A Stone for the Summit

If you ever take a trip up north and decide to take I-87 up toward the Canadian border, about half an hour before you get to the Plattsburgh area, you're going to pass by a mountain called Poke-O-Moonshine. You'll notice it because it has these beautiful cliff faces. If you're driving by, you will very likely see somebody climbing those cliffs. It's not the tallest mountain in the Adirondacks, but it has some of the best cliff climbing in the whole state.

I climbed Poke-O-Moonshine about twenty-five years ago. I took the trail up instead of the cliff because I did not want to die. When I climbed it, there was work going on at the summit, trying to restore some of the erosion that had taken place. One of the ways they were doing that was by bringing small rocks up to the top. I don't know exactly what they were doing with them, but apparently these small rocks were being spread around the summit to help prevent more erosion.

So there was a large pile of stones at the bottom of the mountain that needed to get to the top. How does that happen? In this case, it happened because somebody put a sign next to the stones, asking each person to take one with them as they climbed.

What could have been a tremendous burden for a few people was something that many people could do together without being burdened all that much. The burden for each person was not only light, it was virtually unnoticeable, as each person carried a single stone up the mountain.

For the next four weeks, we are going to be exploring here at church what it means to be *unburdened*.

Life Gets Heavy

But first, I've got to ask: have you felt it? Have you felt the growing burdens that seem to creep into life? Let's be honest, sometimes life gets heavy. Maybe it's the bills piling up, or the work schedule that seems to take more and more of your day to finish. Maybe it's your responsibilities to family, to community. Yes, even your responsibilities to church can feel like a burden sometimes. Or sometimes it's just the uncertainty of life: changes in your career, poorly timed illnesses running through the family. Uncertainty has a way of burdening us.

Maybe for you it's something internal. Maybe it's a burden you've placed on yourself that nobody else expected you to carry: the need to be perfect, that constant voice of self-criticism, fear, guilt, shame, anxiety. The list could go on and on of the burdens we place on ourselves.

Or maybe for you, it's the to-do list that, no matter how many things you check off, always seems to get something new added to the bottom. I've got to do yard work again this weekend. I just did it last weekend. How is that back on my to-do list already? It is fall.

The other day I was putting together the funeral we held here on Saturday. I was sitting downstairs at church putting everything together, which is something I really enjoy, because you get to put a lot of time and attention into something meaningful for another person. And as I was doing it, I swear every five minutes somebody was coming into my office with some problem in the church that seemingly only I could handle. I thought for a moment, there's got to be somebody else who knows how to do some of these things, because I've got things I want to put my attention into, but the burdens keep creeping in. I wonder if you have felt burdens like that.

The Burdens We No Longer Notice

And then there are those burdens we don't recognize anymore. Anybody got one of those? Something you have become so used to, so much a part of your life, that you don't even feel it anymore. You've taken on this burden, maybe it wasn't even yours to carry in the first place, and it has become so familiar you don't notice it's there.

Friends, we have heaviness in our lives, and we talk about it a lot. We complain about it a lot. But I don't know that we often know what to do with it. What do we do when we feel the burdens creeping in? What do we do when they start to exact a toll on us? Because a burden will do that. If we let a burden sit with us too long, it takes a toll. Sometimes that toll is our physical health. Sometimes it's our mental health. It can even be our spiritual health. We can suffer because of the burdens we take on.

None of Us Can Carry Everything

As amazing as you all are, and this church is filled with some pretty amazing people, none of us can do everything. None of us can carry everything. But each of us can do something. We can each carry something. Maybe it's just one little stone to help prevent erosion. Each of us can carry something. And maybe together, we can move what we couldn't move by ourselves. Maybe together we can carry burdens that, by ourselves, seemed overwhelming. Maybe we can move a mountain of stone from a trailhead to a summit.

That's what I want us to think about when I talk about being unburdened this season. Not that the burdens are suddenly going to disappear. That never happens. But that when we strive together, we might discover it's easier to carry a burden as a congregation than as an individual.

One Invitation in Two Parts

Ruth shared with us a moment ago two scriptures, one from the Gospels and one from Paul's epistle. In them, I think we have one invitation in two parts.

The first part is Christ's teaching that he offers a light burden to those who desire it. To a worn-down people, he makes the offer: Set it down. Set it all down. Set down the things that are weighing on you, the things you have been bearing for far too long. *Come to me, all who are heavy laden, and find rest for your souls.* Those are the words of Christ.

But I think it's the words of Paul that teach us how the church can do this. That's the second part of the invitation. Paul writes to the Galatians that they are to bear one another's burdens. You see, it isn't about simply abandoning the burden. It is about entrusting the things that are too heavy for us to our community. These burdens we carry were never meant to be carried alone.

The Law of Christ

Why? Paul gives us the why: when we bear burdens as a community, we fulfill the law of Christ. We didn't actually read what Paul thinks the law of Christ is. To find that, we have to jump back to Galatians chapter 5, where Paul says the law can be summed up like this: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* And how are we to love our neighbors? In Galatians 6, Paul's answer is: by bearing one another's burdens.

