

Three years ago, as many of you know, I traveled to Turkey and Greece with a small group from Saint James in a study tour. We had an amazing time! We also had quite a few meetings and classes ahead of time to prepare ourselves for our adventure. Within the last month before our departure, we had some practical, “nuts and bolts” meetings, you know, the kind where we make sure everybody has a passport, everybody hears about which clothes will be needed, how to get to the airport, and so forth.

One of the things I emphasized to our group over and over again was, “Pack light!” I couldn’t say it enough. Don’t take a lot of clothes, just a few that you can wash out easily, don’t take lots of other things, either. You’ll be among friends, so don’t worry about a hair dryer, and so forth and so on. Limit your baggage to whatever you can carry by yourself easily. Being a preacher, I’m sure I gave everybody quite a sermon about packing light for our journey.

Well, lots of you know what happened. Those of you who don’t know can probably guess. Of course I was the one who came to the airport surrounded by what looked like a small herd of baby elephants. My luggage, naturally. But hey, I needed to bring some books, just in case we wanted to look up something about the Apostle Paul, or something about the early Christians or a commentary on Paul’s letters to the Corinthians! I mean, what if we suddenly needed to know about how the early Church baptized people? Or what if we had to know if the remains of an early church building were really a temple dedicated to the goddess Isis? Curious minds want to know! And just in case we got lost, we would need maps, detailed road maps and maps of the sites we were to visit, and oh, just in case someone got sick, I had a mini-infirmary. I was prepared for everything from motion sickness to a funny little packet from the drug store that would tide someone over if they happened to need a root canal. And then must always travel with a stash of M&Ms. My dear husband Randy struggled through airports on this trip dealing with luggage carts with wheels that had a mind of their own, as most luggage and grocery carts seem to have. He was muttering a lot behind the scale model of Mount Everest made of baggage that I had insisted we would need. But only the essentials, of course!

And I have to tell you that we did indeed need some of those things, and boy howdy, was I ready!

Well, luggage like that is pretty obvious baggage. But there are a lot of burdens that aren’t so easy to detect. I think you know what I mean. Heartache over a family member that needs to change but won’t is a horribly heavy burden. Grief and loss weighs heavily, and does not lighten quickly or easily. Financial struggles cause many sleepless hours for people, and debt can be a crushing load for a person to bear, both financially and mentally. Burdens such as these can’t be shifted around or cast off like a bulging suitcase.

Sometimes a burden can be easy to see. Someone with just such a burden came to the attention of Jesus one day. Only it wasn’t just one day, it was a Sabbath day, and Jesus saw her while he was teaching in a synagogue. She was a woman with an infirmity that had crippled her for eighteen years. Eighteen long, long years! Her illness had created

more hardship for her than the physical challenges of walking and back pain, however. She had lost her legitimate place in the faith community of Israel. Her illness had disrupted her social relationships, marriage, and financial position. There were enormous unseen burdens upon the weakened back of this woman.

A friend of my parents had been a remarkable surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, and a teaching professor for Harvard Medical School. Yet with all of his skill and his access to the medical system, he became crippled in his later life, perhaps with the ailment that this woman had. His back became bent forward in such a manner that he could only walk with the assistance of two canes. He was literally bent forward at a near ninety degree angle, and could only converse with a person by turning his head to the side.

When I saw him in this state, I marveled at his nonchalant manner. He acted as if nothing was wrong with him, and his eyes sparkled and his smile was bright and genuine. He impressed me as one of the most unburdened and unfettered souls I have met, and many persons who knew him felt the same way. Surely he was in constant pain. Surely his illness had robbed him of most of his skills as a fine surgeon. Surely he tired of facing the ground as he walked through the day. Yet he was radiant and gracious. There was not a shred of bitterness nor blame in his demeanor.

I wonder if that was the demeanor of the woman in the synagogue. Perhaps at least a few of her village neighbors would share food with her, and look out for her. Perhaps at least a few of her neighbors felt encouraged by her smile, and her determination to go on with life. And perhaps a few of her neighbors had ached for her, and offered prayers for healing on her behalf.

