

Helping vs. Enabling

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[0 : 0 0] So let me again say welcome to you. If you're new or visiting from out of town, really delighted that you can be here, especially on such a beautiful weekend. Normally in our church, we follow the lectionary. This week and the previous few weeks, we've taken a break from the lectionary because we're spending time on something that I think in any church or really in any community is worth revisiting from time to time because it's so important. And that is we're talking about our vision for congregational care. What does it mean to be the kind of church where every member, every regular attender, everybody who considers this to be their community feels known, loved, and they know how to get support and care when they need it. So what is our vision for that and what does that look like at Church of the Advent? So we've taken a few weeks just to lay out our philosophy of what it means to be a caring community. So week one, we considered the fact that a caring church is one that lives like a spiritual family, which means care is the work not just of a few professionals, but of the whole community. We all do the work of care.

The week after that, we looked at the fact that a caring church recognizes the value of adversity. There's no possible way to eliminate adversity from our lives, but the good news is God can actually use adversity to grow us and shape us. Then last week, we considered the fact that a caring church safeguards spiritual freedom. We guard against both license and legalism and see those as threats to spiritual freedom. So this is the last week, and we're going to be talking about the difference between helping and enabling. We're going to be talking about the difference between helping and enabling. Now, I want to give a caveat because this is not going to be a typical sermon. If you're here for the first time, you're here on an interesting week. It's going to be a lot more teaching than preaching. It's going to be something that you may wonder, why are we doing this in the context of a sermon? My hope is that this becomes more clear the reasons why as we move through this together.

Some of you may wonder, why would we discuss a topic like this? What does this have to do with being a caring community? And here's the answer that I would give. Actually, a couple of answers on that. First answer is this. Why does this matter? Well, whether you're talking about a church or a family or a friend group, I think every single person in this room agrees, I would hope you would agree, that it's important for people to be willing to care for one another. That's not a controversial idea. Yes, we should care for one another. So why doesn't it happen more? What are the obstacles?

And here's what I would say. In my experience, the biggest reason or one of the biggest reasons why people in communities like ours don't care for one another better and more consistently is because people do not understand the difference between helping and enabling. People don't know how to have appropriate boundaries. And so what happens is that you have some people who dive in because they want to help, and then they end up feeling overwhelmed and exhausted and trying to extract themselves.

You have other people who, out of a self-protective instinct, remain completely disengaged, and they have high walls, and they have no room for anyone else's needs. And you have a lot of people trying to do good and be helpful, but they're not motivated by love. They're motivated by guilt and obligation. And when you see things like that, one of the core reasons is that people don't understand the difference between helping and enabling, and boundaries are being crossed. And so if we want to be a genuinely caring community, we have to talk about this. We need to understand the difference. And as we will see, this does belong in the context of a sermon because I think these issues are directly related to what we believe or don't believe about the gospel. So here's our outline. We're going to consider what it means to help. We're going to consider what it means to enable.

[4 : 15] And then we're going to talk about knowing the difference and what that looks like in our community. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And as always, we come not in the hope of human wisdom or understanding. We are here because you're a God who speaks. And we know that when we open your written word, through the power of your Holy Spirit, this is a living word. And as we enter into this word, we come face to face with the living word, Jesus Christ. And we pray that just as the word became flesh in him, so your word would become flesh in us, that we might be changed by it for your glory. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So first of all, let's consider what it means to help other people. In Galatians chapter 6, the apostle Paul is describing what a spirit-filled community looks like. A spirit-filled community where the spirit is living and active and fills people and is present. And the work of God is being done among God's people. And he says this in verse 2, bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. If you want to know what all of this is about, if you want to fulfill and be the kind of people that Christ came to transform you into, bear one another's burdens. So he's saying that a spirit-filled community is one that bears burdens. And the word for burden, the

Greek word, is a word that means by definition something that is too heavy to carry alone. You need help with burdens. Now we live in a culture that prizes self-reliance. And there are some Christians that think this way. They may tend to over-spiritualize their times of struggle. And they say, well, I should be able to pray directly to God and expect that God would minister directly to me.

