

Galatians 6:1-10, 14-18

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (C)

4 July 2010

“On Bearing Burdens”

I. Martin Luther Jones was at a get-together with some old friends from youth group days. They were at Matt Frenelli’s apartment. Allison Fretzke, Amy Harris and Joey Cirillo were there, too. They didn’t get to see as much of each other now that they were in university or worked full-time. They were having a good time telling stories of the “good ol’ days” in youth group, while they sat around, tossed back a few beers and enjoyed some barbequed ribs that Matt had thrown on the grill along with some sweet corn in the husk.

All of them were feeling pretty good, but Joey, Marty noticed, seemed to be feeling a little too good. At the moment he had his right arm slung around Amy’s shoulder with a beer in his other hand, occasionally sloshing it over the rim. His voice had become distinctly louder at the same time his words were increasingly slurred. The look on Amy’s face seemed none-too-pleased.

It was at that point that Amy stood up and announced she was going to head home. Allison chimed in with “I think I will, too. I have to be at work fairly early tomorrow.” That gave Marty an excuse to suggest that Joey and he best be on their way as well. Because he too had had his share of beer, it wasn’t strange to recommend that he and Joey leave their cars at Matt’s for the night and share a taxi home.

Joey didn’t like that idea at all. “I’m fine! I can drive myself!” he insisted. But after Matt voiced his strong agreement with Marty, Joey gave in with a shrug of his shoulders. “Whatever!” Joey mumbled.

II. Seated in the back seat of the cab for their ride across town, Joey turned to Marty and said, “I’ve got a favour to ask, bro’”. “What’s that?” replied Marty. “There’s no way I’m going to be in any shape for work tomorrow. If I call in sick, would you vouch for me if my boss asks for some proof, since he knows you guys from the neighbourhood?” “Why would he want to do that?” Marty inquired quizzically. “Well, ya know,” Joey continued, “I’ve been having to miss a fair amount of work lately, and he kind of gave me a warning.” “What, have you been sick?” Marty questioned. Joey got a rather

silly—and definitely drunken—smile as he came back: “Not sick, really, just sort of enjoying life maybe a bit too much. “You know what they say about ‘too much work, too little play!’”

Marty and Joey had been friends since Joey joined their youth group at Our Redeemer Lutheran their second year of high school; in fact Marty was sponsor for his baptism the following year. Marty would do almost anything to help out his friend, but lying to Joey’s boss wasn’t one of them. When he told him so, Joey pushed Marty away and angrily spat: “Oh, that’s sweet! If it had been you that asked me, I would have done it for you!” But as much as Joey then tried to cajole him, sometimes angrily, sometimes trying to kid around, Marty adamantly refused to give in. When the taxi pulled up in front of Joey’s place and Joey stumbled out of the car, he hissed at Marty just before slamming the door, “Hey, man, if you can’t help out a buddy in a time of need, you don’t know what it is to be a friend!” And, if that weren’t bad enough, Marty was left to pay the entire fare.

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III. Marty’s dad happened to be watching television in the family room when Marty walked through the door, his mom having already headed up to bed. Sam Jones could see that his son was a little worse for wear, but wasn’t quite expecting what came out of his mouth. “Joey is a jerk” he said as he plopped down on the sofa next to his dad. “Excuse me?” Sam responded as he flicked off the T.V. and turned to face his boy. “What in the world happened between you two?”

Marty went on to tell his father about the events of the evening. Sam mostly listened until Marty said, “You know, I’m fed up with having to clean up Joey’s messes after him!” That’s when Sam stopped him with a “Whoa! Hold on mister!” That caught Marty’s attention because his father rarely raised his voice in anger. “Are you, Martin Luther Jones, telling me that you’ve gotten tired of standing by your best friend? Did you hear Pastor Sadler’s sermon on Sunday about ‘bearing one another’s burdens?’ Here you have a brother in Christ who may be getting himself into some deep do-do and you’re going to write him off like that? Your friend who was by your side when you got so depressed while Mom had her breast cancer and I got laid off from work? The guy who spent hours helping you with calculus that first semester of university, who kept encouraging you not to give up when you were talking about dropping out? You who puked all over

the back seat of my car after I picked you up from that beer bash at the beach last summer? Is this how you gently restore someone who's 'caught in a transgression'"? (Galatians 6:1).

