

The Beautiful Truth About Being a Burden

God designed my disability not to make me “independent,” but “interdependent.”

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Beautiful Orthodoxy, the ministry cause of Christianity Today, is compelling to me in its challenge to the way we view love and community. Rich theology and biblical conviction confronts our assumptions, inviting us into a deeper understanding of love that’s shaped by the good, true, and beautiful gospel. This is particularly important to me in terms of Scripture’s convicting teaching about Christian community and my own struggle with not wanting to be “a burden” to those I love.

I have long thought that American Christianity has been far too influenced by the robust individualism ingrained in our heritage. It’s not that I have anything against self-help and private initiative; indeed, the strong ethics of the Puritans made our nation a cultural and economic force in the world.

But Christianity is not about rugged individualism. There are no Lone Rangers in the church, no Mavericks. We don’t pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, touting how independent we are. Rather, we are members of the body, the church. This essential idea of Christian community is a key tenet of our faith—a compelling and beautiful component of our orthodoxy. We are spiritually connected. We belong to Christ and to one another.

Often, though, we don’t act like it—especially as we grow older, or a family member ages or sustains a life-altering disability. The best of believers will be quick to say, “I don’t want to be a burden on my family, and I will do everything I can to see that I’m not!” They assume they are doing their family members a Christian service, as if it were their duty not to have to depend on anyone for help.

Yet this is what families were designed for—especially Christian families. The Christian family showcases to the world that sacrificial service *is* normal. Christians are supposed to give even when it hurts. We serve, even when—and *especially* when—we’re tired. We look out for others’ interests before our own. And if we do feel we are taken advantage of, then we find our example in Christ who “learned obedience from the things he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8).

This is easy for me to say. As a quadriplegic of 47 years, I have been on the receiving end of other people’s help for many years. My caregivers and my husband are experts in giving, even when it hurts, and they are bone-tired. Part of me feels guilty about that. But God designed my disability not to make me “independent,” but “interdependent.” And as the recipient of my husband’s love, I do all I can to support him and my caregivers with gratitude, as well as pray for them in their weariness. It’s the least I can do. It’s the family thing to do.

Gilbert Meilaender wrote in an article for *First Things*, “Families would not have the significance they do for us if they did not, in fact, give us claim upon each other. We do not come together as autonomous individuals freely contracting with each other. We simply find ourselves thrown together and asked to share the burdens of life while learning to care for each other.”

I have many friends with disabilities who have opted to go into a nursing home rather than spare their families the weight of caring for their needs. They don't want to be a burden. When this thinking becomes the norm, we stop living in the kind of moral community that deserves to be called a family. Depending upon each other is actually a strangely wondrous part of community—a key element of our values and faith. It's a snapshot of Beautiful Orthodoxy in action.

In order to grow in Christ, God presents us with inconvenient and unwanted interruptions to our plans—it could be a life-altering disability or dementia of an aging parent. Growth in Christ means learning how to deal morally and compassionately with these interruptions. Nowadays, however, I wonder if Christians are too quick to institutionalize their elderly or disabled, rejecting the encumbrance of caring for loved ones. Some even see assisted-suicide laws as a “safeguard,” fearing their suffering might be a future quagmire to their family.

The highest Christian virtue is love. As a quadriplegic who is rapidly aging, one part of me doesn't want to burden my husband, Ken. The other part understands that this messy, inconvenient stage of life is supposed to reflect God's highest purposes for us as a couple, and as a family. But that's what Christian love is all about—and it *is* truly beautiful.

And because Ken loves me, he will bear my burdens and thus fulfill the law of love. Besides, God has set quite the example. It's why we can say, “Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens” (Psalm 68:19, NIV).

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