

Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus
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The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Well, once again, I notice, what a very odd book the Bible is.

(Of course, it's not just a book, rather an anthology of books, most of which are stories, each from a particular point of view, or a letter.)

The process of choosing which recordings of the stories of Jesus and the early church, and which letters written by Christians to other Christians, the process of deciding which to keep and which to let go in history was of course very long and hard fought, as you might imagine.

And so, I wonder. The second reading, the letter that Rebecca read for us this morning – in fact, she read the *whole* letter, the whole book of the Bible of Philemon – I wonder how in the world that letter was saved, or why.

I mean, on the face of it, it's a letter from Paul, who is imprisoned by the Roman Empire – the same Empire that had, of course, executed Jesus – and while in prison, Paul is writing a letter to Philemon. Philemon was a patron in some ways. He was the patron, along with Apphia and Archippus, of a house church. They met in their home.

Philemon was also a client of Paul. In fact, he was brought to follow Jesus by the testimony of Paul, we're told. Paul writes this letter to Philemon, and then he sends it with Onesimus.

Onesimus is a new friend and "coworker" of Paul's. Onesimus was also formerly enslaved by Philemon, to whom the letter was written. The formerly enslaved man is taking a letter to the person who enslaved him, written by a third person.

That's sort of odd, right? It's sort of odd that that would be a letter included. I mean, most of Paul's letters are about lofty theology and they give us much of the core of our faith. But this seems to be rather an interpersonal issue. And yet, it was saved.

So, I have spent, over the last several weeks, looking at histories of interpretation, which is a phrase we use to say, "How is it that Christians have read this letter over the centuries?" What can we know about that?

Well, first of all, we know that many extras have been written. A lot of extras. They've been created and passed down. I suspect many of you have heard that Onesimus was actually a runaway slave. That's really interesting, but it's not in the text.

This book has been used in the church in times of either defending or decrying slavery. The whole institution of enslaving people. So, it's important for me to say that we must acknowledge and speak to the fact that this letter, that these words have been used horribly on our continent, and much too recently.

Pretty recently, in fact, there's even a video game of Onesimus! I'm not a gamer but I tried this just a little bit. But the content of the game is that Onesimus is a runaway slave, and the player, you, has to try to catch him. I don't know about you, but that is just offensive to me.

But that's a common interpretation of this scripture!

So, what's really here is that Paul loves Philemon, he's grateful for Philemon's work in the church, and both Paul and Philemon recognize that Philemon owes Paul quite a bit. His knowledge of Jesus for sure.

What's really here is that Onesimus was formerly enslaved, and that somehow, he encountered Paul, and in that encounter became a follower of Jesus also, and that Onesimus is being sent back along with this letter, and the letter asked Philemon to voluntarily relate to Onesimus, no longer as an enslaved person, but as a sibling.

If we had a whole lot of time this morning, we could spend much of it talking about the multilayered and fluid power relationships here in this book and the way they're demonstrated. If you're interested, take the bulletin home and look at how each of the people is referred to one another.

Someone is first the father, and then the sibling, and then the parent, and then many terms out of the Roman Empire as well. God is, of course, the client, to which Paul is a servant. Paul is a servant to Christ, but also gets to boss around Philemon as well. Like, I could just tell you to do it. But I'm not going to. But I'm going to appeal to you instead.

Philemon is, again, both a client and a subject to Paul in some ways, but he's also a patron for Paul. Paul owes him. Onesimus is a sibling, and a friend, and a client, and an enslaved person. The power relations go on forever. We could look at them for a long time. But we probably won't.

One of the questions that comes up for many people is, is Paul asking Philemon to set Onesimus free? And the truth is, that debate has been raging among biblical scholars for at least fifty years. No one is sure whether Paul is saying, I know we live in and among slavery, but I want you to set this one free, or is Paul calling for the abolition of slavery altogether? That also is unclear. If that's what Paul wanted, he certainly didn't say it straight up, and those of you who have read other letters of Paul will recognize that he knows how to say things straight up when he wants to. He can be pretty clear. And here, he's not.

It seems to me that in these really complex relations, what Paul is doing is negotiating the concrete realities of where he lives, and the ideals of his commitment. He's negotiating the fact that he lives in the Roman Empire – he's imprisoned by it – and he has commitments by following Jesus for loving others radically in some sort of equality.

Are you like me? Sometimes, "life is that way." Sometimes there are things that I'm very much against, and yet, given the systems and the way that we live, it's hard to escape. I think of it every time I buy a new cell phone, which I try to make as seldom as possible.

