

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**October 25, 2009**  
**Luke 5:17-21**

**“There Is a Song and It’s Inside you”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

A few years ago, when I served as the Dean of Religious Life and Protestant Chaplain at Mount Holyoke College, I undertook the project of converting a Christian prayer chapel on the campus into an Interfaith Sanctuary that would be fine and workable for Christians but would also be suitable for and welcoming to the Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Bahai’s, Unitarians, Buddhists and Pagan/Wiccan members of the Mount Holyoke College community. To transform the chapel from a Christian space to the Interfaith Sanctuary, we took out the pews, two organs, the altar, the pulpit, and all the crosses and placed in the space symbols of the nine active faith groups on the campus and sacred books from each one. When we were done, a group of students spent weeks creating a labyrinth that they painted on thick, heavy canvas that exactly fit the floor space in the Interfaith Sanctuary. We unrolled the labyrinth twice a week, lit a bunch of candles, and students, faculty and staff of all different faiths came from all over campus to walk the labyrinth in silence in their stocking feet.

One day when I was in the Interfaith Sanctuary to walk the labyrinth, my friend and colleague Denise arrived at the door. Denise has MS and is mobile in a wheelchair. She came to see the labyrinth that the students had painted on canvas—she knew we unfurled it twice a week for people to walk and pray. As Denise sat in her wheelchair at the entrance to the Sanctuary watching people walk the labyrinth, I began to feel unsettled. It was a lovely experience to walk the labyrinth and Denise could only observe from the sidelines. It made me uncomfortable and so I went over to Denise and said, “If you want the experience of walking the labyrinth, I will put you on my back and we can walk it together.” “Okay,” Denise said, “let’s try.”

The people in the Sanctuary helped Denise out of the wheelchair and onto my back. She wrapped her arms around my neck but because she is taller than I am, her stocking feet dragged a little on the canvas as I walked.

“This is good,” she whispered when we first started, “I can feel the canvas.” Slowly, slowly, I walked the labyrinth with Denise’s feet dragging just a little. We reached the center point, where people stop and pray, and we stopped and prayed. Then we started back out slowly, returning on the spiral pattern that took us to the end of the labyrinth. Again those in the Sanctuary helped ease Denise back into her wheelchair.

I share this story because our Scripture reading for today from the Book of Luke is about how a group of friends carried a paralyzed man on a bed to Jesus to be healed. Because the friends are trying to reach Jesus with a man on a bed and the crowd is too thick to let them through, the friends go up on the roof, cut an opening, and lower the man down so Jesus can heal him.

Although the miracle of the healing that occurs when Jesus speaks to the man is important and moving, I am equally struck by the love and loyalty of the friends. The friends hear that Jesus is in their village but they do not rush to see him on their own; they gather around their friend who is paralyzed, lift him in his bed, and carry him and his bed to this healer Jesus. And then they think of a creative way—cutting a hole in the roof—to get their friend right there next to Jesus.

The story of Jesus healing the paralyzed man is full of lessons for us. One lesson is that the healing really begins when the friends go to fetch the paralyzed man. The healing begins with the friends. The friends literally carry one of their own to the healer.

I had the opportunity to literally carry a friend as I walked the labyrinth in a meditative state. I share this story not to say how great it was that I did this for my friend, but to say how great it was that I did this FOR ME. I had walked that labyrinth dozens of times before I walked it with Denise on my back. But when I carried Denise, walking the labyrinth walk felt like a new experience. I felt Denise breathing next to my right ear and I found myself breathing in unison with her. I felt her weight on my back and each step had new meaning and purpose. I could hear her feet dragging on the canvas and I imagined the sensation of feeling the heavy cloth only with your toes as they moved slowly over the surface. When we reached the center spot where people kneel and pray, Denise and I stood and prayed and I felt that we were one body in prayer. Walking the labyrinth with Denise on my back made it a holy time, a time blessed by our closeness. Walking the labyrinth in the Interfaith Sanctuary was never the same for me after that time with Denise. I was grateful that she had trusted me enough to lay her body on mine so we could move together through that sacred walk.

We carry our friends, and the bond, the closeness, the love that we share is good for them and good for our souls as well. It is good to care, to serve and to carry.

We all have times when we carry our friends.

Maybe we literally carry our friends like the men did when they brought their friend who was paralyzed to Jesus.

Or maybe we carry our friends emotionally or spiritually.

We carry each other when we offer each other support, love, and hope.

We carry each other when we show up in times of distress and need.

We carry each other when we listen deeply to each other's feelings and pain.

Maybe we carry each other emotionally and spiritually more often than we carry each other physically but that too has weight. Therefore we must be strong to carry each other emotionally and spiritually.

And we can receive that strength from Jesus.

We lean on Jesus so others can lean on us.

We know that Jesus will carry us and so we can carry each other.

The Twelve Step programs, whether AA, OA, NA, or GA, provide sponsors for those in recovery. The sponsors are meant to carry those they are sponsoring when the person's willpower, energy or faith fails. I have been told that there is an expression in AA that sponsors often use, "You don't have to pray for help right now, I am strong and I will pray for us both."

It is like the one being sponsored can BORROW the sponsor's strength and perseverance....the way you borrow milk, sugar or eggs from a neighbor.