I should be able to pray that God would give me the peace that passes understanding. And God will infuse my heart with that peace. And I don't need to reach out because I have access to God. Now what's interesting is if we look at the Apostle Paul, 2 Corinthians 7, he says this, we were afflicted at every turn, fighting without and fear within. This is a time of great struggle and distress. And then what happens? He doesn't say, I prayed and God supernaturally infused my heart with peace. He says, but God who comforts the downcast comforted us, how? By the coming of Titus.

So how does God answer Paul's prayer for comfort? He sends a good friend to his side. Now that's not to negate the possibility that God can give us supernatural peace. But what it does remind us of is that very, very often God delights, he delights to answer our prayers through the people around us. He delights to answer our prayers through the people around us. So spiritual maturity doesn't mean never asking for help. Spiritual maturity means knowing how and when to ask for help.

That's what spiritual mature people do. And helping can take many forms. Burden bearing can take many forms. It means at least praying for people. It can also mean listening actively with empathy and understanding. It can mean providing information. It can mean connecting people to other resources.

[7 : 45] Helping can mean equipping somebody to make a decision, but not making it for them. It can mean offering temporary housing or temporary financial assistance. But the key to helping is that help is empowering. It empowers people. It is lifting somebody up, but not holding them up.

So a spirit-filled community is one where people help one another. We share burdens. We care for and support people when they need it. Now let's talk about enabling. A few verses later, Paul says in the same passage, that each will have to bear his own load. Now he said that we need to bear one another's burdens, and now he's saying we need to bear our own load. Is this a contradiction? And it looks like it until you look at the actual word choice here. The word for burden, *beros*, means something extremely heavy, something that, as we said, by definition we can't carry on our own. The other word that Paul uses in verse 5, *for tion*, means a common pack. Like it's a common term that you would use to refer to the backpack that somebody would carry their personal belongings in. So think of a load in contrast to a burden, right? A burden is way too heavy, but a load, that's your personal pack. That's your stuff that you're carrying. So we can think of a load, broadly speaking, as the realm of personal responsibility in your life. Realm of personal responsibility. So what Paul's saying is that we need to bear one another's burdens, but at the same time we all have a personal load to carry.

And doing so, being able to carry your load, is part of what it means to be a mature human being. So in our gospel reading in John 5, we see an interesting application of this. John comes to a pool called Bethesda, and John tells us that there's a multitude of people with various disabilities who spend time there. They're there on a daily basis.

And Jesus approaches a man who, it says, has been paralyzed from the waist down, and he's been this way for 38 years. And the wording here is very suggestive. Verse 6, when Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there for a long time, he said to him, do you want to be healed? Now, if you're reading this for the first time or reading it casually, it's going to strike you as kind of an odd and maybe even stupid question.

A person who's been paralyzed for 38 years and taking the time to ask, do you want to be healed? That seems ridiculous. Of course he does. But as we know, when we see any encounter between Jesus and other people, Jesus is always asking questions that get to the heart of the issue. And he's seeing things that we don't see. And the commentaries, some of the commentators, they pick up on this.

[10 : 46] Here's essentially what's going on. For 38 years, this man has survived by depending on others. He's had to. At this point in history, there are no services. There are no, right, you were forced, if you were a person like this, you were forced to beg for subsistence, right? And so he's been living like this for 38 years. And so his whole life has come to be defined by this. Every day, he makes his way to the pool. And every day, he spends his day begging money from the people who are coming to the pool. And there are legends and superstitions that the water has healing power.

And so that's a part of the reason why people would gather there as well. But his entire life was built around this reality. So in other words, the question that Jesus really seems to be asking this man is not, do you want to be healed? It's, do you want the implications that come with being healed? Are you ready to start carrying this load in your life? See, this man's entire way of life is going to have to change. He's going to need to find work. He might have to find a different place to live. This means no longer begging by the pool. It's going to be a major change.