By now Marty's eyes were filling with moisture. "I'm sorry Dad, you're absolutely right. You and Mom have always loved and forgiven me, even when I've screwed up badly. And, Joey, too; he's been the most faithful friend I've ever had". "And," Sam added "a good Christian friend, to boot. I just wonder if something else isn't going on in Joey's life that he's gotten so friendly with the bottle lately. Maybe he just needs someone to sit down with him and ask him how he's really doing."

"I can do that," Marty nodded. But I can't lie for him. No way can I do that." Sam's previous scowl gave way to a gentle smile as he put his hand on his son's arm. "No, that wouldn't be right; it wouldn't even be right for Joey, in the end. I have a hunch that not covering up for him might be exactly what he needs. I know his boss Hank Merlow is a fair employer, but I would think that, if Joey has missed as much work as he hinted that he has, Hank is going to pull the rug on him. And, if he does that, Joey's going to need a friend to help him bear that burden. He's going to need his Christian buddy to help him put the pieces back together somehow."

IV. It was the next evening, as Marty was checking his text messages on his phone, that he received one from Joey. All it said was "I need your help, bro". It only took the time he needed to punch in Joey's cell number to get hold of his friend. They arranged to meet in a half-hour's time at the main park in town.

Joey was sitting on a bench on the quiet far side of the lake when Marty sat down beside him. "Mr. Merlow gave me a week's suspension without pay this morning," Joey said quietly with his head hanging down between his bent shoulders. "I really blew it this time," he continued. Marty put his arm around Joey's shoulders. "I'm here for you, brother".

Joey's head turned slightly toward Marty as he breathed an emotional sigh before speaking. "I never should have asked you to lie for me. I was really ticked off when you said you couldn't do that for me. But once the shock of getting suspended settled in, I realized that there was no one else I'd want to talk to about it than you".

When Marty started to reply, Joey put up his hand. “Before you say anything, I have to tell you something that no one else knows. “I started drinking more a while ago when I realized that my mom is going to leave my dad. He’s been drinking for years, and she says she’s had enough. He’s what people call a ‘mean drunk’, I guess. And now I’m wondering if I’m not turning out to be the same thing! Marty, I’m so scared!” he blurted out with a sob.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Marty grabbed Joey’s head and pulled it into his shoulder. After letting Joey cry for a few minutes he let Joey sit back and spoke softly, “Mr. Merlow called me at work this afternoon. “He told me what he had had to do. It almost broke his heart, but he knew that he had to get through to you somehow, before it was too late. He asked me to talk to you about an alcohol rehab program that is covered by your Employee Assistance Program. I’m here for you, Joey. And so is the Lord. He loves you and so do I.

“Last night I was really mad at you. I couldn’t believe you were asking me to lie for you. But what really upset me was the thought that I had some ‘drunk’ that was shirking his responsibilities and expecting me to shoulder his stuff. All I was thinking about was the trouble you were costing me. But my dad helped set me straight. He reminded me of what Jesus did for us. He reminded me that He went to the cross carrying all our crap so that we could be set free, so we could have His peace. I know that apart from Him we can’t do anything, but with Him all things are possible” (John 15:5, Philippians 4:13).

After a few moments of silence, Marty continued softly: “I can’t do for you what you’re going to need to do to get through this, but I can promise you that I’ll do whatever I can to support you and pray for you”. “Thanks, bro” was all that Joey needed to say in return.

As they walked back together around the lake, Marty was already praying. He thanked the Lord for his dad who had spoke the truth in love in calling him back from self-righteous pride to humbly glorying in the cross of Jesus. He thanked the Lord for His faithfulness and strength which provided the only means for His people not to “grow weary of doing good” in bearing one another’s burdens. As he prayed also for Joey and the tough journey in front of him, he thanked the Lord Jesus for fulfilling the Law of God for them so that they could freely seek to fulfill His “law”, His “new commandment” to love one another as He has loved us (John 13:24-35).

*Preached at Historic St. Paul’s Lutheran Church-Kitchener, ON
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