So when Jesus calls her over and heals her, she stands up straight for the first time in eighteen long years. Her burden is lifted, and she praises God. Apparently she is accustomed to praising God, and I have to think that many of the eyes that witnessed her healing were damp with tears of joy! This steadfast trooper that had lost so much – except for her ability to praise God – could now be free from pain and exclusion. And when Jesus later calls her a daughter of Abraham, it is to emphasize that she is to be fully restored to the household of faith.

But before the crowd can rush to her with hugs and dancing, a voice rings out to bring this rising cacophony of joy to a halt. “This cannot happen! This healing has violated the law of God!” It is the leader of the synagogue, who insists that this act of healing has violated God’s requirements for the Sabbath. After all, there are six other days of the week that are wide open for healing. Why breach the fourth commandment of the Ten Commandments given to Moses? He even quotes a part of the Scriptures, the portion of the fourth commandment that refers to six days for labor.

He is right, at least in some ways. What will Jesus do? How could something so right and wonderful be so wrong?

You see, the leader of the synagogue also carries a tremendous burden. It is a burden of confusion over the Law of God. He has a large structure of expectations riding on his back. Oh, you can't see it bend him under its weight, but it is there. His understanding of God must include a very literal reading of the Commandments. And the action of Jesus has just ripped that up and thrown it aside, at least he thinks it has.

Perhaps he meant well. Perhaps he and Jesus just have a little academic difference about the interpretation of Scriptures. Maybe it is just a difference of opinion to be tolerated. After all, they both make good arguments.

But when Jesus retorts, "You hypocrites!" it is clear that this is not just a small disagreement. Jesus raises the issue of going beyond a literal interpretation of Scripture to the moral issue of interpretation. You allow basic care for your animals on the Sabbath. Surely the healing by God of a person is appropriate behavior for the Sabbath!

There is no response to this. Those who were angry with Jesus are left in a shamed silence, while the crowd roars with joy! More than one burden has been lifted this day in this village.

I wish I knew the rest of the story of the leader of the synagogue. This whole episode would have shaken him to the core of his being. Everything that he knew, everything that he held as good and precious, had just been turned upside down! What did he do next? Did he ponder, and reflect, and realize his old tried and true faith needed to make some changes? Did he realize that there was good reason for Jesus to flare into anger whenever the Scriptures were used to beat people into a construct of human restrictions instead of to open their lives to a new way of living? Have you seen this happen today? I know I have.

Perhaps the leader of the synagogue thought long and hard about how the burden of the law that rode on his back could instead give one wings to become a new creation by the grace of God. But perhaps not. Perhaps he was so angry at being publicly shamed, that he ground in his heels, and shriveled with his anger and bitterness. Perhaps he was one who then dogged Jesus to get revenge, the revenge that came in Jerusalem through a kangaroo court and a spineless governor and a host of equally embittered priests and religious leaders.

What will you do with the burdens that you carry? You know, the unseen burdens. Will you succumb to despair and bitterness with them? Or will you find a way to grow in God's grace and transformation with them?

Joan Chittister writes:

Hope and despair are not opposites. They are cut from the very same cloth, made from the very same material, shaped from the very same circumstances.The only difference between the two is that despair shapes an attitude of mind; hope creates a quality of soul. Despair colors the way we look at things, makes us

suspicious of the future, makes us negative about the present. Hope, on the other hand, takes life on its own terms, knows that whatever happens God lives in it, and expects that, whatever its twists and turns, it will ultimately yield its good to those who live it well. ...Hope says that God is waiting for us someplace else. Begin again. (Joan D. Chittister, O.S.B., The Psalms: Meditations for Every Day of the New Year. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996, p. 44.)

What's that? You say you want to grow in God's grace in spite of your burdens? Why, I do believe I hear heaven rejoicing! Amen.