I know that all the really great tech we use comes at the expense of the earth and people in other places who must mine the minerals needed for these conveniences.

I think of it every time, I'm participating in the oppression of someone else even as I use and buy this technology. I mean, anybody else feel caught in that sometimes? I do.

I don't know if I have solutions to you, but I can say, we see you. And Paul sees you. That we live in a concrete place, and we have commitments that are absolute for us, but negotiation them is not always easy. In fact, it seldom is.

Those of us who negotiate between the ideals of our commitment and the concrete realities of our existence are always uncomfortable, because we're never sure that we got the balance in the right place. Always uncomfortable.

I'm kind of uncomfortable with Paul here. I want Paul to say, "Stop it! Stop having slaves if you're a follower of Jesus! Stop benefitting from the oppression of others if you're a follower of Jesus!" And those are the absolute ideals of our faith. And yet, we live in a different place.

So, I wonder what we can learn from Paul here, other than that it was a struggle for him as well.

It seems to me that new relationships, new ways of relating, must be intentionally fostered, in the face of, and despite, all kinds of stratified statuses by our culture.

It occurs to me that Paul would normally not have had any reason to come into close contact or come to know an enslaved person, and yet he did. And I think it's because he was going out and being among and with people who were unlike him.

That's part of what we can see here, is working in Paul.

The other thing is, Paul suspends his own authority, and he appeals to Philemon. Paul refuses to command Philemon on what he should do. Instead, he invites Philemon to have a new kind of relationship with Onesimus, and he bases that invitation on love, of course.

Paul also asked Philemon to suspend his own "right," which was to keep Onesimus, and he asked Philemon to voluntarily give up some privilege.

So here, today, I would say in the Gospel that Michael read, we too are invited. We are invited to freely suspend rights and privileges for the sake of others, for the sake of a new kind of community, for the sake of living the Gospel. We are invited to live in new ways.

But here's the hard part, I think, for many of us. It's actually difficult to see our own privilege. I would say that even in our own culture, as in this one, power relations are much more complex. It's not just that one person is oppressed, and one person is the oppressor, it's much more complex. We all move in and out of different kinds of privilege.

Social scientists say that the kind of privilege we have, we wear; it's not that we do it, it's that it's a part of us. We move in systems that privilege us and we don't see it.

In Paul's letter, we can see that power and privilege are fluid, and change between the three main players in the letter. And for us, in our empire, in the empire in which we live, it's easy for us to function automatically as if what is, ought to be.

But just because something is has never made it what ought to be, is it?

And so, we are invited, I think, to a new kind of community. We see glimpses of it from place to place. I mean, this week, Friday night, we're going to meet here mostly for fun to have a potluck and welcome Rev. Israel and Linda and Matthew, and have a sing-along of the movie "Encanto," and if you haven't seen it – small spoiler alert – it shows us a new kind of community.

So, as we sing along and goof off a bit, I hope we'll be able to see new ways to relate.

We are also, as a way to learn some stuff that we need to know to live in a new community, we will be beginning this Wednesday a new series called Sacred Ground. It's an in-depth curriculum put together by the Episcopal Church to study race and racism, to think about it more deeply than we normally do. Not "I don't want to be racist," but what *is* the privilege that we wear, how does it affect others, how does it affect *us*, how does it keep us from living fully?

So, we will spend twenty weeks in all, though only meeting ten of them, to look at people who've made films and written and reflected on race and privilege. Because I believe that then, once seen, it sets us free, doesn't it? To voluntarily lay this down for the sake of someone else. That which we don't recognize in ourselves is really difficult to let go of.

So, I wonder. I wonder if, as Paul was writing his letter to Philemon, if he was hearing the words of Jesus saying, if you're going to follow me, you're going to need to lay down some things. You're going to need to carry something like a cross, which means carrying something on behalf of another in order that they might have greater freedom, liberation, and in order that we may all live in a community of siblings rather than some sort of hierarchy.

Is this not what following Jesus and carrying a cross is? I mean, we were warned up front by Jesus, it's hard. It will be hard. It will hurt at times. We will be confused. And we will be uncomfortable.

And yet, Paul, who had seen this kind of change in relationship, takes trouble to write a letter and send it back to Philemon to say, at the end of it all, it's worth it. It's worth it to voluntarily give up that which you could claim, and create a new way of relating to others, is worth it.

This is the life to which we are called. I am so honored to share this way with you, each of you.

Amen.

Jeremiah 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Philemon 1-21

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love-- and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother-- especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."