

15th Sunday after Trinity
Rev. Benjamin T.G. Mayes

September 4, 2005 A+D
Epiphany Lutheran Church
Dorr, MI

+Jesu juva!+

Galatians 5:25-6:10
Bearing one another's burdens.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. DEARLY BELOVED:

When a physician wants to cure someone, he has to do things: he must diagnose the illness, and prescribe the cure. If he doesn't diagnose the problem correctly, then the cure he prescribes will do more damage than good. Even if he does diagnose the illness rightly, he must also prescribe the right cure. These two go together. Diagnosing the illness rightly, and prescribing the cure correctly.

In our fallen, sinful world, there are many illnesses to diagnose; many burdens to cure. "Bear one another's burdens," the Apostle Paul says, "and so fulfill the law of Christ." "Bear one another's burdens," he says. What burdens? There are at least *two* kinds of burdens we Christians are to bear. The first is physical. Now, among hurricane, flooding, and so much misery, these words are crucial. "Bear one another's burdens," it says, and Paul explains, when he says, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." At a time like this, we Lutheran Christians can help bear the burdens of our fellow Lutherans in the south, by giving of our time, property, and gifts. Aside from that, you can bear their burdens by prayer. Pray the Lord's Prayer and other prayers for your suffering brethren and for all suffering people, and pray often. "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

"Bear one another's burdens." What burdens? The second kind is spiritual. "Bear one another's burdens," and he explains when he says, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness." He says, "Restore him." That is, *correct* him, *teach* him the right way, *mend* him, almost like a tailor who stitches up or mends a tear in the clothing. Do that. "You who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness." If the spiritual are to restore him, then it is also a spiritual thing to let oneself *be* restored, to be restored to the number of the spiritual, to be corrected in a spirit of gentleness. Let us not be caught in any transgression. But if we are, let us receive correction in a spirit of gentleness.

Now, in order to "restore" someone by instruction and correction, you have to do two things. First, diagnose the illness. Second, prescribe the cure. Now as you know, your former pastor, Dr. Robb Hogg, saw and still sees the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod as being, as St. Paul says, "caught in transgression." I know that the pain of his departure must be terrible. Some may feel betrayed. Others may in their heart agree with Dr. Hogg's assessment of the Synod but cannot agree to his Eastern Orthodox

solution. The pain of his departure must be terrible, and that could make it difficult to see the *good* things that Dr. Hogg did while he was here. For example, you now receive the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day. This is certainly a good thing. My prayer is that amid your pain, you will not forget the good things that Dr. Hogg did, and that you, as true Lutherans, will *distinguish* those good things from his Eastern Orthodox tendencies. It's true. There *are* many problems in Christianity today, and even in the LCMS. But it's not enough just to diagnose the illness. One must also prescribe the right cure.

Even if he was more pessimistic than necessary, Dr. Hogg was truly able to diagnose the illnesses of the LCMS. In his closing thoughts to this congregation, he noted that in many, if not most congregations of the Synod there is minimal instruction in the Christian faith. This is a true critique. And it is the source, I believe, of all the other problems, because lack of instruction leads to negligence. First, there are problems in the view of the *Church* held by many Missouri Synod Lutherans. There are people who think of it as a business or who play politics. Doctrinal discipline has gotten weaker in recent years. Many in our Synod also have a distaste for historic liturgical practices. Besides that, there are many pastors and congregations who err with regard to Holy Communion. Add to that, a general confusion regarding the doctrine of the ministry. Perhaps the most flagrant foul is the public acceptance of interfaith religious services, such as the "Prayer for America" at Yankee Stadium in 2001. These are serious problems. Dr. Hogg was able to diagnose the illness. These are unlutheran practices within the LCMS, and we as confessional Lutheran should be aware of them and should speak out when we are given the chance.

But the solution to unlutheran doctrine and practice is *not* unlutheran doctrine and practice of a different sort. After diagnosing the illness, Dr. Hogg prescribed the *wrong cure*. We recognize problems in the Missouri Synod, but we do *not* see problems in the Lutheran confession of the faith. The answer to problems in the Missouri Synod is not to give up on the Lutheran confession of the faith. Yes, the Missouri Synod has its problems, but the Orthodox Church is not without its problems as well—*serious* problems. Dr. Hogg's departure has caused several local pastors to research the doctrinal position of the Eastern Orthodox churches. They have been disappointed in what they have found. In today's sermon I'd like to mention just *one* troubling practice of the Eastern Orthodox churches—prayer to the saints.