So if we look at this man's condition, the paralysis is a burden. And that's something that this man can't handle on his, I mean, there's nothing he can do to change his situation. Jesus can help with that. But Jesus ultimately wants to empower this man to carry his own load.

He wants to empower this man to pick up his mat and to carry his own mat and to walk away. Do you want the implications that come with being healed? See, that's what help looks like.

Help says, I want to see you up on your own two feet and I want to see you walking in your own power. I want to see you carrying your own mat. I want to see you carrying the load of your life, right? But when we try to carry someone else's load, when you say, give me that pack off your back, when we try to carry someone else's load, when we, when we start taking responsibility for things in someone else's life, we are beginning to cross that line into what we now call enabling, right? And the thing is, enabling is, is often very well intentioned. It comes from an incredibly good place most of the time from people who are very loving and desire to be helpful. And it often is disguised as helping, but you know, a tree by its fruit, right? It has the opposite effect.

[13 : 22] You know, a tree by its fruit, it does not empower people. It leaves them feeling powerless. Often we tend to enable people because we see them as victims. What we don't understand is how enabling itself is a form of victimization. When you see somebody as a victim and then you enable them, you are further victimizing them. One writer puts it like this. It's a vicious cycle.

When people are not challenged to do as much as they possibly can to help themselves, they learn to constantly look for answers and remedies and solutions and fixes outside of themselves.

And what that does is it begins to convince them that they are powerless, that they are useless, that they are incapable. And then the more they feel that way, the more they attract circumstances that prove them right. And the more they attract those negative circumstances, the worse they feel.

And then the worse they feel, the worse it gets. And it becomes a vicious cycle. So for us to be a caring community, it is crucial for us to know the difference between burdens and loads. What is the difference between a burden and a load? How do we know the difference? Here's a shorthand definition. A burden is something that you cannot carry alone.

A load is something that you alone can carry. A burden is something that you cannot carry alone. A load is something that you alone can carry. No one else can carry it for you.

[14 : 58] So for instance, under normal circumstances, you should be able to get a job. You should be able to pay your bills. You should be able to care for your family. You should be able to manage your emotions.

You should be able to grow spiritually. You should be able to follow through on commitments. Under normal circumstances, you should be able to do those things. Obviously, there are exceptions. But in general, those are part of your load. They're in the pack that is on your back, and you're the one who's responsible for carrying it. Nobody can do those things for you. Now, a burden, by contrast, is something very different. Somebody in your family dies. You get really sick and incapacitated. You lose your job unexpectedly. You become severely depressed, and you're having suicidal thoughts. Your marriage is struggling, and you're contemplating divorce. Those are burdens. Those are things that you cannot carry alone. Those are times when you need help, when you need support from others in the community, and you need to reach out and let people know that you are in dire straits.

So let's do some differentiation just to understand the difference between the two and what each response looks like. Long time ago, I knew a guy who was struggling with addiction, and I really cared about this guy. And he said to me, you know, I usually mess up in the evenings. Those are my weakest times when I'm most likely to mess up. Could you call me every evening to hold me accountable? Could you be my accountability partner? And could you call me every evening to hold me accountable to make sure I don't mess up? Now, I cared about this guy. I would have done anything to see this guy free from that addiction. And, you know, whether you're this guy's pastor or this guy's friend or this guy's counselor, that sounds like a very loving thing to do to say, hey, I'm in this with you. We're going to do this together, and I'm going to call you every night, and we're going to do whatever we have to do to help you beat this addiction. That sounds like a loving thing to do. But if I said yes to that request, I would be enabling him. Why? Class, why? Right? Because what's the real request there?

It's not call me, that's the surface request. What's the real request? I want you to take responsibility for my recovery. I want to live my life as normal, and I want you to be the one stressing every day about whether or not I'm going to relapse. Right? What he really wants is to take the pack off his back and to give it to me. He wants that load off his shoulders. And by the way, if I fail to call one evening, and he does mess up, very convenient to have somebody to blame.

