

Burdens

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I was picking up a book at the library one day when I saw a rundown black car pull up. A woman began to painfully extricate herself from the drivers seat. Her clothes were shabby, hair dishevelled, posture bent. Her overall appearance gave the strong impression that the world had kicked her around a bit. She looked up and, seeing me walking toward her, began to wave at me and called out in a raspy voice, “Hey, can you come over here and help me?”

I walked over to see what she needed. “These bags are just too heavy for me,” she said. “I can’t manage them any more. Would you mind carrying them into the library for me?” I looked in the car and noticed two small-ish grocery bags containing DVDs of what looked like every cheesy B movie the library possessed. I looked in vain for anything else that might fall into the category of “things heavy enough to require assistance” but all I could see was garbage and a thick layer of dust. “These?” I gently inquired, pointing to the two bags. “Yeah, would you mind?” she implored.

I reached in and grabbed the two bags and carried them into the library for her. There was virtually nothing to them. A small child could have carried them easily. “Thank you so much,” she gushed as I bid her a good day and began to walk out the door. “It was nothing at all,” I said, thinking that for once this statement might not be soaked in hyperbole and false humility. It almost literally *was* nothing. I wondered how on earth this woman could *possibly* consider two light bags of DVDs to be a burden requiring assistance. I shrugged, smiled and moved on with the day.

But I thought about this woman and her (to my mind) illusory burden throughout the day. I thought of the many burdens that human beings must carry and how prone the less-obviously-burdened are to evaluating them.

I thought of a handful of people who have trickled through our church doors recently looking for money, and the train wreck of misery and bad decisions that almost invariably lie in their pasts.

But really, why can't they just make some better choices? And how can they afford a cell phone or a TV? And where are they getting money for cigarettes anyway?! Just how poor are they after all?

I thought of a number of people I know who are in the midst of sabotaging their own lives and the lives of those close to them through a series of bad choices and the wounds that accumulate along the way. I thought of the ease with which the judgments can flood my mind.

Why can't they just get it together? Why can't they see what I see? Why can't they just stop screwing up their lives?!

I thought about the many parents with strained relationships with their kids and of the many kids who are daily forced to navigate the relational dysfunction of the adults in their lives and who lash out in ways that so often place them on the receiving end of the anger of others.

Don't they have the first clue about parenting?! What's wrong with those kids?! Don't they know anything about manners and decency?! Why can't they entertain themselves for ten minutes on their own?! Why are they always staring at a screen and refusing to interact with others?!

I thought about broader issues. I thought about Canada's tragic relationship with First Nations people and all the poorly informed negative attitudes out there.

Well, why do they expect handouts when nobody else gets them? Maybe if they'd stop being drunks and addicts and tried to work like everyone else they could have a better future!

I thought of the many ways we (I) have of minimizing the burdens of others.

And then I thought that the truth is we actually don't know much about the burdens others carry. And even if we *do* know something about them, whether through personal experience or long conversation, we don't know what it is like for *them* to carry said burdens. We don't know how *these* burdens are experienced by *this* person at *this* time with the specific mental, physical, and spiritual resources that he or she might have available. Burdens, like joys, are unique.

The woman at the library yesterday did not have much of a burden to my mind. But it was experienced as a burden by her. Those meager little bags weighed her down

and she appreciated the relief I was able to offer. In the same way, in each of the cases above (and others), we might wonder why people can't just get it together and pull the weight, carry the load. It's not *that* much of a burden, right? We could easily carry it, so they should be able to as well. Obviously.

Until we are on the other end. Until we are the ones groaning and straining for reasons that we don't entirely understand. Until we are the ones weighing ourselves down unnecessarily with our own sin and stupidity. Until we are the ones bent low by burdens of shadowy provenance and distorted shapes and sizes. Until we are the ones who can't figure out why things that were once so light and manageable now feel cripplingly heavy.

Then, burdens begin to look and feel a bit different.

God gives us each other for many reasons, but one of them is surely to learn what to do with burdens. I am convinced that we are given the gift of bearing one another's burdens not only to offer relief to the one carrying the load but to prepare ourselves for the time when we will be the ones crying out for help. For it is in the relieving and relinquishing of burdens that we draw closer to the heart of Christ himself, the one who carries the weight of all our burdens, the one who offers his yoke of freedom, lightness, and rest.

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