So there you have it. Two thousand years ago, long before our modern self-help culture, Paul was saying that it is an act of love to bear one another's burdens.

The invitation from Jesus is that our God is loving and will help us carry the burdens of life. The invitation from Paul is that our community needs to be loving so as to help carry the burdens of life. And if we've got God on one side and our community on the other, I can't think of two better partners in carrying the heavy burdens that would otherwise lay us down.

Who Needs to Hear This?

So I wonder this morning: who in our worship space needs to hear those invitations? Who needs to hear that it's okay if you can't bear all the burdens, all the time, all by yourself? Who needs to hear it when we go home this afternoon? Sometimes it's easy in church to forget about the burdens of life for a moment. Who needs to hear it around the dinner table tonight? Who needs to hear it on Monday morning when we go into work? Who in our circle of friends needs to hear that you don't need to carry it all by yourself? Who needs to hear that their life does not need to be load-bearing?

I wonder what would happen if Jesus strolled in this morning and started teaching us the same thing he was teaching in our Gospel reading. *Come, you who are heavy laden.* If he

came in here, I wonder if he would say: Come to me, all of you who are struggling to pay off the credit card bill at the end of the month. Come to me, all of you who know that microwavable dinner has way too much sodium in it, but you can't fathom cooking something after being on your feet all day. Come to me, all of you who have been worn thin caring for a loved one who used to bounce back from illness pretty quickly but doesn't anymore. Come to me, all of you who are going to spend too much time in a doctor's waiting room this week.

We could fill a couple of books with the words Jesus might say in our community to address our burdens.

Addicted to Our Burdens

But if you're anything like me, you don't want to hear it. I'll be honest: I don't want somebody to tell me to lay down my burden, because I like my burden. I got addicted to my burden. I've come to cherish the burdens I carry. I invited them in. I treated them like royalty. And then I complained when they refused to leave.

My burdens often make me feel better. My burdens make me feel like I've had a successful career. My burdens make me feel needed by my family. My burdens make me feel like a responsible member of the community. I like feeling successful. I like feeling needed. I like feeling responsible. So when I say I have become addicted to my burdens, I really mean it. And I have a sneaking suspicion I'm not alone.

There are times when it feels like admitting a burden is too much means I've failed. Sometimes I worry that if I can't carry the burden all by myself, no one else will step up to help. Sometimes I worry that others won't care for and love my burdens as deeply as I do. And then I refuse to set them down for fear that whoever picks them up next will do it wrong.

An Invitation for This Week

So I want to offer an invitation to us this week. Maybe it's an invitation you don't need, but maybe it's something you can share in the circles you move through during the week.

Start by thinking about the different burdens you carry. Think about the ones that feel too heavy this week. Think about the ones that feel like too much of an obligation or an imposition on your life. Think about the burdens you just don't have time for anymore. You want them, but you don't have time. Think about the burdens you don't have the strength for. Try to think about those burdens you've become so comfortable carrying that you don't notice them anymore.

Then, once you have a mental image of your burden, imagine what it might look like to set that burden down and trust the community to carry it, if only for a moment. Give yourself permission this week to not carry all of it. Life can be hard, and we can't carry everything all by ourselves. And sometimes, when we set the heaviest burdens down, we discover what it was we were meant to be carrying all along.

God Won't Give You More Than You Can Handle?

One final thought. Sometimes I think we have a temptation, at least in some of the circles I walk in, to think that God would not give us a burden if God didn't think we could handle it. And I'm sorry to be plainly honest, but what a load of crap.

We carry burdens all the time that are above what we can carry. I meet people who walk through the doors of this church every single day, and I mean that, every single day, who have been carrying burdens that are too heavy for them to carry for a moment, let alone a lifetime.

Maybe these aren't burdens God expected us to bear all by ourselves. Maybe that was us. Maybe that was a failure in our communities, to say that a burden is something we carry all by ourselves. We weren't made to move mountains by ourselves. We were made to do it one stone at a time, trusting that our community will step up and have our backs through it all. We weren't meant to carry these burdens alone. We were meant to do it together. And that is what it means to be unburdened.

A Gift to Offer

I've got to tell you, I think when we figure this out personally, when we make that personal discernment of which burdens we need to carry and which we don't, and when we figure it out as a church, which burdens we're meant to carry together, we will have a gift for anyone who walks through these doors. We can share those words of Jesus: Lay it down. Heavy laden, lay it down. Burdened, lay it down. Struggling, lay it down. Pick up something light and carry that for a little while.

What a gift we will have to offer our community when we figure this out as individuals and as a congregation.

Closing Prayer

Friends, let's be in prayer together.

Holy One, the burden presses us. We don't feel it all the time. We can go days or weeks, sometimes years, between feeling like it's too much. But then it happens: the unexpected, the busyness, the pressing of life. Holy God, in those times, remind us to hear the words of

the Apostle Paul: *Bear one another's burdens.* Help us hear that as a community, as we learn what the light burden feels like when we let go of the things we can't carry all by ourselves.

I pray this in Christ's holy and blessed name. Amen.