Right? Well, I would have been okay, but you didn't call. Whose responsibility is it? Who's carrying the load? So what would genuine help look like in this circumstance? Maybe it looks like this.

[18:19] You say, listen, I care about you. You know I'm rooting for you to beat this thing, but I can't do that for you. Here's what I can do. If you're really struggling one night, you can call me, and I would love to pray with you. But the thing is, I might not always be available.

And so you need other people helping you. I'm happy to be part of this fight with you, but you can't rely on me alone. What you should do is find a recovery group like Essie.

And if you go to that group, you're going to find a sponsor. And that sponsor, their job is to be there. So if you're struggling and you need to reach out, they will support you. And together, we can support you in your recovery. That's what helping looks like. Right? Let me give you another scenario. Imagine you have a friend who's going through a really tough time. And imagine this friend has developed a habit of calling you. And it's gotten to the point where maybe they're calling you several times a day. And every time they call, it's because they want to vent all of their frustration and anger and stress and anxiety and sadness. They want to vent all of that onto you. And now listen, you know, you want to be supportive. And that's just a part of friendship, right? Some friendships, there's a lot of venting that happens. And that's a part of what it means to be a good friend to somebody is. You can vent to me and I can vent to you. But say in this particular situation, the calls are getting more frequent. It happens days, sometimes at night, sometimes like when you're trying to put your kids to bed or sometimes when you're trying to get your work done.

And say that you're starting to feel overwhelmed and you're starting to feel drained. Okay? You might think the loving response would be to say, call me anytime. Day or night, I will always answer. You don't have to go through this alone. I'm here for you. I will be your rock.

Right? That's what a loving friend says, right? But what's actually happening? What are you actually communicating? Well, several things. You're communicating, one, that your needs don't matter. You're communicating, number two, that you're willing to take responsibility for this person's emotional well-being. Number three, most pernicious, you're teaching them that their only coping strategy should be to depend on you. That when they're feeling overwhelmed, the way to feel better is to call you and to vent to you. And chances are, when that call happens, your job is to absorb their emotional distress. They're transferring it temporarily to you until it builds up again. And then what happens? You hang up the phone. That person feels better. They feel relief. But you feel totally crushed by all the stuff that you're now carrying. It got taken out of their pack and it got put into your pack. And all of a sudden, those straps are digging into your shoulders. So helping might mean saying this, hey, I can see that you're really struggling right now.

[21 : 38] And I want to be here to support you. And I am. But I also need to take care of myself. And I can't be available all the time. Because I have other things that I need to worry about. And I have other responsibilities that I need to focus on. So here's what we can do. Maybe can we schedule times to talk? And just put it on the calendar. And then I know and you know that when that time comes, I'll be fully available for you. Can we do that? Also, I'm very committed to praying for you. I pray for you every day. And number three, have you considered reaching out to the healing prayer ministry that we have and asking them to pray for you? They would love to pray for you.

So again, you're not saying, I want to remove myself from the situation. You're saying, this can't all depend on me. And I have needs too. And those matter as well. And can we put structure around our interactions so that I can be prepared and so that we know when they're going to happen?

And can we also bring in other resources and supports for you? And you know, ultimately, what that does is it puts that person in the position to have to develop and figure out other coping strategies to deal with their emotions. And guess what? Counselors are really good at giving you tools to help develop coping strategies to manage your emotions, right? So that's another scenario. Just one or two more for the sake of time. This will be shorter, but it's one that I think comes up enough that it's worth mentioning. Imagine you have an adult child who loses their job unexpectedly and they call mom and dad and they want to move home. An enabling response might be to say this. You let them move back. You say, you stay here as long as you need. We're here for you. We love you. But you don't set any expectations for ways that they might need to contribute to the home.

There's no expectation of any kind of financial contribution. And you don't set any timeline for when they need to move out. You just say, stay as long as you need. Now, a helping response might be to do this. Maybe you say no. Sometimes the best way to help somebody is to not help them.