The Twelve Step Sponsor carries the one she/he is sponsoring and briefly does the work for two. The Sponsor has strength to lend, strength to spare.

As people of faith, we know we can lean on Jesus. He is our permanent and ever-present sponsor. Jesus will fortify and strengthen us so that we can in turn carry others when they are in need.

In July, as you all know, I suddenly had emergency abdominal surgery and was laid up in the hospital for ten days. During that time you all carried me. You prayed for me, sent cards and flowers and letters, left CDs, books, food and love notes on my porch. You carried me.

And my friend the Rev. Caroline Meyers, pastor of South Amherst Congregational Church, carried me too. She came to see me soon after my surgery. I was in pain and not communicating much. Caroline stood by my bed, took my hand in hers

and prayed over me and for me. I was too weak to pray aloud but Caroline prayed for us both.

Then in August, unexpectedly, Caroline was hospitalized and had surgery. And I, now much better, went to her bedside. She was flushed and post-op, medicated and still in pain when I saw her. I took her hand and I prayed over her and for her. She was too weak to pray but I prayed for us both.

As people of faith, we carry each other. It is good to care and good to serve. And good to carry each other.

In the fascinating book My Stroke of Insight, Jill Bolte Taylor, a brain scientist herself, tells of her massive stroke at age 37 and her 8 year recovery back to being her former self with all her functions intact. When first released from the hospital and recovering at home with her mother as her caregiver, Jill Taylor writes about being carried by the many cards she received that she could not, at that time, even read. Listen:

*I loved collecting the mail from my front box. Every day for six weeks, I received 5-15 cards from people who were cheering me on. Although I could not read what they wrote, I would sit on my bed and look at the pictures, touch the cards and literally feel the love radiating from every message.*

We carry each other when that is needed.

We carry each other when that is needed because God carries us with love and grace. As people of faith we know that we can rely on a God who is loving and trustworthy, ever-present and all compassionate and we can receive the strength, patience and love we need to carry each other.

Think of a time when YOU were carried by someone in this congregation, or someone in the wider community.

Think of a time YOU carried someone in this congregation or someone in the wider community.

I don't mean physically like the friends in the story who cut a hole in a roof and lowered their friend down so Jesus could touch the paralyzed man.

I mean the times when you relied on your faith and fortitude and carried someone emotionally or spiritually so they could tell their story, cry on your shoulder, hold a supportive hand, deal with a loss, receive a warm meal, not be alone.

We carry each other...in this congregation and in the wider community.

Gina visits Cora and takes her for a long ride through the Hilltowns.

Paula and Richard deliver Armenian food to Gloria's door as a surprise.

Robert visits Steven in jail and talks about faith, family and God.

Ruth and Ruth bring lunch to the Caravaners working on the Habitat house in Amherst.

The Church Choir visits Helen at home and sings Helen's favorite hymns with her. Hannah and Dale bring Parker to visit Phyllis who they lovingly call "Grandma." Matilda and the Church Youth cook and serve supper at the cot shelter program in Northampton

Nancy collects Viola's laundry at the nursing home and washes it all at her house. Shirley and Jim visit Geoff in jail and talk about Geoff's future when he is released.

Dawn and a hearty crew of parishioners walk together in the pouring rain in the Crop Walk.

Beth writes to Fred every week and tells him she loves him and prays for him. Mary and Lynn stay at Ann's house the night Linda dies so Ann won't be alone. Sue drives Alice all over God's creation looking for a new place she and Alice have not yet tried for breakfast.

We carry each other.

Emotionally and spiritually we carry each other.

And we do that because we know what it is like to be carried.

We have been carried by our friends and we have been carried by God.

We know that God is there, always there, weeping when we are weeping, offering comfort, reaching out to soothe, as close as our breath, as close as our prayer.

God is present, God is near, God carries us and helps us carry on.

And so we carry each other.

Some friends literally carried a paralyzed man to Jesus.

They remembered their friend.

They did not rush to see Jesus, they went and got their friend on his bed.

And they carried the man and the bed to Jesus.

And what does the Bible say...Listen...

*One day, while he was teaching...the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus.*

*When Jesus saw THEIR FAITH, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you."*

When Jesus saw THEIR FAITH, the Bible says. Jesus saw the faith of the friends. The friends had enough faith to lend to the paralyzed man. They could lend him some faith and carry him to the miraculous healer. Like those friends, we carry each other. Fortified by our faith, renewed by the Spirit, rooted in God's ever-present love, we are able to carry each other.

Emotionally and spiritually we show up and serve with love and with prayers of thanksgiving on our lips.

For we are grateful to be present to our friends, grateful to serve in God's name, grateful to lend support, offer hope, show our love, carry each other. This is good work, this is God's work, and we are grateful to do it.

And it was this idea that we carry each other that inspired me to write a tiny song, years ago, a song I want to sing now and maybe you will join in. But first let me say WELCOME, again, welcome to our beloved friends here worshiping with us today. Know that we believe a friend is someone who has been carried by God and will carry those in need, a friend is someone who has learned the song that is inside you and when you are frightened or you're weary, a friend will sing your song to you.

*There is a song and it's inside you and I hear it when you're near,  
That song is yours alone and every note is lovely and it's clear.  
And they say a friend is someone who has learned your song, it's true,  
If you're frightened or you're weary I will sing your song to you.*

Amen.