There are certain phrases that we hear so often we cease thinking too much about them. These phrases get classified within our brains under broad topic headings, while the full definition or ramifications of the phrase are never much fleshed out. They sort of exist in a kind of suspended animation never bothering or disturbing much of anything. For an example of this, take Franklin Roosevelt’s famous. “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” In most people’s minds it is classified as a statement about not being afraid, but is that really what it says? I mean if we are not to fear how could there be fear in the first place, of which we are not supposed to be afraid? Rather quickly you end up in a sort of chicken and egg self-referential death spiral not knowing which came first the fear or the nothing to fear. Or how about, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going?” It is generally classified as a statement about tough people being able to persist through tough times. And it does say that but in so doing it also tells us something not terribly flattering about those tough people, which is that tough people are free to sit around and do nothing when times are not so tough. I could skip mowing my lawn for months or performing basic hygiene as long as I was tough and the times were not. Now I am not saying that all popular phrases are silly or useless but am merely pointing out that we don’t always think through what is really being said. These phrases kind of lodge in our minds under big headings like good, nice, pleasant, motivational and so on.

Which brings us to a rather famous phrase we have from St. Paul today. He says, “Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Sounds lovely. I mean for those of you old enough to remember it kind of gives off the vibe of that Coca Cola add from the early 70’s when a bunch of groovy teenagers gathered to sing among other things, “I'd like to buy the world a home And furnish it with love Grow apple trees and honey bees And snow white turtle doves.” I went back and rewatched the ad and it is even stranger than I recall because for some reason they are all staring the same direction in a semi-lobotomized state like they are waiting for the mothership to land. But my larger point is that there is more to Paul’s point than a laid back, soft rock 70’s vibe. For look a little more closely at what he says. He tells us to bear one another’s burdens. And this may be a rather obvious point but in so doing he tells us two things. One is that other people have burdens or are actual burdens and two that we are to aid in bearing them. I did a little looking in the original Greek to see if it would help and it does a little. The word that gets translated as burdens is the Greek word βάρη (bara) which means weight or heaviness. It is similar to the Latin word *gravo* which we use in words like gravitas and gravity. The word that gets translated as bear is βαστάζετε (bastelete) which can mean to carry, bear or endure. We see it other places in the New Testament like in Luke 14:27 when Jesus says, “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.” So put another way St. Paul is telling us that we need to carry or endure the heaviness of each other. And what all of this suggests is that other people and we ourselves can be a real pain.

Years ago, when I was in San Antonio, we hired a new secretary. She had secretarial experience but had never served in a church. After she had been with us about a month, she came into my office very distraught and wanted to talk. I asked her what the problem was and she said that she had thought things at a church would be different. I asked her to explain what she meant by different and she said something to the effect that she had believed that when she worked in a church there would be none of the pettiness and enmity that you would see working as a secretary in the outside world. In a polite way I asked her where she had gotten such a stupid idea. For the fact of the matter is as St. Paul tells us today, we can be burdens – all of us, not just the heathens. We should expect that other people are going to weigh on us and that we are going to weigh on other people. That is part of life and it does not cease when we cross the threshold of the church.

During my last year in seminary the not-so-great schism was going on in the Episcopal Church. My home diocese, the Diocese of the San Joaquin, voted to leave and form what would later become the Anglican Church of North America or ACNA. I was placed in a position where I had to decide if I was going to stay in the Episcopal Church or join up with this not so merry band of misfits. Obviously, I chose to stay in the Episcopal Church and I did this for many reasons but one of them has to do with what Paul is telling us today. And that is no matter where we go, we will find humans and as a result we will find the burdens that we are called to bear. In other words, I knew that there was craziness and weirdness in the Episcopal Church but I also knew that there would be craziness and weirdness in whatever new thing came into existence, just with some new packaging. Wherever you go humanity will be there. But let’s wrap things up.

Paul closes out his thought by saying that in bearing one another’s burdens we are fulfilling the law of Christ. And so what exactly does he mean by that? Well, it is pretty simple. If you look at 1 Peter 2:24 it says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.” So what Paul is telling us is that in bearing one another’s burdens we are being like Christ who bore our sins upon the cross. We are quite literally imitating Christ by so doing.

Now I realize up to this point my sermon may sound pretty depressing – people are a pain and we just have to deal with it or else we are not being like Jesus. But of course, as we know being a burden is just one aspect of our humanity. And much of the reason we are asked to bear things is because there is so much more to us than this. You see if we don’t bear the heaviness, we will cut ourselves off from the wonderful and glorious parts. There is an old saying that those who do not know how to fast also do not know how to feast. When we run away from burdens we also run away from joy. We trap ourselves in a state of mediocrity. And certainly, bearing other’s burdens comes with caveats for there is a difference between bearing burdens and being in an abusive relationship. But assuming this is not the case there is something deeply Christian about it. We are not simply to sit around and say people are jerks. Rather going back to the idea that we are fulfilling the law of Christ, we are to do for the people whose burdens we bear the same as Jesus does for us in bearing our sins. In bearing our burdens Christ draws us higher towards himself. He removes the burden that sin put on our lives so that we may grow into his likeness. Remember when we looked at the Greek word translated as burden it had connotations of heaviness. When we bear one another’s burdens, we remove this heaviness so that the community may rise up and grow in its love and affection for God so that we all may be his, this day and forevermore.