreen, first-aid kit, etc. Some items will be shared among the group. Others are needed by each individual. Ideally, you are all carrying only that which is essential.



As the trip proceeds, it becomes clear that not every person is able to hike with the same speed or strength. The weight of the backpacks has become too burdensome for some. The group pauses to evaluate, and together you decide to "balance the load" of your packs. The one with broad shoulders offers to add to their own pack some items from the person whose legs are faltering. You also discover that another person in the group has packed much more than was needed, and s/he is encouraged

• We are now in "Ordinary Time," the season of the liturgical year which follows Pentecost and is marked by the color green. The term "ordinary" does not mean mundane or routine, but instead it refers to measured time. During this extended season, our focus turns to spiritual growth and discipleship. We are reminded that the everyday moments of life hold possibilities for us to encounter God's love and to mature in faith, love, and hope as disciples of the risen Christ.

to shed unneeded weight from their pack. In order for all to enjoy the journey and to reach the goal, your group must work as a team. You share the burdens that must be carried, and you help one another unload those things that are unessential.



Consider now, your backpack as a metaphor for the burdens – or weaknesses - you carry in your life right now. Some burdens are things that we learn to let go of, with the support of loving community – for example: resolving conflicts; seeking forgiveness; healing from grief. In time, with prayer and loving support, we can learn to lighten our packs.

Other burdens that cannot be removed are shared among a loving community. These represent our “weaknesses,” which we all have. Weakness is a display of our humanity. No one is any less human or less valuable. As community, we are called to “balance the load” of one another’s burdens, so that we all may experience the grace of God in our midst, through our weaknesses and our differences.

The words of Henri Nouwen often speak to the presence of God in the midst of human weakness and vulnerability. Toward the end of his career, Nouwen left academia to be in residence at the Daybreak community in Toronto, a home for people with severe physical and mental disabilities. He had reached a point where he felt his own sense of success was placing his soul in peril – the drive for success and “making it on his own” in the world’s sense was threatening his own spiritual well-being. Living among those whom the world considers to be weak was a time of re-discovery for Nouwen. His words beautifully remind us where God’s grace and God’s presence are made known:

“Where is God? God is where we are weak, vulnerable, small, and dependent. God is where the poor are, the hungry, the handicapped, the mentally ill, the elderly, the powerless. How can we come to know God when our focus is elsewhere, on success, influence, and power? I increasingly believe that our faithfulness will depend on our willingness to go where there is brokenness, loneliness, and human need.”¹

As loving community, we strive to be bearers of Christ’s hope for all. Our prayer from Sunday’s liturgy reflects this call:

While we are still weak, we share the good news of God's love.

While we are still sinners, we learn to love.

While we are still searching, we evoke within others their meaning and worth.

While we are still broken, we sing the gifts of God.

Prayer

We give you thanks, Loving God, that you have given us an enduring hope – one that does not disappoint. Strengthen us as a community of grace, called to be support and encouragement for each other, delighting in all the ways that our differences reflect your love. Through your grace, may we be good news for those who struggle, hope for those who despair, honoring you today and all days. And “may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”. (Rom. 15:13) Amen.

¹ Nouwen, Henri J. M. You Are the Beloved (p. 377). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.