As an example, one of their post-communion prayers is directed to St. Mary¹. She is addressed as "All-holy Lady, the light of my darkened soul, my hope, protection, refuge, comfort, joy." Except for "Lady," are these not titles that should be reserved for God alone?² The prayer continues, "I thank you, because you have made me, the

1. *The Divine Liturgy of Our Father Among the Saints John Chrysostom* (Oxford, 1995). This edition of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom was issued with the blessing of Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox churches.

2. Another exception: The Lutheran Confessions (FC SD VII:100 Latin) include "most

unworthy, worthy to become a partaker in the most pure Body and precious Blood of your Son.” But are these not things that God alone can do? Again, the prayer says, “But, O you who gave birth to the true Light, enlighten the spiritual eyes of my heart; you who bore the source of immortality, give life to me, who have been slain by sin; you, the compassionate Mother of the merciful God, have mercy on me and give me compunction and contrition in my heart, humility in my ideas, and release from the imprisonment of my thoughts. And count me worthy, until my last breath, to receive without condemnation the sanctification of the most pure Mysteries, for healing of soul and body; and grant me tears of repentance and thanksgiving, to praise and glorify you all the days of my life. For you are blessed and glorified to the ages.” Are these not things that only God can do? Indeed, is this not worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25)? To put it briefly, this kind of prayer is idolatrous.

We confessional Lutherans do not dishonor the saints when we refuse to pray to them or to trust in them or their prayers for our salvation. We do them no disrespect when we look at them as our beloved brothers and sisters in the faith, even as princes, but not as kings or queens upon whose prayers we rely for salvation. It is no discourtesy, for we read in Psalm 146, “Put not your trust in princes, nor in a son of man in whom there is no help.” The liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox churches offers much that is beautiful, trinitarian, and Christ-centered. In our days of constantly changing worship forms it is attractive that the liturgy of that church body remains constant and universal. However, the inclusion of prayers to and through the saints are a human addition to the service that distracts the worshipper from the Lord, who alone can save. In the Old Testament, when King Josiah reigned over Judah (2 Chronicles 34) the Holy Scriptures corrected what had become traditional worship practices and gave direction for the faithful. May the unanimous testimony of our Lord’s Word turn the voices of all His faithful to pray to and give glory to Him alone.

Dearly beloved, you have a lot to bear. I recognize this. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” There are physical burdens—hurricane, flood. And there are spiritual burdens—friends and family caught in false doctrine and practice. There is a lot to bear. But you do not have to bear it alone. Indeed, you cannot bear it alone. The Lord Jesus Christ is the one who bears your burdens. He Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness, by whose stripes you were healed (1 Peter 2:24). What a load that was for Him to bear—an unbearable load. All the sins of the world. All your failings. More than that. All your sadness, worry, toil, and suffering. He bore your burdens on the cross, and he continues to bear your burdens. He bears your physical burdens when He holy” among titles used in honor of St. Mary. This does not mean most holy of all existing things, but most holy among women (cf. Luke 1:28, 42), and more holy than all creatures except our Lord Jesus according to His humanity. “Lady,” however (the feminine form of “Lord”) is used for St. Mary neither in Scripture nor in the Lutheran Confessions. The ambiguity of the term could allow it to slide from a simple expression of love to a term of (semi-)equality with Christ.

says, "If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" And then He bears your spiritual burdens when He says, "Your sins are forgiven you" (Matt. 9:2). He will continue to bear your burdens as you go about the process of calling a new pastor, who will preach to You God's Word and administer to you the holy sacraments. You have a lot to bear, but your Lord will continue to bear you up, to carry you, and to keep you in His care. He will do this because He has bound Himself to the Word and Sacraments. Where the Gospel is preached in its purity and the Sacraments are administered according to God's Word, that is where the true Church is, and that is where the Lord Christ has promised to give out His forgiveness. You, the members of this Lutheran congregation, are truly a part of the Church. Christ is here with His gifts. He bears your burdens. To Him be glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.