Right? Now, that has to be done with a lot of discernment. Maybe you say no. Or if you say yes, yeah, you can move home. What do you do? You say, yeah, you can move home. But then you discuss what are the chores and responsibilities that you're going to take on to contribute to the household? How are you going to maybe contribute financially since you're home and you're going to be eating food and all of those things?

[24 : 23] And then you set a clear timeline. And you say, I'm going to give you this long to kind of get back on your feet and figure things out. But by this date, and it can be generous as long as it's there, by this date, you need to move on. That's a helping response. One more scenario. Imagine your roommate or your spouse fails to take responsibility for things around the house. I know this never happens, but just imagine. Roommate or spouse fails to take responsibility for things around the house.

Enabling might mean to do this. You know, you just want to keep the peace. Life is stressful. So you just end up letting the thing build up and build. The dishes get higher and higher and higher.

The laundry pile gets higher and higher and higher. Whatever the things are, you just let it go, let it go, let it go. And then finally, you just go, I can't take it anymore. And then you just go and you do it. And then it happens again and again and again. And you just do their things and do their things. And they don't do them. And you do them for them. And maybe you keep the peace for a while.

But then maybe things build up and eventually you completely explode. Right? You just get really angry. Right? Especially in certain Christian circles. You know, if you're a Christian woman and you're married, there can be these sort of latent, tacit expectations that in a Christian home, the wife should do all of the things in the home. And so there can almost be some context in which the kind of church culture tacitly or maybe even explicitly reinforces this idea that the only one really responsible for things in the home is the mom, the wife. Right? So say this is happening.

An enabling response would be to just do it and do it and do it and do it and do it and either be resentful or maybe blow up. Helping response would be to do something like this. You initiate a calm and respectful conversation. And you say, hey, I've noticed that I've been taking on most of the responsibilities around the house. Avoid all or none language. I do everything. You do nothing. Avoid that. It's very tempting, but they'll get you on a technicality. So you say, I've noticed that I've been doing most of the things around the house. That's the truth. Then what's the feeling? I'm feeling really overwhelmed. I'm feeling really overwhelmed. For this to work. Remember we said a few weeks ago, we're all responsible for building the kind of home that we want to live in, the kind of church that we want to live in. For this to work, it's essential for both of us to share responsibilities.

[26 : 58] Can we sit down and divide up the tasks and decide very clearly who's responsible for doing what? And maybe you even put it in writing and maybe even put it in with a fridge magnet on your fridge.

Here's my stuff. Here's your stuff, right? Now, what do all these examples have in common? Think about all the examples we've just gave. What do they all have in common? Well, genuine help means having good boundaries. It means having good boundaries. You're not refusing to help, but what you are saying is you're communicating that you have limits. You're communicating that you have needs, right? So good boundaries communicate that. They clearly define what you are and are not responsible for. And very important, good boundaries keep everybody's pack on their back and not try to put it off on somebody else's back. Now, here's the thing to watch out for. When people who don't have good boundaries start to encounter boundaries, what happens? Sparks fly. People who aren't used to boundaries, when they encounter boundaries, they will often experience that as unloving, uncaring, harsh. I thought you were my friend. I thought you cared about me, but you won't do this one thing for me, right? Sparks are going to fly. The temptation can be to relax the boundaries, but boundaries have to be maintained because good boundaries are essential for relationships to thrive.

And again, good boundaries don't mean I'm not involved. There's such a thing as overdoing it with the boundaries. And sometimes when you talk to people who talk a lot about boundaries, what they need is actually to be told some of those walls need to come down a little bit because we do need to bear one another's burdens, right? But the thing is, boundaries, appropriate boundaries have to be maintained because, and this is just true, you cannot have a relationship with someone who habitually disregards your boundaries. You can't have a relationship, a real, meaningful, healthy, thriving relationship with somebody who habitually disregards you. Now, we all, we all overstep boundaries. That happens all the time. But sometimes if you encounter a person who just that, they habitually do it all the time in lots of different ways, right? Your physical boundaries, your emotional boundaries, right?

If they're constantly trying to manipulate you, transgressing your emotional and psychological boundaries, you can't have a relationship if the boundaries aren't in place. And the thing that we need to understand is all of us at one point or another, we're going to be on both sides of this.

All of us are going to be in positions where we need to set better boundaries. And we're also going to find ourselves in the position where we have to respect someone else's boundaries. And so this is a warning to all of us who will encounter boundaries that maybe weren't there before or we didn't expect to find, right? If somebody sets a boundary with you and you get angry or you get upset and your impulse is to say, I thought you cared about me or to feel rejected or unloved by that person, that is a fantastic opportunity for you to do some deep self-reflection and maybe some repenting.

[30 : 29] One of our hopes for this church is that this would be a kind of laboratory because we all come in and we import all kinds of things from our background, from our family. Nobody comes from a perfect background. And we all have to relearn how to have godly relationships together. And so there's going to be a lot of experimenting here with boundary setting because we want to have healthy godly relationships. But it's a trial and error process. And so with all of this, we need to have an enormous amount of grace and patience with one another. But we need to look at the fact that Jesus himself actually had boundaries. People routinely tried to manipulate Jesus, but he would have none of it.

Matthew 21 is this great example. The religious leaders tried to pull Jesus into an argument and they had ulterior motives for wanting to pull Jesus into this argument. And as soon as Jesus sees that they are not interested in searching for truth, he cuts off the conversation and he goes back to preaching. He's like, I'm not doing this. We're not playing this game. You know, in Luke chapter 5, Jesus is surrounded by throngs of people, some who have traveled a great distance in the hopes that he might heal them or deliver them. And yet at Luke 5, it says that Jesus would routinely, not just when he got overwhelmed and burned out, he would routinely withdraw from the crowds to go be alone and to pray, sometimes spending all night in prayer. Jesus, how could you leave all of these people? They all came to see you. They all need things from you. Why does Jesus do it? It's because Jesus knows that everything he's doing hinges on his relationship with God, on his psychological and emotional well-being. Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. And so you see Jesus habitually prioritizing his relationship with the Lord and his emotional and psychological health so that he can be available to meet the needs that present themselves to him. He has his priorities in order. That's what it means to have boundaries. Now, we're wrapping up here, and I told you at the beginning that this is directly related to what we believe about the gospel, and now I'm going to tell you why. When we enable people, even when we do it with the best of intentions, we are denying the truth of the gospel. We are denying the truth of the gospel because instead of pointing people to their

Savior, we are trying to be their Savior, we are trying to be their Savior. We're trying to take the place of their Savior. And as Christians, we know that we have a Savior. We know that Jesus has come to do for us what we cannot do on our own. We know that the entire gospel hinges on that fact that at the end of the day, all of our hope rests in the fact that we have a God. When we cry out to that God and cry out for mercy, that that God responds with grace and love and pours those things into our lives. We know that Jesus will ultimately heal all who are oppressed, liberate all. He will set all the captives free, and that one day he will renew and restore this world, that there will be no more suffering. We know all of that. That is where our hope rests.

So true help always involves pointing people to Jesus, not trying to take his place. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for Jesus. We thank you for the hope that we have.

We thank you that we have limits. And we thank you that in our creatureliness, in our creaturely limits, our limits of time and energy and money, our limits of compassion and empathy, and our limits of faith, and our limits of, around our families and our friendships, Lord, we thank you that in all of our creaturely limits, that we are continually reminded that you are the one without limits, that you are the one who's able to do the impossible, that you are the one who's able to do far more than we can ask or even imagine. We pray ultimately that as we seek to be a helping, loving, caring, burden-sharing community, that our hope would not ultimately rest in ourselves, but that our hope would rest continually, forever and always, in you, who bore the ultimate burden on the cross, who rose from death and calls us to new life in freedom. We pray that because of this, our service would be motivated by love and joy.

[35 : 25] We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.